

Families' involvement at schools: the perspective of the psychosocial duos

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Article Info

Article history:

Received Aug 7, 2023

Revised Aug 20, 2024

Accepted Sep 2, 2024

Keywords:

Family-school relationship

Parental involvement

Psychosocial duo

School psychologist

Social workers

ABSTRACT

This article aims to investigate the perspective on family involvement of social workers and school psychologists. Based on a qualitative study, we analyzed a corpus of four interviews with psychosocial duos from state-subsidized public schools. We analyzed these interviews by conducting a thematic analysis. The results show that for these professionals, family involvement would ensure the educability of students in a framework of individual parental responsibility, understanding the efforts of schools as a support to the work of parents and guardians. The consequences and relationships of these perspectives for the work with school communities in the framework of public education are discussed.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Chile has been considered a neoliberal laboratory since the early 1980s, and in line with this ideology, its educational policy views educational problems as individual matters [1]–[4]. This perspective is typical of advanced neoliberal systems [5] and assumes an ethical responsibility [6] that demands high commitments to parenting from caregivers, whether parents or legal guardians. The literature has described this phenomenon as parental intensification [7]–[10], which is characterized by an exclusive focus on the needs of children and adolescents, reliance on expert knowledge, emotional demands, and investment of time and money by caregivers [7].

In the context of Chilean education policy, the family unit is considered responsible for both the exercise of rights and the fulfilment of duties associated with the school education of children and adolescents [5]. This perspective expects adults within each family to manage personal and social risks related to upbringing, attributing the difficulties children and adolescents face to a deficit in parenting [11]. This rhetoric absolves the educational system of any structural or political causes [12]. Given the high level of segregation and socioeconomic stratification in Chilean schools, as well as the pressures associated with accountability, it is understandable why discourses emphasizing family involvement in schools [13]–[15], and attributing low standardized test results to deficits in parenting have become more prevalent in Chilean schools.

The Chilean regulatory framework reinforces this viewpoint by attempting to address inequities in the education system through compensatory regulations and differentiated subsidies that provide resources for school projects [1]. Consequently, schools, particularly those in low-income areas, seek special subsidies

to finance themselves and meet the needs of their students through projects that provide additional funding, enabling the hiring of support professionals [16], [17]. These projects often establish psychosocial duos comprising social workers and psychologists to work with this student population. The logic behind these projects aligns with privatization-oriented perspectives and tends to rely on “Psi” interventions that pathologize students and their environment, particularly the family [18].

Psychosocial duos, comprised of professionals such as social workers and educational psychologists, are employed in schools and work as a duo. However, the role of these duos in schools needs to be better defined [19] and faces several challenges. These challenges include a need for clarity regarding the scope of their actions, job insecurity, limited coordination with teachers, and inadequate recognition of their contributions to the school [16], [20], [21]. In the context of their work in public and subsidized schools in Chile, their professional activities are primarily focused on social interventions with the poorest students, often characterized by social labelling [16], [17], [20]. Although these duos’ specific functions and activities are not clearly delineated [19], the literature consistently highlights their significant involvement with students’ families.

The latter becomes problematic because the assumptions about the nature and purpose of the relationship between families and schools vary [22], [23], despite a substantial body of literature supporting the importance of family involvement in schools [24]–[26]. Consequently, the differing orientations towards this goal hinder efforts to promote such participation. For instance, interventions carried out by psychosocial duos tend to be sporadic, peripheral, and individual in nature [16], [17].

Numerous studies have explored the perspectives of school administrators [27], in service teachers [28], trainee teachers [29], and parents [30], [31] regarding various aspects of the family-school relationship. However, despite professionals acknowledging the significance of promoting family involvement in schools as an integral part of their work, there is a gap in understanding how psychosocial duos perceive family involvement in schools. Inquiring into this issue is a contribution both to the field of family studies and to a better understanding of the role that educational psychologists and social workers fulfil in schools.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative method to explore the participants’ modes of meaning. The primary objective is to examine the phenomenon of the relationships between families and schools from the perspective of social workers and psychologists. The results are reported, in which the professionals’ understanding of family involvement in the school were investigated; as well, as the different level of this. Finally, we identified the meanings related to the idea of family participation associated to said involvement.

2.1. Participants

The sample selection criterion was pragmatic and by convenience [32]. Our research design considered a qualitative sample of four professionals, specifically two psychosocial duos. Among the participants, two were social workers, and the other two were psychologists from two municipal and public schools in Chile. The inclusion criteria for participants in this study were based on their employment as a psychosocial duo in a school setting and their involvement in working with families with children attending the school. The city has four schools with psychosocial duos. All of these schools were invited to participate, of which two agreed to join this study. Participants consented to the interviews, and ethical protocols were strictly followed to ensure their well-being and protection.

2.2. Instruments and procedures

We were interested in exploring the perspective of the duo or duo working together. For this reason, we aimed to foster collective reflection to ensure that the responses were provided from a shared standpoint. Consequently, we decided to conduct interviews with the professionals of each duo as a cohesive unit.

We use a semi-structured interview script to foster a close, flexible conversation with each psychosocial duo [33]. The interviews were structured into analytical categories that guided the questions to gather the necessary information. These questions explored topics such as the importance of specific activities performed by the duos, their understanding of their role, and their perception of the family-school relationship. Two experts in methodology and a school social worker judged the thematic script assessing the consistency, relevance, and clarity of each proposed question. During the participants’ assigned working hours, the interviews occurred in their respective schools, specifically their offices. Each interview lasted for 1.30 hours.

2.3. Analytical procedures

We first conducted a thematic analysis to analyze the collected data, employing deductive categories based on Vogel’s model of family involvement in schools [34]. Vogels [34] explores different levels of

parental engagement, ranging from being consumers to becoming partners. According to Vogels [34], families can have varying degrees of involvement at their children's and adolescents' schools. They can be classified into different layers of implication: consumers, clients, participants, and partners. Our analysis focused on examining the position and response of psychosocial duos concerning parental involvement in schools to explore their perspective. We utilized a thematic grid during the analysis process to enhance information clarity, enabling us to visualize the relationships between the identified categories.

In a subsequent phase, patterns were identified to achieve a deeper understanding of three aspects: i) family participation in school; ii) the different levels of involvement; and iii) the types of participation as reported by our participants. The analysis process was iterative, closely tied to the data, and gradually abstracted to identify categories that could explain the phenomenon under research. Individual team members conducted each stage and subsequently discussed to seek intersubjective consensus.

The researchers engaged in an iterative discussion process, aiming to seek the plausibility and robustness of the findings. The authors' methodological decisions guided the analytical procedure. Specifically, our analysis, conducted through thematic analysis and coding, allowed for an understanding of the phenomenon through the participants' narratives. This comparative method, structured coherently based on both deductive and inductive (or emergent) categories related to the relationship between family and school, facilitated the establishment of an account of the configuration of the studied phenomenon as perceived by our participants.

In this group interview analysis, the profession of origin of those providing the answers is not relevant to highlight. The focus was on generating a collective reflection as a duo rather than emphasizing individual professional backgrounds. Therefore, when reporting the results, the citations will only mention the duo without specifying whether it is a social worker or a psychologist speaking. This decision was further supported by the absence of strictly disciplinary vocabulary used by the interviewees to identify themselves. The citations are organized by the interview (1 or 2) and the member of the responding pair (1 or 2) for clarity.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Understanding family involvement at school

First and foremost, it is important to note that the participants were consistently asked about families in a broad sense throughout the interviews. This approach avoided influencing their responses towards a specific family structure. However, it is noteworthy that when questioned about "families," the participants primarily referred to "parents" (either the father or mother), although they acknowledged the possibility of other responsible adults for the students. Consequently, the "the family" concept exhibited an adult-centered perspective, focusing on the legal guardians or family members responsible for the children and adolescents at school. The notion of family was framed in terms of the caregiving and upbringing responsibilities of one or more adults towards a child or adolescent, with other types of connections being disregarded.

The participants perceived parental upbringing as crucial for children's development. However, it was emphasized in terms of its absence and the subsequent consequences for children when it fails to meet the expected standards. One interviewee describes it as:

"It is related to concern, and it is of utmost importance because we must consider that from the moment a baby is born, their first interactions are with their parents. Therefore, when there are indications of deficiencies, it has serious consequences for the child, whether in terms of social skills, rights, education, or learning ability. All these factors make the child's development more challenging." (E1, Psychosocial Duo 1)

Regarding the school's work, "the family" plays a crucial role in facilitating the student's moral and academic educability. The latter is achieved through active "participation" in school life, which includes regular attendance and visibility within the school community. In this context, "being family" entails being consistently "present," offering close support to the child. Failure to attend school when requested is perceived as a neglect of parental duties and is interpreted as a lack of commitment. Thus, parental (or legal guardian) presence at school indicates responsibility and genuine interest in the child's well-being. According to the participants' perspective, parental absence constitutes an act of abandonment, leading to observable academic and moral consequences for the student.

"Yes, and it is evident in the academic achievement of the children. It's about comparing a student whose parents are actively present, particularly a mother who consistently attends meetings and is fully committed to the child's educational journey... with a parent who is never seen here. The impact is visible in the students; their parents' participation is significant for them." (E1, Psychosocial Duo 1)

“And it's not just about academic achievement; it also affects their personal development. For instance, during adolescence, there are numerous risky behaviors and temptations, and without a supportive family nearby, it becomes more challenging for the kid.” (E2, Psychosocial Duo 1)

Therefore, parents' school attendance serves as a marker of their responsibility and commitment to their children. Participation is related to involvement in the schooling process and will be the sum of these commitments for a common purpose. Participation is closely linked to active involvement in the educational process and is manifested through the collective dedication to a common purpose. This purpose is often perceived as self-evident and unquestioned. Consequently, “families” are expected to participate by actively joining collaborative endeavors led by school professionals.

“The commitment that people have towards a common objective or goal is that they become participants in the process, rather than just observers of the work being done, in this case, with the students.” (E1, Psychosocial Duo 2)

Although these duos work in public schools and expect parental leadership through the parental representation bodies in schools, the desired involvement lacks a civic or ethical-political rationale. The articulation of this participation is related to the obligations contracted concerning the education of each child and the interest in the school's actions towards them, as well as the desire for it to have an emotional nature, expressed through the longing for “close ties”. When asked what they expect from the families, they replied:

“Commitment, but it also needs to be a connection with the school. Well, we would appreciate parents being involved every day (laughs), but that's not the reality. There are some parents who show great concern, but we don't have parents who take on leadership roles in the sense of proposing new ideas or strategies that would allow for a closer relationship with the school.” (E1, Psychosocial Duo 2)

3.2. Family involvement levels

When inquiring about the levels of parental or family involvement from the perspective of these professionals, it is expressed in complaints regarding the absence of parents at school. Observing how the absence of school attendance and the lack of being “within” its boundaries would pose a relational threat is intriguing. It is worth noting how these poor parents are described as having a weak connection to the school.

“Here at the school, there is very little involvement, it is a poor involvement: it is reflected when we do congratulations. We are permanently reinforcing commitment. We try to generate parent's commitment, but a large number of parents are not committed, it can be seen in meetings, special summons...” (E1, Psychosocial Duo 2)

In the narratives of these psychosocial duos, there is a notable absence of mentioning the material conditions in which families live, even when asked about it. There is an absence of reflection on how these conditions might contribute to difficulties in engaging with the school. Additionally, other potential forms of involvement in the education of children and adolescents and their school life are not acknowledged.

Judgments regarding the perceived deficit in parental involvement are constructed in contrast to the efforts and relevance of the activities proposed by the psychosocial team. Thus, we are presented with a situation where families are depicted as lacking responsibility while the professionals strive for the student's future. This idea is exemplified by a case where the intended audience did not attend a scheduled talk to explain the program for access to higher education (PACE in its Spanish acronym).

“They should be more responsible in this process as it supports the student. For example, last year there was a PACE activity for senior high school students. The invitation was sent to all the parents of last year's senior high school students; the total number of students must have been about 120, and attended what? Two parents? Two parents out of a total population of 120 senior high school students! They were going to be informed about the benefits of the PACE program and what advantages they could obtain from it.” (E1, Psychosocial Duo 2)

Involvement in school processes encompasses more than just attending activities to which parents are summoned; it also involves parents proactively reaching out to the school to apologize for their absence. It is noteworthy to observe that part of the responsibilities of these teams involves actively seeking out these parents in order for them to offer their apologies to the school. An example of this can be seen in this interview excerpt:

“Furthermore, not all parents attend the parent-teacher meetings, and it is the inspector and even ourselves who have to personally deliver the summons to the families in order for them to provide excuses to the school. It is truly remarkable!” (E1, Psychosocial Duo 1)

Nevertheless, more than simply attending the meetings or apologizing is required: parents are expected to engage in them actively, however, without altering the structure of these institutional practices, whether they are meetings or school curricular initiatives. In the narratives provided by these professionals, the absence - as well as the passivity - of fathers, mothers, or guardians emerges as a significant indicator that underscores the profound isolation experienced by only a few parents dedicated to their children's education. The following excerpts are typical examples of this perspective:

“They participate in meetings, in the typical things that are done, but they still seem rather passive.” (E2, Psychosocial Duo 2)

“We are an environmental school, sustainable agroecology, because there is a garden, there is a monitor, all the same, there are four to six parents who participate. It is a low commitment, if they are always the same mothers, the same guardians who come. I have been here since last year and I have always seen the same faces. That's all: there are about six or seven guardians who work hard so that the project can go ahead.” (E2, Psychosocial Duo 1)

3.3. Types of participation provided by schools

Parental involvement is considered of utmost importance by these teams, as they believe it plays a critical role in the educational development of children and adolescents. However, according to the interviewees, the poverty or “vulnerability” experienced by families presents a challenge in achieving significant parental engagement. As a result, professionals perceive their role as primarily providing support or reinforcement to the efforts made by families at home. This perspective implies that education can only be effectively delivered under specific family circumstances. Consequently, the school's role is visualized as facilitating family involvement to enable children's education.

“We are the most vulnerable school in this town, and we constantly need to enhance student's skills that are not adequately developed. If children don't have those skills reinforced at home, their learning outcomes here will be null. Therefore, we provide support or even take the lead in fostering those skills, so to speak.” (E2, Psychosocial Duo 1)

“In this context, our teams reflect on how informational meetings appear to lack appeal. The high school organizes meetings, such as informational sessions, but they don't generate much interest among parents.” (E2, Psychosocial Duo 2)

This finding does not prompt a question about the modes of involvement and decision-making spaces but rather about how these organized activities are animated. This situation explains why the duo focuses on enticing parents to “enter” the school. What they refer to as “participation” primarily entails attending recreational or celebratory events to get fathers, mothers, or guardians to “step inside” the school. These activities mention parties, dinners, and courses unrelated to parental engagement in their children's learning. No actions associated with democratic or collective participation in public education are mentioned.

“We have a school coexistence management plan where we implement initiatives in various areas. We have several initiatives that involve parents, and one of them has been successful this year. The gastronomy workshop has been very well received, but the computer workshop did not have much participation.” (E2, Psychosocial Duo 2)

“In our school, we celebrate Saint John's Day. During this event, we prepare traditional stews and engage in activities that revive the culture of our local community. We invite the entire school community to participate. Additionally, we have Chilean Heritage Week, which is another open space for celebration and appreciation of our cultural heritage.” (E1, Psychosocial Duo 1)

One of the interviewed teams engaged in self-criticism, acknowledging the lack of recreational activities that foster a connection between families and the school. This questioning is done in comparison with other schools in the sector. Interestingly, the ultimate goal of these activities is to “attract” families to the school.

“We have not organized large-scale activities to attract families or parents because, for example, other schools in the district host bingo events, parties, and make stews for all.” (E2, Psychosocial Duo 2)

Given that participation is understood as the response to a summons established by the school, the question of how to communicate with families becomes relevant. This is seen in terms of the circulation and display of the information that the school wants to communicate. Such communication is described in terms of unilateral information, from the school to the student's homes.

"We are implementing new outreach strategies to enhance family participation, such as utilizing radio, mass communications, banners, posters, bulletins, newsletters, and circulars. We even send these materials directly to their homes." (E2, Psychosocial Duo 1)

Parents and guardians are not only asked to participate by attending school and accepting the definition of education proposed by the establishment they choose for their children's education. They are also expected to be involved by adhering to schooling practices in their family life. On the one hand, they observe a lack of family members present at home. On the other hand, parents are not seen as "participating" by following the prescribed guidelines provided by the professionals. The notion of not being present at home is framed as a deficit without considering alternative forms of support for children and adolescents, lacking nuances in their perspective.

"Not having a person who is empowering them at home, little can also be achieved at school. What I was talking about as a significant figure, then it is important that parents also support and believe in their children, that they develop self-esteem. As a psychosocial team, we provide guidelines for them to work at home and [they do] nothing." (E1, Psychosocial Duo 1)

Another aspect to consider is that within the context of schools facing pressure to succeed in standardized tests and meet accountability measures. Within that framework, family "participation" takes on a new significance as it is seen as means to enhance the metrics by which schools are evaluated. The explanation for the importance of family participation follows circular reasoning: i) education cannot be successful without parental involvement; ii) consequently, student learning outcomes are low; iii) to address this, it is necessary to encourage parents to actively engage by attending school events; and iv) however, since parents are perceived as deficient in their involvement, the school struggles to facilitate effective student learning.

"The SIMCE [national standardized test] results obtained this year were very poor, which is why we aim to implement these actions. The goal is to improve the survey indexes and also cultivate a sense of belonging among the parents towards the school." (E1, Psychosocial Duo 2)

However, the relationship between different types of participation and student learning outcomes is not quite clearly elucidated. The identified types of participation include: i) attendance at meetings and special events; ii) receiving and understanding school communications; iii) following the school's guidance for parenting practices at home; and iv) engaging with the school community through participation in organized events and celebrations. The connection between these various forms of participation and their impact on student learning remains ambiguous and requires further clarification.

3.4. Psychosocial duos' contribution in the school setting

The teams themselves recognize the significance of their role in providing teachers with information about the family context of students, thereby contributing to the school's efforts in working with families. While these professionals generally feel acknowledged for their work, they also express frustration with being held accountable by their peers and colleagues for the absence of parents at schools and the educational difficulties resulting from it. This accountability is perceived as excessive as a responsibility for everything that happens to the students.

"It is of utmost importance because through our work as a psychosocial team, teachers, for instance, can gain insight into the students' realities." (E2, Psychosocial Duo 1)

"As a psychosocial team, we are held responsible for everything that happens to the children. The directors and teachers often question us, asking what has been done, why certain things are happening, why the child's grades have dropped, why the mother is not involved. They consider the psychosocial duo to be at fault for such issues." (E1, Psychosocial Duo 1)

Overall, for these professionals, the involvement of families in schools is seen as crucial for students' cognitive and moral development. They define family as the adults responsible for children and adolescents at school. Their descriptions of the parental role are heavily influenced by discourses of intensive parenting [11], with deterministic characteristics regarding its impact on children's education [8]. This view is contrastable with the research that shows the loneliness and incomprehension with which Chilean parents of low-income live the act of upbringing, as well as the depiction of hyper agentic motherhood. Their notion of participation points to a relational logic of support for the school professionals' educational work rather than the democratic ideals expected in public education.

The aims and purposes of educational activities are assumed as given and not problematized. Attendance at school and being physically present are considered indicators of adequate parenting. Nuances are largely absent in the concept of parental participation. The absence of families is framed as a threat to education and is discussed in terms of risk and threats to moral development.

The level of family involvement is linked to the requirement of school attendance, with three levels identified: absence, passive attendance, and commitment. However, there is little questioning of the strategies used to engage families or the design of activities. The analysis primarily revolves around parental responsibility without considering the economic, social, or cultural conditions in which these families live. Examples of highly involved families tend to focus on mothers' presence at school without reflecting on the underlying social, economic or gender issues of it. Criticisms of parental absence at home implicitly assume the incorporation of women into the workforce. The portrayal of children and adolescents as abandoned and alone allows for examining the construction of women's roles and expectations regarding children's education. The analysis shows a view of parental involvement as either a total presence or absolute absence without shades.

The types of participation described diverge from democratic models. Instead, an understanding of participation with bureaucratic undertones is emphasized, such as compliance with guidelines, reading the information, and attending meetings. Complementarily, with recreational community perspectives, where participation means attending parties and events organized by the school. This last form of participation has two functions: on the one hand, it is a strategy for families to attend school, and on the other, it seeks to generate a sense of identity with the school. This finding aligns with existing literature on the subject [13].

In the context of schools being evaluated and held accountable, the psychosocial duo is tasked with promoting parental involvement in the school. The latter is seen as ensuring the educability of children and adolescents and improving indicator scores. The reductionist and deterministic discourse regarding what fathers or mothers "can" do reflects a shifting of responsibilities away from the specific role of the school.

In this sense, this study has implications for the practice of school professionals. First of all, it is necessary to discuss in a broad way the ways in which schools relate to families within the framework of a public education that ensures the right to education of children and adolescents. This implies questioning utilitarian, authoritarian forms of linking with families in the context of a democratic public education. Secondly, it implies the need for an approach to families that considers their strengths and contributions to the school education of all children in the school, and not only particular cases. Specifically, it implies an exercise of recognizing the contribution of fathers, mothers and other guardians in a community context. Finally, an integrated approach is suggested in which the different professionals in the school coordinate their work with families; this implies overcoming reductionist perspectives such as those already reported, in order to move towards interdisciplinary work that strengthens the educational work of both schools and the families that attend them.

4. CONCLUSION

The research seeks to examine the phenomenon of the relationships between families and schools from the perspective of social workers and psychologists. To that aim, we used Vogel's categorization. We observed a desire on the part of the duos to be participatory guardians; however, the basis of this participation is based on obedience and docility. Parental participation is grounded through the basis of their choice of school, which can be understood in terms of clientelism on the duo's part.

These professionals' understanding of family involvement in the school is consistent with what research has described in student interns, teachers, and principals. However, this perspective is exacerbated by the lack of recognition of the work done by the duo and the expectations that teachers have that the duo will resolve tensions between families and schools. The phenomena of intensive parenting typical of neoliberal systems frame the whole experience.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank the Universidad de Las Américas FFCC 2024 project: “Schools and Communities. Situated conversations through knowledge dialogue methodologies coming from within the educational agents involved.” We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the participants who kindly and generously consented to participate in this study.




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