Articles / Artículos

Between consensus and conflict: Schools and parents negotiating the educational trajectories of students at risk of early school leaving

Entre el consenso y el conflicto: escuelas y familias negociando trayectorias educativas de jóvenes en riesgo de abandono escolar prematuro

Marta Curran (iD)
Departamento de Sociología Aplicada, Universidad Complutense de Madrid. España.
mcurran@ucm.es

ABSTRACT

There is a vast amount of literature which locates the home-school relationship as a keystone to improving academic outcomes and preventing school dropout. It is not always sufficiently clear, however, how these relationships are established and function and how they impact on students' school engagement. This paper draws on the concepts of familial habitus and institutional habitus to better understand how home-school relationships are formed and how they are deeply class-biased. Using in-depth qualitative interviews with parents and teachers from four public secondary schools in Barcelona, this paper examines the factors explaining more and less harmonious relations between these two agents. This article will help shed light on the challenging relation between home and schools, taking into account different sociocultural contexts mediating this interaction and suggesting some implications in terms of educational policy from a social justice perspective.

Keywords: Home-school relationships, familial habitus, institutional habitus, early school leaving, educational trajectories.

RESUMEN

Es abundante la literatura que sitúa la relación familia-escuela como un factor clave en la mejora del rendimiento académico y la prevención del fracaso escolar. Lo que no queda suficientemente claro es, sin embargo, de qué modo tienen lugar estas interacciones y cómo impactan en la vinculación escolar de los y las jóvenes. Desde una aproximación bourdiesana, esta investigación hace uso de los conceptos de habitus familiar y el habitus institucional con el propósito de explorar cómo se construyen las relaciones familia-escuela y de qué modo estas interacciones están fuertemente sesgadas desde una perspectiva de

la clase social. A partir de un estudio cualitativo basado en entrevistas en profundidad a profesorado y familias de 4 institutos públicos de Barcelona, el artículo analiza los factores que explican relaciones más o menos armoniosas entre ambos agentes. Los resultados de este artículo contribuyen a arrojar luz sobre la desafiante relación entre familia y escuela, teniendo en cuenta diferentes contextos socioculturales que condicionan dicha interacción y sugiriendo algunas implicaciones en términos de política educativa desde una perspectiva de la justicia social.

Palabras clave: Relación familia-escuela, habitus familiar, habitus institucional, abandono escolar prematuro, trayectorias educativas.

INTRODUCTION

For the past 30 years, literature on home-school relationships has been dominated by Epstein and Dauber's model (1991). In this model, six elements are established as key to ensure strong home-school relationships: set home conditions to support children with schooling, reinforce communication with parents about student progress, involve parent volunteers in schools and classrooms, promote learning activities at home, incorporate parents in school governance, and strengthen collaboration between schools and the community. From this model, interpreted as excessively normative, several questions arise in the process of analysing home-school relationship that this paper attempts to address. What are the channels of participation between these two agents? Are families aware of the internal dynamics and functioning of schools? What are the proceedings to negotiate any decisions that affect a student's trajectory?

Evidence shows strong symbolic and institutional barriers in home-school relationships (Lee and Bowen, 2006). Elsewhere, we have demonstrated that when analysing teacher's discourses about the factors that explain school success and school failure, one of the key elements that constantly appears is the role of parents (Tarabini et al., 2018). In this sense, one of the main assumptions is that educational failure, specifically of students of low socioeconomic background, is explained by a lack of interest and effort either from the students or their parents. Thus, in teachers' discourses, an overlap between disadvantaged families and a lack of interest and involvement is detected (Collet, 2020; Rujas, 2016; Dunne & Gazeley, 2008).

The term 'parental involvement' implies a conscious and explicit commitment on the part of parents and attributes a quality of immorality to those who 'do not get involved' (Rujas, 2016). What needs to be examined is what it means to be 'involved', since its accommodationist effect keeps it sufficiently vague to embrace a multitude of possible meanings and attract maximum support. We have considerable evidence (both in the international literature: Vincent & Maxwell, 2015; Crozier, 2000; Lareau, 2003 and the local one: Collet, 2015; Collet & Olmedo, 2021; Feu et al., 2018) demonstrating that parental involvement is not a neutral term but rather is mediated by social inequalities. What is more, 'parental involvement', far from being a neutral concept, is founded on the basis of a normative vision that establishes what 'appropriate' school practices are in terms of class, gender and ethnicity. In the words of Mills & Gale (2004): '[T]he assumption that having a voice is really just a matter of choice ignores the complex matrix of power relations (…) that enable some and inhibit others from having their say in what counts as "good" schooling.' (p. 270).

Another term that persistently appears in teachers' discourse, when referring to school dropouts, is that of 'dysfunctional families' or 'troubled families'. From a deficit perspective, mono-parental families, a migrant background, young parents, long-term

unemployment and receiving social benefits are all considered to be causal factors for poor performance and disruptive behaviour. These terms are frequently used when referring to 'dysfunctional families' or 'troubled families', omitting the structural barriers that these families may be facing (Gillies, 2005). From a moral perspective, these families are conceived of as inappropriate and irresponsible. As a consequence, over the last few years, numerous programmes known as 'positive parenting programmes' have been implemented in many countries (Rodrígo, Máiquez and Martín, 2010). The rationale of these programmes lies in domination of a positive psychology approach, on the one hand, and neoliberal principals, on the other, that tends to individualize school success or failure. As Gillies (2005) points out: "[S]uch policies construct disadvantage as an individual developmental issue rather than a consequence of inequality, so that a quality upbringing is all that is needed to ensure equal opportunity" (p. 838). At the same time, these programmes tend to over-homogenize the term 'school', omitting the context and different schooling conditions that characterize educational institutions. Few studies have explored these programs from a perspective of social inequalities' perspective (Morelli et al., 2018; Churchill & Clarke, 2010).

The purpose of this paper is to present an empirical analysis that reinforces the academic debate about home-school relationships beyond a normative approach. In this article, we argue that home-school relations are mediated by social class dispositions and that this relationship is not only explained by parents' dispositions and practices but also by interaction with different school contexts, and this is strongly marked by social inequalities. Thus, it is not just a matter of understanding whether parents participate in school events, but rather, to understand why some parents feel more comfortable and intervene more effectively in school matters. To do so, in this paper, we analysed a variety of home-school relationships, including parents from different social backgrounds and schools with different contexts. Our research focused on students at risk of dropping out of school, and one of the main goals was to analyse how home-school relationships affect negotiation of key aspects of these students' educational trajectories and post-compulsory school destinations.

The paper is structured as follows. The main theoretical assumptions related to the concept of parental involvement and home-school relationships are discussed in the first section, based on a Bourdieusian approach, and the concepts of familial and institutional habitus. With the aim of operationalizing these concepts, the methodological approach of the study is developed in the second section. The third section presents the findings of the research, based on a typology of families, structured according to the degree of proximity between familial and institutional habitus and the level of agreement between home and school regarding students' progress. The last section presents a final reflection on the complex relation between schooling and different sociocultural contexts, deepening understanding of the unequal opportunities associated with parent participation and suggesting some implications in terms of educational policy.

FAMILIAL AND INSTITUTIONAL HABITUS

The paper is based on a Bourdieusian perspective, which entails analysis of the impact of social class on individual and institutional practices, dispositions and relations. For this purpose, we use the concepts of familial and institutional habitus as instruments to analyse 'collective practices' of social groups, rather than 'individual practices'.

Habitus, defined as a system of durable and transposable dispositions, is developed from a young age. It is transmitted consciously and unconsciously through family practices (Dumais, 2002). Far from being deterministic or fixed, habitus is an ongoing interaction between the past and the present. It represents the active manifestation of past experiences and accumulated history, both individual and collective, that

constitutes the schemes of perception, appreciation and action, and connects to the social world (Bourdieu, 1977). Consequently, habitus can explain why individuals from the same social class would share a common scheme of perception, appreciation and action (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 16).

The term institutional habitus, introduced more than two decades ago by McDonough (1996), was initially defined as the impact of a social group on an individual's behaviour, mediated through organizations such as schools. This concept was further developed by Reay (1998) and Reay, David & Ball (2001), and was defined as the set of predispositions, taken-for-granted expectations and schemes of perception according to which schools are organized. As we have detailed elsewhere (Tarabini et al., 2016), the concept of institutional habitus introduces schools' social composition as an intrinsic element to analyse practices, regulations and forms of organization.

The interaction between familial and institutional habitus can be explored through the educational field. As Bourdieu & Wacquant (1992) suggest, the habitus acquired in the family forms the basis for the structuring of school experiences, and when familial and institutional habitus are coordinated, both parents and students encounter a social world that they recognize, and they feel like 'fish in water' (p. 127). Along the same lines, Reay et al. (2001) argue: "[I]individuals are differentially positioned in relation to the institutional habitus of their school or college according to the extent to which influences of family and peer group are congruent or discordant with those of the institution" (Section 1.7).

There are several scholars who, following the work of Bourdieu (Crozier & Davies, 2007; Lareau & Weiniger, 2003; Ball, 2003), have demonstrated how certain social groups (that is, middle-class families with high levels of cultural capital) enjoy greater social and school legitimacy in school institutions and intervene effectively in school matters. Lareau (1987, 2003) refers to 'interconnectedness' to explain how middle-class families share the same language with teachers and are likely to have similar knowledge and expectations about the education system. As stated by Davies et al. (2018):

[M]iddle-class parents—mainly mothers—maneuver school institutions and activate cultural logics, aligning their family routines, lifestyles, and practices with school rewards by structuring children's activities, intervening with teachers, prioritizing homework, engaging in school choice, or preparing for key educational decisions.' (p. 13).

In contrast, a sense of inadequacy and inferiority is more prevalent among those families for whom habitus is less aligned with the values and norms of schools. A lack of knowledge of the rules of the school system may discourage these families from taking part in school activities, and thus, students are less likely to succeed (Bonizzoni et al., 2014; Wells & Serna, 1996). Beyond parental dispositions and knowledge of the educational system, it is also important to consider that there are various material constraints that may affect different kinds of participation by parents, based on social origin. Less flexible work schedules, most common among working-class parents, make it more difficult for them to participate in school events and restrict their ability to engage in educational activities at home (Lee & Bowen, 2016).

Another line of research explores the association between parental involvement in relation to students' academic performance. In general terms, literature shows that middle-class parents intensify their investment when students are performing poorly (Quadlin, 2015). In contrast, working-class parents seem to present fewer effective strategies to overcome their children's learning difficulties. What is more, increasing school failure among their offspring tends to lead to greater dissociation from the school and to lowered expectations regarding their children's educational success (Carmona, 2021). This class gap in effectiveness in terms of overcoming failure seems to widen as performance declines (Carmona, 2019).

From what has been stated previously, one can deduce that child rearing is not just about providing material resources but also about affective and emotional support. In this sense, Diane Reay (2004) uses the concept of emotional capital, first developed by Helga Nowotny back in 1981, to explore the role played by emotions in combination with other capitals, in the participation of families in the schooling of children. Emotional capital emanates from interactions between children and teachers in the educational arena and contributes to understanding many of the experiences of young people throughout their schooling process. In this process, there are both positive emotions (e.g., encouragement and care) and negative emotions (e.g., guilt, frustration and anxiety). All these emotions have a clear impact on children's well-being, self-confidence and self-esteem. This impact can function in different ways; for instance, anger could result in the child making more effort, but it could also generate resistance. Emotional capital is, again, strongly mediated by social class, and different types of investment and costs can be observed according to the social and cultural background (Gillies, 2006). Working-class parents are likely to experience more difficulties in terms of revenue from their emotional capital investment, not just with adverse structural conditions but also due to possible negative personal educational experiences, which may diminish their self-confidence in their role as educators.

All in all, research demonstrates the relative positioning of parents within the educational field and the advantageous position of middle-class parents, who are likely to be more aligned with schools' requirements.

THE STUDY

Some authors argue that in the vast quantity of research based on Bourdieu's work, the concepts of habitus or field have been used more as an 'intellectual display' than as an active analytical tool (Reay, 2010). As Bourdieu puts it: '[T]he thing is that they are not to be conceptualized so much as ideas, on that level, but as a method. The core of my work lies in the method and a way of thinking.' (Bourdieu, 1985, quoted in Mahar, 1990). In contrast, the aim of this papers is to analytically operationalize the concepts of Bourdieu in order to better understand how home-school relations are developed in terms of class positions and dispositions.

In this paper, we are presenting the results of an ethnographic study conducted in four lower secondary schools[1] in the city of Barcelona. We spent two terms in each school, and we carried out qualitative research based on semi-structured interviews with teaching and coordinating staff (47), and the parents of students (21) (at the end of the secondary compulsory education phase, i.e., grades 9 and 10) who were at risk of dropping out of school.[2] The interviews were supplemented with periods of participant observation (in classrooms and staff meetings), which enabled us to capture daily discourses and practices and explore the differences in school ethos characterizing each educational institution included in the sample. Since these observations were exploratory in nature, our analysis was mostly based on interview data.

The two variables that guided selection of the case studies were school social composition[3] and school ethos. These two variables constituted a proxy for the institutional habitus of the schools in the case studies.

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1 Lower secondary education in Spain includes grades 7–10 and is compulsory up to the age of 16.

2 Students were categorized as being at risk of dropping out of school based on their previous educational trajectory, i.e., failing grades and having repeated a course at least once or being allocated to low-ability sets.

3 Although, here, we are analyzing the social characteristics of students, it is also important to take into account the social background of teaching staff. In this sense, evidence in Spain shows that there are proportionally fewer teaching staff of working-class origin at secondary level than there are in the early childhood and primary phases (Pérez Sánchez, 2000, quoted in Carmona, 2019).

Table 1. Case study selection criteria.

		School Ethos	
		Inclusive	Segregated
School composition	Middle class	Oak	Pine
	Working class	Cedar	Spruce

Source: own elaboration.

In terms of school ethos, Oak and Cedar are typified as 'inclusive models' characterized by having a great number of mechanisms to manage pupils' heterogeneity where the main rationale in their discourses and practices was based on prevention and promoting classroom diversity. These practices characteristically had fewer teachers per group, heterogeneous groups, progressive diversified methodologies, key importance in guidance practices and a high level of reflection on the mechanisms applied and their impact on students' experiences and academic outcomes. In contrast, Pine and Spruce are identified as 'segregated models' showing fewer mechanisms to manage pupils' heterogeneity, mainly ability grouping, and with a lack of coherence between them. The main rationale that prevailed in these schools were targeted measures including redirecting those students who were not expected to obtain secondary compulsory education, to external institutions.

On the other hand, with regard to parents' social background, the fact that students were at risk of dropping out of school implied that despite us wanting to have heterogeneity in terms of the social profile, there was an over-representation of working-class parents. In the same way, most of the interviewees were mothers, which was to be expected since parental involvement is a highly feminized task (Lareau & Weininger, 2003; Reay, 2004).

Table 2. Level of education, occupation, migrant/ethnic background and sex of parents interviewed.

School	Level of education	Occupation	Migrant/ ethnic background	Sex
Oak School	Higher	Civil servant postwoman	Native	F
	Higher	Secondary school teacher	Native	F
	Higher	Veterinary medicine lecturer	Native	M
	Higher	Import/export agent	Native	F
	Higher	Policeman	Native	M
	Intermediate	Building electrician	Native	M
Pine School	Higher	Office supervisor	Native	F
	Intermediate	Accountant	Native	F
	Primary	Building construction worker	Native	M
	Primary	Informal economy	Migrant	F
Cedar School	Intermediate	Bus driver	Native	M
	Intermediate	Customer service clerk	Native	F
	Primary	Domestic housekeeper	Migrant	F
	Primary	Informal economy (street vendor)	Roma/native	F
	Incomplete	Domestic housekeeper	Roma/native	F
	Incomplete	Informal economy	Migrant	F

Table 2. Level of education, occupation, migrant/ethnic background and sex of parents interviewed (Continuation).

Spruce School	Intermediate	Domestic housekeeper	Migrant	F
	Intermediate	Security guard	Native	M
	Primary	Domestic housekeeper	Migrant	F
	Primary	Informal economy	Migrant	F
	Incomplete	Inactive	Migrant	F

Source: own elaboration.

Following the logic of 'Grounded Theory', developed by Glaser & Strauss (1967), and later Strauss & Corbin (1990), the coding of our interviews was carried out by combining a deductive and inductive strategy, structured around four main themes: 1) parents' perceptions of their role as educators and their expectations in relation to their children's educational trajectory; 2) level of satisfaction with the school and the teaching staff; 3) level of familiarity with the education system and functioning of the school; and 4) parents' and teachers' views of home-school relations. On the basis of these themes, we focused on how parents made sense to the term of 'parental involvement' with the purpose to redefine legitimate and normative concepts and adapt these to their own practices. The categories were continually revised throughout the research to make sense of the data collected and allow new substantive and theoretical categories to emerge.

HOME-SCHOOL RELATIONSHIPS: BETWEEN CONSENSUS AND CONFLICT

Based on the data collected, a typology of families is built. The two axes that form the typology are the level of proximity between familial and institutional habitus on the one hand and the level of agreement between family and school in negotiating students' educational trajectories on the other.

Table 3. Typology of home-school relationships.

		Level of agreement	
		Consensus	Conflict
Level of proximity between familiar and institutional habitus	Close	Synergy and collaboration	Critical consumer
	Distant	Confidence and delegation	A) Discord and mistrustful B) Overwhelmed and absent

Source: own elaboration.

Synergy and collaboration

This group mainly comprised white middle-class parents and was characterized as presenting very close alignment with the school ethos. From a school perspective, these parents represented the legitimate model of parents: the kind of parents that all teachers wanted to have in their schools, as revealed in the following quotes:

> Well, it's an honour having these types of families[;] you see that they are involved with the school (…) these are families that beyond their own kids, battle for the interests of the whole school.
>
> (teacher, Oak School)

> In this school we are very lucky as most of the students are delightful, they come from families with a cultural background, with values, you know? Their parents are the ones who ask you for more cultural activities and things like that.
>
> (head of studies, Oak School)

In most cases, these parents participated in school activities such as organizing leisure activities, celebrations and workshops. They were members of the school council, sat on advisory committees or were involved in decision-making through parent organizations.

The parents gave a very positive evaluation of teachers, and in all cases, the school in question was their first choice for their child. These parents were very satisfied with the educational provision and the school's approach to dealing with their children's learning difficulties. They reported feeling that they were constantly informed and were aware of their children's progress. Not surprisingly, all the children in this group were enrolled in Oak School, which is known for its inclusive model when dealing with pupils' heterogeneity.

> She was a girl that used to get good marks but in Grade 9, just in the middle of the adolescence period when she was trying to deal with growing pains, her performance began to be affected until she repeated the course. The school helped me a lot throughout this process. Angel, her tutor, was the one who began to recognize something was going on and between him and us we got the situation back on track.
>
> (Judith, vocational education training, accountant)

In the above quote, the synergy between home and school is evidenced when Judith mentions 'between him [the tutor] and us' when talking about possible solutions to deal with her daughter's learning difficulties. Home-school relationships in this group appeared to be based on a partnership, where both agents worked together and shared the same aims and aspirations for their children/students.

Overall, these parents indicated that they knew how to successfully navigate the education system by mobilizing legitimate forms of cultural and social capital. In their role as educators, they ensured that they spent a lot of time helping their offspring with homework and exams or hiring external professionals to get private lessons, and they mentioned a wide range of extracurricular activities (dance, music, art, gym, sport and languages), which their children engaged in. They represented the middle-class parents mentioned in the theoretical section who, according to Davies et al. (2018), align their family routines and out-of-school activities with school rewards, demonstrating their familiarity with the 'grammar of schooling' (Tyack & Tobin, 1994). This greater understanding of the rules was also evident in the post-school choice process; these parents showed extensive knowledge of different options, requirements and channels of information, both formal and informal (Vincent & Ball, 2007; van Zanten, 2007).

> It's been many months since we started looking for different schools that were offering a course in accountancy. At first, I had doubts and I was doing a lot of google search[es;] I also asked for references from my sister who is a high school teacher and after that, we started visiting all the schools we had chosen. We have now made our decision and we are happy with the choice.
>
> (Carol, university degree, import/export manager)

In terms of emotional capital, these parents expressed a preoccupation with developing their children's potential and overcoming their learning difficulties whilst, at the same time, showing confidence that they could ensure a good future for their children.

Critical consumers

This group was made up of white middle-class parents. They shared some similarities with the previous group in terms of their 'role as educators', but the main difference was that the relationship with the school was far from harmonious. In fact, their participation in school was exclusively focused on attending regular meetings with teachers to check up on their children's progress in school. These families were characterized by presenting a sense of distrust with teachers and their criteria for evaluation of the learning process. What is more, these families were not satisfied with the strategies employed by teachers to deal with their children's learning difficulties. In fact, they blamed the school for their children's learning difficulties, and they believed that rather than preventing them, the school had actually made them worse, as is evident in the following quote:

> Ok, I know that my daughter is not going to get As in her exams and I am aware that she has a problem but I think that if she had been assisted from the beginning, she might have passed the course and we wouldn't be where we are now (…) I have the feeling that they want to get rid of her because she means a problem for them, but my daughter is not a problem, she has a problem.

> (Laura, university degree, civil servant postwoman)

As stated earlier, this group was very critical of teachers' practices and the way they dealt with their children's learning difficulties. However, what really characterized this group was the strategies deployed to face this discontent, and this was clearly mediated in terms of class. In this sense, the strategy deployed to manifest this disagreement was through 'voice', in Hirschman terms (1970). They were the kind of parents who demanded a lot of information regarding children's learning progress; who questioned teachers' evaluation criteria or the content of the curricula. In fact, these parents would not hesitate to confront teachers' authority, as illustrated in this quote:

> I was telling Rosa [the head teacher]: 'If I have a business and I have an incompetent worker, my business will [get] a bad a reputation and I will have to do something to reverse the situation.' I am aware that she [the teacher] is a civil servant and it's difficult for Rosa to do something but she hasn't bothered to speak to the 'SENCO' [special educational needs coordinator]! I cannot be continually getting in touch with the SENCO to do the follow-up, that's her duty!

> (Laura, university degree, civil postwoman)

In the same way as the previous group, the parents in this group showed considerable understanding of the functioning of the education system. As in the previous quote, this mother revealed specific knowledge of the different professionals responsible for supporting students with special educational needs (SEN):

> I was very clear with the head teacher, I told her that if the school is not taking responsibility for my daughter's case, I would get to the bottom of the matter and present it to the local education authority if necessary and demand solutions.

> (Laura, university degree, civil servant postwoman)

These parents reported that they were within their rights to expect the school to offer solutions (as in a provider-customer dyad). In addition, they affirmed investing a lot of resources in order to improve their children's academic achievement – mainly through

private tutors – in order to compensate for what they considered were the deficiencies of the school. Previous research (Ong-Dean et al., 2011) has explored how high cultural capital among parents of children with special needs represents a clear advantage in a context of resource constraints.

Seeing their children discouraged and demoralized by the educational process was a harsh emotional cost, expressed in anxiety and anger. The effect of these emotions and friction with teachers resulted in the mother becoming very protective of her daughter, working hand in hand to overcome the child's learning difficulties. This investment and the emotional costs are, however, mediated by class. These parents showed a strong conviction that their investment in time, resources and the emotional implications would result in them getting 'better treatment' from the school and would improve academic outcomes.

Confidence and delegation

In contrast with the previous groups, these parents had low levels of education, mostly worked in low-skilled occupations and presented greater social, cultural and symbolic distance. In terms of a migrant background, it is important to highlight that in contrast with the other groups, these were all migrants, and two mothers were Roma. Here, we could observe an intersection of class and migrant/ethnic inequalities. In the case of migrant parents, and according to previous research (Gillborn & Mirza, 2000), the motivations that led them to migrate may explain the greater confidence they not only had in the school but also in the educational system, as the key mechanism for social mobility.

These families were mainly enrolled in Cedar school, characterized by having an inclusive model. In this sense, they felt very supported by the school, both academically and economically, as is revealed in the following quote:

> I can tell that he enjoys being in this school, teachers take care of him (...) I am also very grateful for all the facilities they have given us to get all the materials and enabling him to participate in all the excursions and so on.
>
> (Miranda, primary school, informal worker: street vendor)

Home-school relations in this group were described as favourable, but at the same time, distant. It was a relationship between experts and non-experts with a certain degree of hierarchy, highlighting an apparent interaction based on power relations. Parents defined the teachers as the experts who know what is best for their children and they showed absolute confidence in their expertise and recommendations. These are families that presented a cautious attitude, they waited for the teachers to call them to the meetings, and they expressed that they did not feel that they had the authority to criticize the school.

These families kept a constant eye on their children's educational progress, checking they were doing their homework on time, that they were studying for the exams, that they regularly attended classes. However, these were families that, in contrast with the previous group, experienced a 'sense of futility' (van Houtte, 2015). They had a sense that, however much effort they made to support their children with schooling activities, they had no control over their children's success or failure. These parents lamented lacking the knowledge to help their children with homework, they were unfamiliar with the grammar of schooling and some of the programmes in which their offspring were enrolled. They felt quite disoriented when referring to possible post-school destinations, as is expressed in the following quote:

Interviewer: And do you have any information on the VET courses and/or bachelor courses for next year?

Dolores: Well, the thing is that we finished primary education and that's it and I don't know all these programmes, to tell the truth, I'm quite lost.

(Dolores, primary school, domestic housekeeper)

Dolores represented this group: parents who were trying to navigate a system that was unfamiliar to them; whose social networks and information channels were limited; and who received information mainly through their children. All in all, they were families that had a firm belief in education as a mechanism for social mobility; who showed a strong level of trust in all the professionals working with their children; and who particularly wanted to ensure that their children had the educational success that they had not had.

Discordant and mistrustful

This group was composed of white working-class parents. In terms of the grade of proximity between familial and institutional habitus, like the previous group, these parents presented a social, cultural and symbolic distance from the school. The main difference detected in this group as compared with the previous group, was that their level of satisfaction and trust in the school and the teachers was very low. Their discourses showed that there was a lack of identification with some organizational practices of the school, such as the purpose of attending a meeting, as is revealed in the following quote:

I attend all the meetings that I am called to, even if they are not worth anything, I have not missed one (...) but there are some incident reports that I haven't signed because I think they are ridiculous.

(Gloria, primary school, domestic housekeeper)

Such distance and distrust were perceived by the school, and staff regretted the fact that being unable to rely on parents made their work more complicated, as stated in the next quote:

Well, what do you think is behind this student profile? Okay, first is their [the student's] attitude. And second is the parents. Collaboration with parents is fundamental. That parents think what we do here is important, that parents value teachers, that they take seriously what is said, what has to be done. If the parents don't do this (...) it's very complicated.

(academic coordinator, Pine School)

This disagreement was based on the fact that the parents felt that they were not receiving the support that their children required and even perceived that they were been treated unfairly. Although they recognized their children's learning difficulties and/or low motivation, they considered that a great part of the educational trajectory (repetition, suspensions) was explained by the low expectations the teachers had of their children. In this sense, they had reservations about some of the interventions deployed by teachers to address the difficulties their children were facing during the learning process.

On the other hand, these parents thought that the school did not adequately report on the progress of their children, and they complained that staff only contacted them when there was a problem. In fact, when there was some conflict between their children and the teacher, the parents positioned themselves on the side of their children, increasing tension and distance from the school. In accordance with the findings of previous research (Carmona, 2021), increasing school failure tends to lead to greater

estrangement, especially among working-class parents. Moreover, as relationships with teachers deteriorate, these parents are much more likely to excuse their children's outbursts and to delegitimize teachers, as shown in the next quote:

> The music teachers tend to tell him every day they start class: Octavio, go to exclusions room and we came and told their tutor, this has to be illegal that they do not let him attend class.
>
> > (Raquel, vocational education training, customer service clerk)

> At first, we thought it was him making trouble and we started having arguments all the time and he was having a bad time both at school and at home (…) but in the end we realized that the problem was that they were ignoring him and every time he complained, he was sent to the exclusion room.
>
> > (Raquel, vocational education training, customer service clerk)

In contrast with the 'Critical Consumers' group, the strategy deployed by this group to deal with their discontent with school is 'exit', in Hirschman terms (1970). They prefer to enrol their children at another school in the hope of receiving fairer treatment, as is shown in the next quote:

> We are very disappointed with the school, my son had a terrible course, he didn't want to come to school and we were deluded thinking that they were trying to fix the situation and then we realized they were doing nothing. We've made our choice; we are sending him to another school.
>
> > (David, vocational education training, bus driver)

In terms of emotional capital, these parents are experiencing troubles in transforming their investment of time and care into academic success. In short, these parents are having a very bad experience with the educational process of their children. This is not just explained by an accumulation of low academic grades and retention, but more importantly because they see their children unhappy, discouraged and unmotivated by school.

Overwhelmed and absent

In terms of socioeconomic and cultural background, what distinguished this group was that beyond social, cultural and symbolic distance from school, these families also suffered severe structural constraints, and some were in a situation of social exclusion that represented a strong barrier to their role as educators. This group was mainly composed of single mothers with a migrant background. They regretted that they lacked a support network which would allow them to mitigate the obstacles to a work-life balance. As a consequence, these families were the focus of all criticism from teachers:

> There are students that come from dysfunctional families where education is not a priority. You can see they are unsupervised (…) they spend the whole day in the street and then they come to school as if it was a social club.
>
> > (teacher, Pine School)

Most of these families were receiving state benefits and teachers 'demanded for more responsible behaviour and fulfil their obligations' in their role as educators (ensuring class attendance, supporting their children with homework, attending school meetings, etc.). Unlike in the previous groups, home-school relationships here were based more

on a contractual association based on an underlying logic of punishment rather than a partnership. On some occasions, parent-teacher dialogue was mediated by 'agreement contracts' as a mechanism for enforcing school discipline (Vincent & Tomlinson, 1997).

As pointed out in previous research (Lareau, 2000), teachers tend to assume that parents who were not successful in their own educational trajectory do not value this for their children. As claimed by Mills & Gale (2004):

> [T]here seems little recognition that there could be parents who would like to become more involved in their children's schooling and little understanding of the more complex reasons why they are not, including the role of the school in fostering non-participation (p. 270).

As has been stated elsewhere (Tarabini et al., 2018), when school failure is merely attributed to family deficits, this may imply that teachers feel that changing such a situation would be beyond their control.

> Too much is asked of us and we do what we can (…) I think that it no longer depends on us but the problems that students carry with them, the family is basic here (…) Let's make it clear, we do what we can. On the other hand, we are secondary school teachers and we have a degree in our own expertise, but we are not psychologists.

> (pedagogical coordinator, Spruce School)

A school's 'futility culture' (Diamond et al., 2004) is not independent of the school's social composition. Unsurprisingly, in this case, the children of these parents were mainly enrolled in Spruce School, characterized by a high level of social complexity and segregated practices.

As in the previous two cases, these parents experienced a strong sense of frustration as they felt that no matter how much they helped their children with their schooling, they were still not successful. The main difference here was that they exclusively blamed themselves for this:

> How can I help him if I am a mother who is absent for twelve hours? And of course, I blame myself for not helping him with his schooling, imagine how I feel.

> (Selina, primary school, informal work)

As Reay (2004) has argued, "a combination of poverty, negative personal experiences of schooling, insufficient educational knowledge and lack of confidence and low levels of dominant cultural capital, economic capital and social capital" (p. 64) restrict the possibilities for working-class parents and act as a barrier to transforming emotional capital into educational benefits for their children.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper demonstrates that in order to overcome existent barriers between parents and teachers in negotiating students' educational trajectories, there is a need to open the black box of parent-school relationships and to focus on the process and the context of this relationship. There are many aspects that emerge when attempting to open this black box and some of them will be discussed in this section.

Firstly, the findings of this paper show that home-school relations cannot be understood without taking into account the school's social composition in relation to the school ethos. Although this is not a linear relation, since there were groups in our study that included parents from different schools, we found a clear correlation between some of the positions and attitudes of parents and their relationship with

school, depending on the school at which their offspring were enrolled. Parents with children enrolled at Oak School or Cedar School (based on an inclusive model) felt more supported and more informed than parents from Pine School and Spruce School (with a segregated model). Overall, we believe that the level of proximity between home and school has a clear impact on teachers' expectations, which, at the same time, has an impact on interactions with parents.

From a parental viewpoint, this paper shows how different ways of dealing with children's learning difficulties are strongly affected by class. In situations like having children at risk of dropping out of school, parents adopted different strategies and ways of responding, and they were influenced by social class positions and dispositions. The findings show that among those home-school relationships based on consensus, when the family and institutional habitus were more aligned, the relationship appeared to be based on a partnership. In contrast, when a greater distance was detected between both agents, the relationship seemed to be more hierarchical, like an interaction between experts and non-experts. On the other hand, within those interactions based on conflict, this was manifested in different ways which were, again, mediated in terms of social class. In the case of middle-class families, we saw how they raised their 'voice' —in Hirschman terms (1970)—, confident that they had the legitimacy to confront the authority of teachers and demanded improvements from a provider-client perspective; among the working classes, there was also a questioning of the authority of teachers, but these families were more inclined towards 'exit' strategies.

Consideration of the implications for policy and practice remains an important aspect of any attempt to engage in social justice research (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2002). Our analysis has attempted to demonstrate some of the material, social and symbolic barriers that working-class —and migrant— parents experience (more so than middle-class families) when interacting with teachers and schools. According to Mills & Gale (2004), in order to open up the processes of schooling to groups who are often excluded (and for their views to be taken seriously and engaged with during decision-making processes), a 'politics of recognition' needs to be taken into account. In the words of the authors: "[R]ecognitive justice, with its positive regard for social difference and centrality of social democratic processes, offers us another way of advancing this discussion beyond simplistic attributions of blame" (p. 268) (see other local research sharing the same concerns: Collet, 2020; Feitó, 2011). In this sense, redefinition of the 'rules of the game' (in Bourdieusian terms) would seem necessary, to level the playing field for all actors in education.

On the other hand, in a context like Spain, where (according to the National Institute of Statistics) 26.4% of the adult population was at risk of poverty and exclusion in 2020 (which is expected to continue to increase as a consequence of COVID-19), the need for welfare support seems unquestionable. Without this type of support, the 'conditions of educability' (López & Tedesco, 2002) of families in a situation of greater social vulnerability are strongly threatened.

As a limitation of this research, we must keep in mind that as this was a small-scale qualitative case study, we need to be cautious when trying to generalize the findings to other contexts. This paper presents our analysis of a small selection of schools in Barcelona, which may not be representative of the school population as a whole. Consequently, readers should see our findings as a preliminary step towards developing theory and empirical knowledge about how home-school relationships are established and the role of social inequalities in this relation. To obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the effects of home-school relationships on students' engagement, in future research, the author would also like to capture students' own experiences.

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NOTA BIOGRÁFICA

Marta Curran is a PhD in Sociology from the Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona and she is currently a professor of Sociology of Education at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid. Member of the research group Globalization, Education and Social Policies [Globalización, Educación y Políticas Sociales] (GEPS) of the UAB and of the Research Group in Sociology of Education [Grupo de Investigación en Sociología de la Educación] (GRISE) of the UCM where she has participated in several competitive research projects at the international and national level and has published in several impact journals. Her research focuses on the analysis of inequalities in education, policy analysis and educational transitions. In addition, she has worked as a consultant for various organizations and public entities on projects focused on early school leaving and transitions between school and work.