FAMILY-SCHOOL COLLABORATION PRACTICES AT SUCCESSFUL SCHOOLS IN DISADVANTAGED ENVIRONMENTS
PRÁCTICAS DE COLABORACIÓN FAMILIA-ESCUELA EN CENTROS DE ÉXITO DE ENTORNOS DESFAVORECIDOS
PRÁTICAS DE COLABORAÇÃO FAMÍLIA-ESCOLA EM CENTROS DE SUCESSO DE ENTORNOS DESFAVORECIDOS

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ABSTRACT: Educational research indicates that family-school collaboration is an important factor for student achievement, especially among more socially disadvantaged groups. It is, therefore, interesting to explore collaborative practices between family and school developed in schools that, despite being located in disadvantaged urban contexts, are characterized by achieving good results. In this work, we have selected 24 schools with such characteristics and through interviews and focus groups, we have compiled the perceptions of school directors, teachers and families regarding the collaboration between family and school. The information obtained has been categorized according to the six dimensions identified in the theoretical model posited by J. Epstein (2001). The results show that the schools subject of our analysis undertake measures to promote collaboration with the families in all the areas defined by the model. However, some differences can be observed in the intensity of the work conducted in the different dimensions of collaboration and in the perceptions between parents and education professionals. Based on these results, it is possible to outline some of the features shared by schools in the study, which could help to explain their achievements, even if only in part. However, in contrast to the aforementioned theoretical model, it is also possible to identify areas whereby these schools could expand their strategies for collaborating with families. Therefore, the study reinforces the idea that collaboration with families is an important key for schools serving socially disadvantaged groups and the need to develop systematic and holistic projects of intervention, aimed at strengthening all areas of collaboration.

PALABRAS CLAVES:
relación padres-
escuela
entornos
desfavorecidos
éxito escolar
familia
eficacia del centro
de enseñanza

RESUMEN: La investigación educativa indica que la colaboración familia-escuela es un factor relevante para los logros de los estudiantes, especialmente entre los colectivos socialmente más vulnerables. Por ello, resulta de interés explorar las prácticas de colaboración entre familia y escuela que desarrollan centros españoles que, a pesar de estar ubicados en contextos urbanos desfavorecidos, se caracterizan por obtener un buen rendimiento escolar. En este trabajo se han seleccionado 24 centros que reúnen esas características y se han recogido, a través de entrevistas y grupos de discusión, las percepciones de directivos, familias y profesorado sobre las acciones de colaboración entre familia y escuela. La información obtenida se ha categorizado de acuerdo a las seis dimensiones identificadas en el modelo teórico de Epstein (2001). Los resultados muestran que los centros emprenden acciones encaminadas a lograr la colaboración con las familias en todas las áreas definidas en dicho modelo, si bien se aprecian diferencias en la intensidad del trabajo llevado a cabo en cada una ellas, así como ciertas discrepancias entre las percepciones de las familias y las de los profesionales de la educación. A partir de esos resultados, se perfilan algunos rasgos compartidos por las escuelas analizadas en relación a las prácticas de colaboración que pueden ayudar a explicar, al menos parcialmente, el éxito que dichos centros obtienen. Sin embargo, en contraste con el modelo teórico mencionado, es posible identificar también ciertas áreas en las que las escuelas podrían mejorar sus estrategias de vinculación con las familias. Se refuerza, por tanto, la idea de la importancia que la colaboración con las familias tiene para los centros que atienden a colectivos socialmente desfavorecidos y se apunta a la necesidad de desarrollar proyectos de intervención de carácter sistemático y holístico, destinados a reforzar todas las áreas de dicha colaboración.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE:
Relação pais-escola
Entornos
desfavorecidos
Sucesso escolar
Família
Eficácia escolar

RESUMO: A investigação educacional indica que a colaboração família-escola é um fator relevante para o desempenho do aluno, especialmente entre os coletivos que apresentam mais desvantagens sociais. Por isso, é interessante para explorar as práticas de colaboração entre a família e escola em centros espanhóis, apesar de estar localizado em contextos urbanos desfavorecidos, eles são caracterizados pela obtenção de um bom desempenho escolar. Neste trabalho foram selecionados 24 centros com tais características e foram coletados por meio de entrevistas e grupos de discussão as percepções do dirigentes escolares, famílias e professores sobre as ações de colaboração entre família e escola. A informação obtida foi categorizada de acordo com as seis dimensões identificadas no modelo teórico de Epstein (2001). Os resultados mostram que os centros analisados empreendem ações orientadas para alcançar a colaboração com as famílias de seus estudantes em todas as áreas definidas neste modelo. Contudo, é possível notar as diferenças entre a intensidade do trabalho desenvolvido nas distintas dimensões de colaboração, e as percepções que têm as famílias e os profissionais de educação em relação a esta temática. A partir dos resultados apresentados, faz-se possível perfilar algumas das características partilhadas pelas escolas que participaram do estudo, que poderiam contribuir para explicar, ao menos em parte, os objetivos conquistados. Não obstante, em contraste como o modelo teórico referido, os resultados permitem identificar também áreas de melhoria, a partir das quais estas escolas poderiam reforçar suas estratégias de colaboração com as famílias. O estudo reforça, portanto, a noção de que a colaboração com as famílias é uma chave importante para as escolas que atendem grupos socialmente desfavorecidos e a necessidade de desenvolver projetos de intervenção de natureza sistemática e holística, destinados a reforçar todas as áreas de cooperação.

1. Introduction

1.1. Family-school collaboration: conceptual aspects

In recent decades, educational research has provided a growing body of evidence regarding the importance of cooperation between the family and the school in the attainment of good educational results. In the 1980's, studies conducted as part of the school effectiveness movement gave prominence to this issue after it was determined that one of the characteristics of successful schools is families being strongly involved in the school life of their children and tending to participate actively in the school (Mortimore et al., 1988). Since then, many studies have highlighted that collaboration has beneficial effects not only for students but also for the families and schools themselves (Avvisati, Besbas & Guyon, 2010; Desforgues & Abouchaar, 2003; Fan & Chen, 2001; Halgunseth & Peterson, 2009).

From a theoretical perspective, different conceptualizations exist with regard to family-school collaboration (Repáraz & Naval, 2014) and proposals to systematize the dimensions that comprise it (Eccles & Harold, 1996; Hornby, 1990; Kohl et al., 2000; Lee & Bowen, 2006; Nordhal, 2006; Vogels, 2002). However, of the theoretical models proposed, the most widely used and disseminated has been the one devised by J. Epstein (1995, 2001), which identifies six modes of collaboration (Table 1). According to this author, these modes encompass actions that pose specific challenges for schools, but for which any school can develop initiatives to strengthen collaboration with families.

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Table 1. Modes of family-school collaboration in Epstein's model	
Mode	**Definition**
Helping parents with parenting	Help families establish conditions that favour study at home (health, nutrition, safety).
Communication	Design effective channels of communication with families regarding school programmes and children's progress.
Volunteering	Promote and organize voluntary assistance and support by parents in classroom and school activities.
Learning at home	Provide information to families to help students with homework, as well as the choices and decisions of an academic nature.
Decision-making	Involve parents in decision-making, developing their leadership and participation in school associations and government and management bodies.
Collaborating with the community	Identify and integrate community resources and services to strengthen school programmes, family practices and the development and learning of students.

Source: Adapted from Epstein, J. L. et al. (2009): *School, Family and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action,* 3rd. ed. Thousand Oaks: Corwin.

Regardless of the theoretical model adopted, collaboration between the family and the school has mainly been studied from the perspective of education professionals. However, there is evidence to suggest that parents and teachers hold different views on the subject. This means that analysing cooperation practices from the unique perspective of educators provides us with a limited view which needs to be extended to award parents a voice (Piekarski, 2008). Including parents not only allows their perceptions and views to be taken into account, but is also a basic requirement if we truly consider them to play a central role in collaboration on equal terms with teachers (Ferrara, 2009).

1.2. *Family-school collaboration in disadvantaged environments*

Families from the more disadvantaged social groups generally tend to collaborate less with schools. In fact, practices established by schools seem to favour middle-class families and may not be suitable for those which display greater cultural differences from the school (Smith & Wohlstetter, 2009; West, 2007). Specifically, those parents who live in urban environments, with low incomes, and are immigrants or ethnic minorities are those who face greater barriers to collaboration (Carrasco, Pamies & Bertran, 2009; Parreira do Amaral & Dale, 2013,).

In contrast to the situation described above, achieving effective collaboration with the school is a particularly important issue for disadvantaged families, as it can be decisive in this group achieving academic success (Crozier, 2012; Reynolds, 2005). Adequate parental involvement throughout their children's school life is key to these students achieving good results, despite the adverse expectations deriving from their situation (Sylva, 2014). In fact, obtaining the cooperation of families in disadvantaged schools is considered a priority in education policies and practices aimed at equity, which is why in recent years many school systems have developed actions specifically aimed at immigrant parents from ethnic minorities or with fewer resources (Autor, 2014).

From this perspective, it is essential to take into account the special needs of such families and strive to eliminate the additional barriers they encounter. To do this, those schools which serve the most disadvantaged populations must invest more time and effort than other schools in achieving adequate cooperation and making both parents and teachers aware of the benefits deriving from it (OECD, 2012).

1.3. Studies on family-school collaboration in the Spanish context

As in other countries, many initiatives are undertaken to strengthen collaboration between families and schools in Spain (Borgonovi & Montt, 2012; *Consejo Escolar del Estado* - State Board of Education - 2014). However, in the field of research it is a topic that was scarcely studied until recently, with the exception of research into the involvement of parents in school governance and

management. This particular dimension of collaboration has been the subject of numerous studies, which have repeatedly stated that the active participation of parents on school boards and in Parents' Associations is in practice limited to a very small proportion of families (Paniagua, 2015; Parra et al., 2014).

The relative lack of research in other areas of family-school collaboration has begun to be addressed in recent years with new studies that demonstrate the relationship between family involvement in the academic life of their children and student performance, motivation for learning and school climate (Castro et al., 2014a; 2014b; Martínez-González et al., 2008; Ruiz de Miguel, 2009). These investigations provide similar findings to those conducted in other countries, showing that variables such as parental expectations and communication between parents and children are linked to improved results, while the outcomes of other types of involvement, like parents' attendance at school meetings, are less conclusive.

In recent years, Spanish studies can also be found that have explored variables and conditions related to collaboration (De la Guardia, 2004; Parra et al., 2014, Pérez-Díaz et al., 2001), while research has been conducted that relates existing cooperation practices in schools with dimensions established by different theoretical models (Azpillaga, Intxausti & Joaristi, 2014; Colás & Contreras, 2013; Martínez-González et al., 2000). Although the purposes and results of these studies differ to some extent, this body of research is providing new evidence regarding prevailing levels and types of family involvement in schools, while helping to increase understanding of the factors that may influence family-school collaboration in our country.

Within this body of work, some research has focused on specific types of family, especially the immigrant population. This has highlighted the importance that these families' participation in school may have not only in improving the academic performance of their children, but in contributing to their integration in society (*Defensor del Pueblo* – Ombudsman - 2003; Lorenzo et al., 2009; Lozano, Alcaraz & Colás, 2013; Santos-Rego, Lorenzo & Priegue, 2011) and ways in which they can acquire social capital (Carrasco, Pàmies & Bertran, 2009). However, to date very few studies can be found which analyse the collaboration practices of other types of disadvantaged families, particularly those groups which the international research has identified as the most vulnerable (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003).

Given the above, we believe it is pertinent to analyse the relations existing between families and Spanish schools serving disadvantaged populations. Our aim in this study was therefore to investigate family-school collaboration in schools located in disadvantaged urban environments taking the aforementioned theoretical model developed by Epstein (2001) as a starting point. Specifically, the article addresses the issue in a group of schools which, despite being located in unfavourable environments, obtain better school results than other similar schools. This will allow us to determine whether at these schools, as expected, it is possible to find good practices promoting family collaboration that can guide the actions of other schools (Azpillaga et al., 2014). In order to obtain the most complete overview possible of this subject, we have included the views of school directors, teachers and parents.

2. Aims

The purpose of this article is to explore the perceptions of parents, teachers and directors regarding those family-school collaboration practices that drive successful schools located in disadvantaged urban areas. This general aim is specified in two specific objectives. Firstly, to identify the type of strategies that these schools put in place to encourage collaboration with families. Secondly, to contrast the views of the three groups considered (directors, teachers and parents) in order to analyse whether their perceptions coincide or, on the contrary, differences exist between them.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The study was carried out in the four most populous Spanish cities: Barcelona, Madrid, Seville and Valencia. Given the aims of the study, we did not look for a representative sample of schools in each city, but rather undertook purposive sampling aimed at selecting successful schools, defined as those which obtain a higher academic performance than that expected considering the socio-economic environment in which they are located and the type of students who attend them (Sammons, 2007).

Specifically, schools were selected by means of a quantitative approach to identify those which met both of the following conditions: located in socially disadvantaged urban environments in each of the four participating cities and obtaining higher than expected results considering the effect of contextual variables (Joaristi, Lizasoain & Azpillaga, 2014;

Martinez-Arias, Gaviria & Castro, 2009). The first phase involved selecting districts that met certain socio-economic criteria in each city. These criteria were adapted to the context of each participating city and determined using the following indicators: economic (levels of family income in the lower third of the population and above average rate of unemployment), educational (low percentage of the population with a university qualification and high proportion with less than primary education), and indicators related to the composition of the population (high percentage of registered foreign residents and high concentration of Roma students in schools). The second phase consisted in using the information provided by the education authorities of the four autonomous regions involved in the research[1] to identify the schools in each district that had obtained high relative scores, understanding these to be scores equal to or above average in external exams on the core competencies of students in Compulsory Primary and Secondary Education administered by the various Spanish Autonomous Regions.

After identifying schools that met the above two requirements, two state primary schools, two state secondary schools and one private school with public funding were selected in each city. In the case of Barcelona, following the same proportion between types of schools, the study was extended to include five additional schools in the city's metropolitan area. Following the selection process, the schools' management teams were contacted to ask for collaboration. Finally, a total of 24 schools took part in the study, as it was not possible to complete the research at one of the selected schools. Consent for conducting the research was obtained from the various sectors involved in all cases.

3.2. Procedure and instruments

Once the sample of participating schools had been selected by means of quantitative methodology, qualitative methodology was used to decide upon an approach to the subject of study. Specifically, focus groups were used as data collection techniques in the case of parents and teachers, and semi-structured interviews in the case of school directors. The focus group may be defined as a planned conversation in a relaxed atmosphere designed to obtain information on a given area of interest (Krueger, 1991) and its use is common when the aim is to capture ideological discourse and symbolic representations associated with social phenomena (Ibañez, 1979). It therefore suited the aims of our study, as it allowed a prospective approach to determining the situation regarding family-school collaboration in the selected schools and the views of the various sectors concerned. The interview is also widely used in qualitative methodology, as it is designed to gather information on people's views, attitudes and beliefs regarding the situation under study (Bisquerra, 2004).

Using a script for the focus groups and interviews allowed the research team to gather information on the six modes of involvement established by Epstein's model (2001), described in Table 1. Specifically, they were asked broad questions concerning which channels of communication the school employed between itself and the families, the role that families and teachers play in educating children, the practices adopted by the school for promoting family participation and involvement, and families' true level of involvement in their children's school lives. In total, 24 focus groups were held with parents and 24 with school teachers, and 24 interviews were conducted with head teachers. The focus groups comprised five to seven participants and were balanced in terms of homogeneity, as participants belonged to the same group, and heterogeneity (teachers from different school years and subjects, parents of students of different ages) (Krueger, 1991). Nevertheless, it should be noted that there was a higher representation of mothers in the case of the family focus groups (around 80%). Although there was more of a gender balance among teachers, there was also a predominance of female teachers participating in the groups (approximately 60%). The members of the research team went to the schools in person and were responsible for conducting the interviews and focus groups. Data collection took place throughout 2014.

The team recorded the interviews and focus groups and took field notes, before producing transcripts of the contents. The analysis of these transcripts allowed responses from each of the three sectors to be grouped according to their content and the categories established in the Epstein model.

4. Results

The results of the study are shown in Table 2, which is organized according to the percentage of schools in the sample that use collaboration strategies in each of the six modes proposed by Epstein in the opinion of the different response groups: parents, teachers and school directors. The table also presents some examples of strategies used by schools in each dimension.

**Table 2. Family collaboration modes employed by schools.
Perceptions of parents, teachers and directors**

Mode	Number and percentage of schools that promote collaboration strategies by sector			Examples of strategies used by schools
	Parents	Teachers	Directors	
Helping parents with parenting	6 (25%)	12 (50%)	11 (46%)	Training parents about healthy lifestyle habits and rules of behaviour Promoting educational leisure activities Material assistance for families
Communication	24 (100%)	24 (100%)	24 (100%)	Newsletters, bulletins and school agendas Group and individual meetings Informal meetings Phone calls and SMS Email Websites
Volunteering	15 (62%)	22 (92%)	24 (100%)	Participation in festivals, workshops, extracurricular activities, etc. Participation in classroom activities
Help with learning at home	3 (12%)	6 (25%)	5 (21%)	Guidance for parents about helping with homework Talks on academic issues Advice for families about academic decisions Reading, IT, etc. workshops for parents
Decision-making	7 (29%)	16 (67%)	19 (79%)	Promoting the participation of families on the school board Promoting the creation and expansion of Parents' Associations
Collaborating with the community	12 (50%)	19 (79%)	22 (92%)	Collaborating with the city council, associations, NGOs and local organizations

In general, based on the information gathered in the interviews and focus groups we can state that the schools participating in this study establish actions to promote collaboration with the families of their students in most of the areas analysed. However, some differences can be observed in both the intensity of the work done in the different dimensions of collaboration and the perceptions that parents and education professionals have of this concept.

As the table shows, schools more often instigate actions in the categories listed in Epstein's model as *Communication, Volunteering* and *Community Collaboration*, in that order. In fact, the dimension that appears in all schools according to all sectors is that of *Communication*, seemingly an aspect these schools take special care over. The schools use different means of communication with families, both traditional (newsletters, agendas or meetings) and via technology (email, SMS or digital platforms), although the latter are only present in a small number. Also, alongside communication of a formal nature, the schools also use informal procedures, such as contact between

teachers and parents when entering and leaving the school. Directors and teachers believe that this variety of channels achieves a good level of communication with most families, while noting that the strategies they implement are not effective in achieving fluid communication with some sectors of parents. From the parents' perspective, the most highly valued measures are those of an informal nature because in their opinion they show the willingness of teachers and directors to maintain close contact with families.

Teachers are often downstairs at four-thirty and nine. They're in the playground and you see them talking with different people, so often you don't need to go upstairs. If you want to talk to them you find them down in the playground (FG Parents, C1).

With regard to *Volunteering*, teachers and directors at almost all of the schools say they work hard to incorporate activities that require parental collaboration, an opinion shared by families in 6 out of the 10 schools analysed. Most often, these activities are festivals, trips or extracurricular

events, although several schools also invite parents, grandparents and other relatives within school hours to give talks, help out with workshops or help with manual arts and crafts, to mention a few examples. A more formalized and generalized form of collaboration by families, which also includes academic activities, can be found in schools that have adopted projects such as the Learning Communities project.

> *The school also supports you if you want to offer what you might call a service... I recently did a workshop making biscuits, they brought me the flour and the sugar and started getting them all making the dough. Because to me all the resources in the school are at our disposal (FG Parents, C16).*

The third most common mode found at these schools is *Collaborating with the community*, in the opinion of the head teachers and teachers, and in the opinion of half of the parents. Many of them seek out opportunities for cooperation with municipal services, associations and NGOs capable of helping the students and their families, with support not limited to academic issues, but also covering other areas, such as economic, social or leisure needs. It is difficult to separate the actions taken by schools in this dimension from those related to the first mode of the Epstein model, that of *Helping parents with parenting*, since the two overlap to some extent.

> *That's important... that the school has opened its doors to any organization that wants to come here to do activities. In fact, I'm a member of an association for immigrants and the director, amazingly, has given us the key so we can run sports schools here for the city hall (FG Parents, C14).*

Situated somewhere between the remaining dimensions we find the type of collaboration referred to as *Decision-making* in Epstein's model. In relation to this, varying views are expressed by different schools and between different sectors. Although parents enjoy the legally established means of representation on the School Board at all of the schools participating in the study, several either do not have a Parents' Association or it only comprises a very small number of families. According to school directors and teachers, parents play an important role on the School Board and this influences the path the school chooses to take. Parents, on the other hand, believe that families have little influence on the decisions taken by the Board.

Regarding Parents' Associations, responses should also be clarified according to sector.

Directors and teachers emphasize the significant effort they have put in to creating the Association at those schools where none previously existed, or in involving all parents in it, considering that it makes a valuable contribution to school life. However, parents say that participation in the Parents' Association is for most families in name only and often amounts to nothing more than membership.

> *There are very few of us in the Parents' Association... and we are the ones who make sure it functions (FG Parents, C9).*

The modes of collaboration in which the schools in the study appear to undertake fewer initiatives are those of *Helping parents with parenting* and *Help with learning at home*. in Epstein's model. Concerning the former, we find that perceptions differ somewhat between directors and teachers on the one hand and parents on the other. In half of the schools, the former believe they implement actions aimed at helping parents to raise their children properly, providing information on issues such as diet, timetables and healthy lifestyles.

> *We often give parents guidelines on how they can collaborate with the school and send them notes with things like: "I have to wash every day", "I must always go to bed at the same time", and general rules about life (FG Teachers, C12).*

There are even some schools where teachers and directors say they do activities outside school hours or at weekends in order to involve parents in leisure activities that may be beneficial for their children. Also, a small number of schools provide material assistance to families (clothes, food, school supplies) to contribute to the children's wellbeing, either directly or via associations or social services.

In contrast with these perceptions, parents only mention actions aimed at helping them raise their children in a minority of cases, which seems to suggest that they do not perceive the strategies developed by the schools as being effective with regard to this type of involvement.

Finally, the mode in which the least number of actions are identified is *Help to promote learning at home*. According to accounts from all sectors, only a small group of schools adopt strategies to strengthen the role of parents in helping with homework or guiding them in taking decisions on academic matters. Some schools have occasionally implemented projects in this regard, such as language classes for immigrant families, family literacy workshops or IT courses for parents.

The most common practice is for issues related to children's learning to be addressed in individual meetings between families and teachers, without there being any systematic action by the schools in relation to this type of parental involvement.

We have tutorials where we do talk about the child's weak points and they say, well look, for example, you have to help them more with maths, or spelling. So that we also help them at home and they overcome that weak point as soon as possible (FG Parents, C14).

As well as analysing actions in the different dimensions of cooperation established by Epstein, the study results also allow us to take a more in-depth look at the similarities and differences in the perceptions expressed by the different sectors. In this regard, education professionals, namely teachers and directors, hold almost identical views on all the areas addressed, but these do not always coincide with those expressed by the parents. In general, professionals have a more positive perception than parents regarding the actions undertaken by schools to promote family-school cooperation, especially in some of the categories analysed. These differences would confirm that, as noted in other studies, the visions of the two groups differ regarding parent-school collaboration, something that should be considered when educational institutions design strategies for cooperation (Barnard 2004; Harris & Andrew Power, 2009).

Nevertheless, there are also similarities worth noting in the views expressed by the directors, teachers and parents who took part in this study. Most directors and teachers highly value collaboration with the parents of their students and work hard to achieve it, and this coincides with the perceptions of parents, who feel that the schools do a fine job fostering relationships with families. In addition, both teachers and parents say that the strategies that have been developed are insufficient with some sectors of families, who tend to remain outside the channels of cooperation established at their schools.

5. Conclusions and discussion

Taking the theoretical model developed by Epstein (2001) as a reference, this article has conducted an in-depth analysis of the family-school collaboration practices implemented by 24 schools in Barcelona, Madrid, Seville and Valencia serving disadvantaged urban populations and characterized by high academic achievement, with the aim of contributing to the field of research on this topic in the Spanish context. The results confirm that the three dimensions of the model these schools appear to pay more attention to are Communication, Volunteering and Community Collaboration. Promoting family involvement in Decision-making occupies a middle position, while fewer initiatives are found in the categories of Support for parenting and Support for home learning.

However, above and beyond the specific dimensions in which collaboration is encouraged, the study allows us to outline some of the features that broadly share these schools in their relationship with families: they take a proactive approach to cooperation between families and school, are aware of the difficulties of the families, take a broad view of collaboration with families and are schools open to the environment.

With regard to the first of the characteristics, we can say that the schools participating in this study adopt more of a proactive than reactive approach when it comes to family involvement, since they themselves take the initiative in establishing an appropriate relationship with families and strive to implement a plan designed to obtain their collaboration. As they are all schools that achieve good academic results, this Spanish study reinforces the evidence contributed by international research regarding the benefits of seeking cooperation with families for both students in socially disadvantaged contexts and the schools that serve them (Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003).

On the other hand, the directors and teachers who took part in the study are aware of the particular difficulties, in terms of both time and mentality, facing many of the families at their schools when it comes to attending activities organized by the school. They also understand that formal channels of school communication, which may be valid for other parents, are less effective in the case of disadvantaged groups (Field, Kuczera & Pont, 2007). For these reasons, in their daily work they seek out opportunities for informal contact not only to communicate with parents, but to try and establish a relationship of trust that leads to greater mutual support in the task of educating their children.

In relation to the above, it should be noted that both the teachers and directors of these schools take a broad view of collaboration with families. For them, the most important type of family involvement is not that which refers to parents participating in school associations and governing bodies or attending meetings arranged by the school, even if they do also award importance to these issues. Rather, the professionals working in these schools emphasize the relationship with families fostering the integral development

of their children and being geared towards meeting the different needs they have, not only in the schooling process, but also in other aspects of their family and social life. In this respect, professionals at the selected schools appear to pay more attention to individual involvement than the involvement of parents as a group, a factor also highlighted as a priority by the latest research, which has found that while both types of collaboration have positive effects, family support for each individual student's school career is the most effective strategy in improving results for students from the lower social classes (Faubert, 2012).

A further feature shared by most of the schools studied is their openness to the environment (Jeynes, 2003). They are schools that seek out collaboration with a wide range of organizations, both public and private, which provide various types of assistance to their students. They also offer all elements of the social fabric in which they find themselves opportunities for collaboration with the aim of benefiting their students and their families.

This set of traits shared by the schools under analysis may help explain, at least in part, the good results they obtain in comparison with other schools in their environment. However, despite the successful work they do with regard to family-school collaboration, the study shows that there is still room for improvement on this issue. Specifically, we have noted that there are still some groups of parents for whom the actions undertaken by the schools are not effective, and additional efforts are therefore required to achieve their involvement. While the educational institutions can reinforce their strategies in this respect, it is worth considering that reaching all parents is a goal that extends beyond schools' capabilities, given the problems suffered by some families. In this regard, collaboration is required by other agencies to support the work done by schools (Goodall & Vorhaus, 2011).

In addition to the above, the practices implemented in most of the schools studied appear to be insufficient in the two collaboration dimensions more directly related to the family environment in Epstein's model (2001): Support for parenting and Support for home learning. One possible explanation is that these are the two areas furthest from the school's reach, although schools should take into account that they do have the possibility to intervene in them through properly planned strategies (Epstein et al., 2009). In fact, none of the schools that took part in this research have a specifically designed programme for improving collaboration with families, even if some of them have adopted the Learning Communities model,

which entails work specifically aimed at involving families in the community (Díez-Palomar & Flecha, 2010). There is, then, a need to consider the importance of the schools analysed, and, by extension, all schools that serve disadvantaged groups, developing systematic and holistic intervention projects that incorporate actions in all dimensions of the family-school collaboration established by Epstein (2001). Such projects, duly contextualized and adapted to each case, can in practice serve to expand the initiatives already implemented by schools regarding family collaboration and strengthen the areas of cooperation where there is most need for them.

Considered globally, the results of this study may provide a starting point for actions which, if appropriately contextualized, can be designed to achieve fruitful collaboration between families and schools in underprivileged urban areas. However, the conclusions drawn here should be considered with caution, as the research has a number of limitations that deserve mentioning. In this regard, it is clear that we have not conducted an objective analysis of cooperation strategies implemented at the schools, but rather only show directors', parents' and teachers' perceptions of them. Moreover, this is a qualitative study conducted on a small number of schools, and it therefore needs to be extended to larger samples and complemented with other methodologies. In addition, the parents who took part in the study comprise only a handful of all parents at these schools, so they may not be representative of the families as a group. The mere fact of participating in the focus groups indicates that these parents have contact with the school, meaning that those who really have no relationship with the school may have been excluded from the study. However, despite these limitations, with this study we have made an attempt to give a voice to parents who belong to the sector of families that the literature refers to as "invisible" (Vogels, 2002) and are often left out of research.

By way of a general conclusion, the analysis of practices implemented in these "successful" schools located in disadvantaged environments in various Spanish cities reinforces the importance that an adequate family-school relationship may have in breaking the cycle of academic failure and exclusion in schools serving socially disadvantaged populations. Work on parental involvement programmes that take into account the special needs of families facing greater obstacles in collaboration with the school and that receive support from other organizations in the environment can be, among other possible solutions, an effective way to help schools improve the results of students in a situation of disadvantage.

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Note

[1] In the case of Barcelona, the local authorities also provided information to assist with selection.

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