

# Family-school communication in Spain: channels and their use

## *La comunicación familia/escuela en España: canales y usos*

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**Abstract:** Family/school communication has not been a central theme of educational research in Spain. In fact, it can safely be stated that it has rarely been the focus of work although it is also true that the relation between these two institutions or the participation of the families in the school have been analysed in depth. This text aims to supply an overall view from our own empirical work (ethnographic and survey) of the main channels of communication and the use made of these. The starting point is that there are many channels but that these are not always used or used adequately which leads to important obstacles in the communication and that this can be improved. Moreover, a point that can be highlighted is the scant use of the new technologies despite their potential. The results of the two studies presented, one the base for the other, show that Spanish schools are not taking sufficient advantage of the potential of the new technologies for communication and to make information flow between families and professionals. However, this does not mean that there are no successful experiences.

**Keywords:** Communication Family-School, Participation, New Technologies.

**Resumen:** En España la comunicación familia/escuela no ha sido una temática central en la investigación sobre educación, de hecho, se puede afirmar que en pocas ocasiones ha sido el foco de trabajo. Aunque sí es cierto que la relación entre ambas instituciones o la participación de las familias en la escuela han sido analizados en profundidad. Este texto pretende aportar una visión de conjunto, a partir de un trabajo empírico propio (etnográfico y encuesta), de los principales canales de comunicación existentes y el uso que se realiza de ellos. El punto de partida es que existen múltiples canales pero éstos no siempre se utilizan o utilizan adecuadamente comportando que existan obstáculos importantes en la comunicación y que ésta sea mejorable. Además, un punto destacable es el poco uso que se realiza de las nuevas tecnologías a pesar del potencial que tendrían.

**Palabras clave:** Comunicación, Familia-Escuela, Participación, Nuevas Tecnologías.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Although the school and the family need each other, they have had to establish a distance between each other (Maulini, 1997; Dubet, 1997). However, recent cultural changes have favoured this relation. For Montandon and Perrenoud (1994), with the improvement in the level of education, an increase is observed in the ideology of participation (social and school) in line with the democratisation of society. Moreover, the attitude of the citizenry towards public services has evolved towards them claiming more rights and behaving like consumers. This also means the institutions and professionals must be accountable for their actions. The above-mentioned conditions have favoured the slow but growing presence of families in the school and the conviction and claim that this favours the objectives of the school and families for their pupils/children. In Spain, the legislation, and specifically the educational laws, have also moving towards favouring the social and school participation, despite ups and downs (for the evolution of educational legislation in Spain and the participation of the families in the school, consult: Fernández Enguita, 1992; Garreta, 2008 and 2014). In spite of this, we are still far from the school recognising the families as partenaires and of the majority of families becoming actively involved.

Nowadays, the relations between the school and family are seen as a factor of great importance in the education of the pupils. To sum up, among the arguments in favour of involving families, we should highlight:

- **The fact that the educational mission of the families as the first educators of their children obliges them to take part in all the decisions that affect their education. Moreover, they have the responsibility to manifest interest in the good working of the school through active participation in meetings and the taking of decisions, expressing themselves and cooperating with the school (Garreta, 2008).**
  
- **On the other hand, there is research that highlights the fact that the participation of the parents has positive effects on the results and behaviour of the minors. Those in favour of this state that to the extent that each pupil's learning process does not only imply cognitive mechanisms but also an emotional dynamic, the attitudes of the parents to school work, the interest they show, the support they lend, etc., have a positive influence on the relation the pupils build with the school, their learning, results and attitudes (Epstein, 1995 and 2001; Deslandes, 2004).**
  
- **Other studies emphasise the benefits for the families of participating actively in the school. For Olmsted (1991), participation in the school has positive effects on the families: they learn to assert themselves and develop specific skills related to the school and the schooling of their children, they contribute to the school and the class, etc.**
  
- **Other studies claim that the teaching staff with positive attitudes to parental participation also reap benefits, as this brings greater knowledge about the families and their expectations and attitudes, as well as increasing the sensation of greater efficiency and personal satisfaction (Ozer & Bandura, 1990; Walker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2008). Moreover, they also mean benefits for the working of the school, as this expression of democratisation enriches the objectives and improves their running (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Furman, 2004).**

A review the research carried out in Spain also shows that, among the factors that affect the performance and success of the pupils, the involvement of the families in the school and the educational/school project of their children is important. Martínez Gonzalez (1996) concludes that, when the parents participate in the life of the school, positive effects are generated for the child, the teachers, parents, and also the school. Meanwhile, Bolívar (2006) indicates that when the schools work together with the families, the academic performance of the pupils rises and, moreover, the quality of the education in the school improves. Our recent studies (Garreta et. al, 2011; Garreta, 2014) indicate that for the teachers, representatives of the parents' associations and management teams in the schools, the involvement of the families in the school, the fluid relation, and continuous communication in both directions are the keys for the academic success of the pupils.

To sum up, the participation of the progenitors (from here on, we use the terms family or progenitors in the generic sense aware that the tutors/persons responsible for the pupils do not always fit this profile, although this is the most common situation) in the school is considered important and covers various roles (Hester, 1989): communication with the teachers and other personnel in the school, participation in the parents' associations, participation in activities in the school, support for school work, their role as educators, etc. In line with Hester (1989) and Thompson and Mazer (2012), an important factor in participation is communication. Moreover, as the latter indicate, the progenitors use different combinations and modes of communication with the teachers. This text focuses on this point, starting from the idea that there are multiple channels for communication with the families in Spanish schools. However, despite this, these channels do not always exist in the school or respond to what is planned. The new technologies seem to be remarkably underused despite being highly rated and considered a modernising aspect in schools, especially regarding the relation with the families.

## **2. FAMILY-SCHOOL COMMUNICATION: THE ETHNOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVE**

The start of the research was a three-month ethnographic phase (April, May and June 2007) in eight pre-school and primary schools (these are state schools that teach pre-school: 3 to 6 years old; and primary education: age 6 to 12) in the Autonomous Community of Catalonia. These were in six places in the four Catalan provinces (Barcelona, Tarragona, Lleida and Girona). Briefly, the profiles of the schools where the ethnography was carried out responded to a prior selection of regarding their geographic situation, number of pupils and teachers, the different working dynamics in the school and the parents' associations (the choice of the schools was based on the criteria of there being different numbers of pupils and lines (groups/classes per level); from both rural areas and large cities, with varied percentages of foreign-origin families; and different dynamics of relations, in other words, from centres with relations that they themselves define as positive to others who do not see them this way. To detect these, a prior work of interviews was carried out to select a sample with which the final study was done (for more details, see Garreta, 2011).

The ethnographic study enables us to know what the schools do to communicate and relate to the families. Firstly, during the enrolment period, most schools have an open day to let the parents and children get to know the school. However, not all schools do so. For example, one school keeps its doors “closed” to parents except in exceptional cases, working with a minimum opening to the families. On the other extreme, another school (a small rural one) does not hold an open day because the doors are always open and they prefer to attend to possible new pupils on an individualised basis as they arrive. Most schools have protocols for receiving the families and children, especially those of foreign origin. Beyond the open days, and whether or not they have a protocol for reception for the first arrival at the school, the habitual communication channels between the schools and progenitors are as follows:

- ***The start of course meetings:*** these meetings organised by the schools for parents are designed to inform the families about the school and how it works. In the ethnography, we see that these are held in all schools, although they sometimes seem to do so out of obligation and with no specific interest in presenting the centre or initiating communication and involving the families. The first problem that was observed in these meetings is that they do not respond closely to the interests of the parents and the same information is often repeated year after year. The oral presentations and power-points always seem to be the same, there is little new information for the families who have been attending the school for some time and one of the few points that interest for those who attend is to see if their children appear in the photographs in the presentation. This leads to a low level of attendance. The professionals generally consider that it is necessary to work to increase attendance, especially in the higher courses in primary as the number of parents attending falls steadily as the children move up through the school. The situation is different when the meeting is limited to the teachers and members of the families of children in the same class. As the parents state, this higher level of participation is because these meetings discuss more specific themes and refer to their children. Although these meetings are generally seen as important, in many cases, it is common to think that they need reinforcing to bring them closer to the demands and needs of the families and the interests of the professionals in the school.
- ***The tutorials:*** as established by the education authorities, at least three tutorial sessions must be held between the teacher-tutor and the parents every year. However, this is not always complied with, either due to overwork or lack of interest from the teachers and/or families. We have detected cases of families who request a meeting but have to wait a long time for an appointment, especially with pupils who “are doing well”, and families who do not attend the tutorials they are invited to. Through the ethnography, we concluded that when these tutorials

are held, they are done so correctly and are very highly valued by both professionals and progenitors. However, they could be improved in the following ways. They should be held at times when neither the teacher nor the parents are in a hurry to finish. They should be held in adequate surroundings. The attitude of the teacher should generate confidence by being perceived to be receptive, listening actively and, at the same time, knowing how to communicate.

- *The school diary* (notebook the pupil has and in which the teacher and parents or guardians note the incidents and information they wish to transmit, requests, etc.) is a basic tool for control and communication. However, it is little or not always used, and the families do not really know what it is, what it is used for and how they can use it. The teachers could also improve the way they use it. We have found teachers who never use it or discourage parents from using it (as they find little or nothing in it and stop looking in it or considering it an active communication channel). In fact, some do not even read what the parents write. On the other hand, problems also arise among teachers who habitually use the diary as a communication tool, as they do not always bear in mind that there are parents who have difficulties following it and writing in it (especially among those with low cultural levels) or who show little interest in doing so and prefer to talk face to face or by telephone. For the professionals, the diary is more than anything a valuable tool for communication and still with great potential given that it is underused through a lack of interest, lack of knowledge of its possible uses or limitations in its use.
  
- *The circulars and notes to parents*: these are other communication channels widely used in the schools, and highly valued by professionals and progenitors. This channel is used by the professionals to transmit news and information about activities that affect either all the school or specific classes (festivals, activities for the families, strikes, outbreaks of head lice, etc.). However, parents believe that although the

frequency of use is adequate, what they receive from the schools is not always clear or specific enough (the language is not always understandable and an excess of information hinders their reading and assimilation of the information). In the view of the teachers and especially of the progenitors, it is necessary to improve the communicative strategies. This could be by summarising the information better, adapting the language to the level of all the families, or including more illustrations and drawings to make them more attractive.

- *The notice board*: this channel is found in all schools and theoretically is undeniably useful, but less so in practice. Each school places the information it believes useful for the families on the notice board: timetables, holidays, activities, etc. From observations in the ethnography about their location, whether they are kept up to date and the use made of them, we can conclude that more thought must be given to where they are placed (Although not habitual, there are cases where these are in places not usually accessible to the parents, in other words, the people the information is aimed at) and their design. Moreover, the language used must be adequate and, vitally, they must be kept up to date so that the information is not seen as “the same as always”. The most important is to hang up information that is interesting for the families. All too often, little care is taken with the choice of what is placed there, leading to a loss of interest to the point where the notice board becomes invisible. Nevertheless, needless to say, there are schools that take care of this and use it adequately to transmit the expected information.
  
- Few centres have a *school magazine* and where, in theory, the progenitors can also express themselves. The magazine is a good channel of information and one highly valued by the families. However, the analysis carried out in the schools that have one concluded that the progenitors should be encouraged to participate more and that the



magazine should respond more to their interests as the contents are often thought up from the school, giving the parents little space (voice).

- *The Web and the blog:* the new technologies are still little used in most schools, despite the existence of webs and blogs. The latter is much more dynamic than the web regarding updating and the participation of the families. The management teams, representatives of the parents' associations and the teaching staff value these positively as a quick source of information permanently available for the families, as well as giving the school an image of modernity. Another aspect is whether these platforms are always kept updated or of interest for the families. Webs are often not updated frequently and the families do not always find what they want, as they are designed more as a showcase for the school (photos, activities organised...) than as a channel for information and communication with the families and where the latter can find what concerns them most (calendar/timetable of their children, lunch menus, places to debate how to improve the school and what it offers, etc.). Regarding the blog, despite being more participative and encouraging the involvement of the families through enabling them to participate in the debates, it is often underused and is activated especially at specific moments that we have characterised as "crisis". These are moments and situations that generate an intense on-going debate due to events that concern the families. The rest of the time it is a channel for information/communication that is highly valued and used but with long periods on "standby". At the same time, the families still lack the habit of using these places for information and communication, as some of them state that they did not know they existed, had no interest in entering them, did not know how to use them and that, if they needed anything, it was easier to ask directly. Although it is clear that the use of these technologies has advanced notably in recent years, there is still a long way to go to make full use of them as sources of information and channels for communication.

- **Informal communication (in person, by telephone and e-mail).** In last place, we have to highlight the importance of specific contacts, sporadic consultations, taking advantage of the moments when the children enter and leave the school, in the street, on the telephone or by e-mail. The first point detected was that these contacts are much more frequent in the lower courses and fall off with the passing of the years, although they never disappear altogether because both the teachers and especially the families use them. For the teachers, all too often it is used to give “bad news”, to tell the parents about something that does not work properly. A contact of this type (either in public or in private) ends up dissuading the parents rather than encouraging them to continue the relation-communication. For the progenitors, comments, information about the day and the children’s progress, or simply glances exchanged on entry and at the end of the day, are reassuring. However, the parents must also understand that the teacher cannot always be available. If the teacher is required to have the ability to listen and communicate, the parents should also be asked to correspond. However, there are situations that require a rapid response, such as conflicts or problems that arise suddenly and that the families do not want to leave for the next day. It is generally thought that the use of telephone and e-mail should be enhanced to facilitate communication and to contact and inform the families (taking care to avoid excluding those who do not use these means), as it is neither easy nor quick for the parents to obtain a response from the professionals in the centres when they use these channels. The reason used to justify these delays or lack of response is overwork and the lack of personnel.

As well as the habitual channels of communication in all the schools, a few have incorporated other professionals, often contracted by the parents’ associations, to improve the relation between the pupils’ tutors and the professionals in the school. These include, for example, educators or educational psychologists, responsible for enhancing the relation and communication.

### **3. COMMUNICATION WITH THE FAMILIES: THE QUANTITATIVE POINT OF VIEW**

The second approach to the theme was from the quantitative perspective. Specifically, based on the ethnographic phase, a questionnaire was designed for head teachers and heads of study in pre-school and primary schools (with pupils aged between 3 and 12) in Catalonia. The sample was made up of 353 head teachers and heads of study in state schools (The empirical work was done through a number of pre-school and primary schools in Catalonia taken from the list of these centres from the Catalan government's Department of Education. The sample was chosen using a random number table, so this is a proportional sample of the population. In the least favourable case  $p = q = 50\%$ , with a level of confidence of  $95.5\%$ ; the statistical error was  $\pm 3.4$ . The telephone interviews were carried out in 2010. To sum up, the profile of the interviewee was:  $95\%$  were head teachers and the rest, heads of study;  $63\%$  were female and the rest, male; the average age was 48; they had an average of 23.6 years of teaching experience and had worked an average of 12.5 years in the school where they were interviewed). One of the aims behind the design of the questionnaire was to approach communication in the schools, so they were asked about the obstacles to communication and the action carried out to improve this.

In the view of the interviewees, there are various hurdles to be overcome in the communication, but, as the following table shows, these are mainly attributed to the families. Two earlier studies also took the teaching staff (Garreta, 2003) and those in charge of the parents' associations (Garreta, 2008) as respondents. They were asked the same question (likewise without conditioning the possible answers) and, although the percentages differed, they also held the families responsible. In fact, it can be observed that the most common among the interviewees is to believe that: there is insufficient interest; they do not understand what the teacher expects; they have insufficient knowledge about the education system; etc. Comparing the three surveys, we find that the response of the lack of interest and low cultural level of the families was higher among teachers, while the representatives of the

management teams mention more lack of interest, time and knowledge about the education system. Moreover, although the representatives of the parents' associations coincide with this general evaluation, they place less emphasis on the importance of interest in and understanding of the education system and more on the idea of cultural conflict.

Going into depth about what schools do, we asked the management teams if they had worked to: present the school and its organization to families (95.5 % space and 97.2 % organisation); facilitate meetings between families and teachers (97.2 %); know the expectations of the families (61.5 %); improve teachers' attitudes towards the families (61.5 %) and those of the families to the school (38.8 %). Later, within the previous framework, we probed the actions by the schools in each of the mentioned lines of work. In first place, those schools that had acted to improve knowledge about the physical installations of the centre among the families had mainly organised open days for the families who wanted to visit the school (81.9 %), especially when they were deciding whether or not to enrol their children. The response to the rest of the actions was considerably lower, and only 15.4 % had held informative meetings/visits for the families (mainly among the smaller schools). The web page (blogs were not mentioned) is hardly mentioned as being used to promote the school (0.6 %).

More specifically, we asked about the level of attendance at the information meetings for the families, and the result indicates that just over a third of them attend. Moreover, the participation varies according to the level: it is slightly higher in the first two years of primary in comparison with the middle cycle of primary. Thus, in primary, the average participation is 76.78 % in the initial cycle, and 74.2 % in the middle one [Moreover, asking representatives of management teams in secondary schools in Catalonia in the Compulsory Secondary Education (aged 12 to 16) the same question gave an average of 60.7 % (see -anonymised- 2011). This continues to confirm the idea that attendance at meetings falls off as the age/level of the pupils rises].

Table 1. Obstacles to family-school communication

	Members of primary schools management teams (2011) %	Representatives parents' associations (Garreta 2008) %	Primary school teachers (Garreta 2003) %
<b>Causes attributed to the families</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>70.7</b>	<b>82.7</b>
Lack of interest from parents	44.8	11	65.3
Parents do not understand what teachers expect from them	39.1	18.5	37.9
Lack of knowledge of the education system among parents	31.7	38.5	46.1
Lack of time	26.3		
Low cultural level of parents	8.8	13.8	28.5
Cultural conflict between the family and the school	7.1	34.5	23.4
Total/partial lack of knowledge of the language	7.1		
Lack of trust in the work of teachers	2.3		
They do not value the work of teachers	1.7		
Individualism	1.1		
Others attributed to the families	8.8		
<b>Causes attributed to the school and its professionals</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>28.6</b>	<b>11.32</b>
Teachers do not understand what parents want/ask for	17.6	4.5	6.6
Curriculum not very flexible	3.7	5.5	9.3
Lack of interest from teachers	3.1		
Lack of training of teachers		4	8.4
The school makes no effort to present itself	2	2.5	19.7
Lack of fluidity in the transmission of information	1.7		
Little support by the education administration	0.3		
Others attributed to the school	1.7		
<b>Causes attributed to pupils</b>	<b>0.6</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
The pupils hinder communication	0.6		
There are no obstacles	0.6		
<b>Causes attributed to families and professionals</b>	<b>1.4</b>	<b>0.4</b>	<b>3.5</b>
Total/partial lack of knowledge of the language of communication	2	0.4	3.5
General causes	1.1		
Lack of mutual trust	0.6		
Not known / no answer	0.6	-	3.7

\* Source: Prepared by authors.

Returning to the general approach, among those that have carried out activities to inform about the organization of the school, the survey indicates that the main action was meetings at the start of the course, (68.2 %; more often mentioned by schools with over 450 pupils, 76.3 %) and circulars (15.2 %). Again, the proportion of all other activities was very low (information meetings during the course 6.7 %; information leaflets 2.3 %; group tutorials 0.6 %) and, as in the previous case, the web and other new technologies were little used.

In third place, the actions to facilitate meetings between families and teachers are focussed mainly on tutorials with the families (63.8 % individual and, 0.9 % collective, i.e. with various families), and adapting timetables for these to the needs of the families (32.9 %). We looked into the attendance at tutorials and observed that this is high, as a little less than ten per cent of families do not attend (91.5 % attending).

On the other hand, to know about the expectations of the families, covering actions that have been carried out in this sense, we observe that the most frequently mentioned are again the tutorials with the families and enhancing the formal (through the above-mentioned channels established by the schools) and informal relations (contacts that allow more direct and spontaneous communication). However, the latter is less frequently mentioned and is related to the size of the school. This last form of finding out about the expectations of the families is more common in smaller schools, and less frequent in bigger ones, as shown in the following table. In the opposite sense, surveys are used more often in large schools given the difficulties of informal relations compared with the situation in smaller ones.

Table 2. Actions carried out to find out the expectations of the families.

Base: centres have carried out actions to know the expectations of the families	TOTAL	Number of pupils in the school			
		Fewer than 150	151-300	301-450	Over 450
Survey of the families	14.3	5.4	19.7	13.1	20.7
Tutorials with the family	35.9	42.9	35.2	27.9	41.4
Plan de action tutorial	0.9	-	1.4	-	3.4
Strengthen the relation through the formal organization	24.4	26.8	21.1	29.5	17.2
Strengthen the relation by organising activities	3.2	3.6	-	8.2	-
Strengthen the informal relation	17.1	25	15.5	13.1	13.8
Others	4.1	3.6	2.8	6.6	3.4
Not known/no answer	3.2	-	5.6	1.6	6.9

\* Source: Prepared by authors.

Lastly, informal relations have been encouraged (38.7 %) to improve the attitudes of teachers towards families and this aspect has been worked on in meetings of teaching staff (31.5 %).

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

A main element for strengthening family-school relations and participation is the existence of fluid communication in all senses (Hester 1989; Thompson and Mazer 2012). The existence of communication channels is the premise for a respectful, creative and productive relation between the professionals in the school and the families. However, having these channels does not necessarily mean that they work and are always beneficial for professionals, family and pupils.

Beyond illustrating the actions carried out in the pre-school and primary centres in Spain through a sample of schools in the Autonomous Community of Catalonia, the work carried out detected that there are some obstacles to communication and these must be overcome. These include a lack of interest or time among families/tutors, parents not knowing what the schools expect or lack of knowledge of the education system, misunderstanding among teachers about what families want, etc. However, we especially observe that it is necessary to overcome the idea that it is principally the family that has to

take steps to approach the school, as the family is mainly attributed with responsibility for communication working or not. The survey of the school management teams, like the teachers or representatives of the parents' associations, places great responsibility on the families and much less on the professionals in the school. Evidently, the families must make changes, but the schools also have responsibility for this improvement, and need to be aware of this. In fact, the survey of the school management teams indicates that the schools have intervened principally to promote the centre and its organization (through open days and group meetings with families at different moments in the course) and to facilitate meetings between families and the teaching staff (through tutorials and adapting the timetables of these to make these easier) but less on finding out the expectations of families and improving the attitudes of teachers and families. It also seems that the dominant discourse here is that the family should adapt. To sum up, it is necessary for the school in Spain to recognise its own role in improving relations and communication with families. It must take steps to know them better, because that is what the families perceive as interest, desire to communicate and even affection.

In reference to the habitual communication channels between the school and the progenitors, the most widely used are the meetings at the start of the course, tutorials, the school diary, circulars and notes to parents and notice board. Although these can be improved, they are seen as effective in the schools and adapted to the reality. We detected that the options for communication chosen by the management teams is especially influenced by the number of pupils in the school. The response by the families also varies depending on the level of their children. However, the use of the telephone, e-mail and the web or blog should be rethought and extended, as we believe they are underused. While the telephone is little used, e-mail is hardly mentioned in the ethnography and does not appear in the survey results. In fact, although some of our interlocutors mention its potential, in practice, the fear of the time that the professionals must dedicate to responding to parents means that they state that it is better to use other channels. On the other



hand, while the web and blog give the school a veneer of modernity, there are also notable limitations to their use. The web is perceived more as a public showcase for the centre than as an information channel for the families. The blog, which is always more active, is used mainly in moments of “crisis”, in other words, in situations that generate specific debates (generally among the progenitors themselves) and that manage to attract the interest of the most motivated among these. To sum up, the results of the two studies presented, one the basis for the other, show that Spanish schools are not taking sufficient advantage of the potential of the new technologies for communication and to make information flow between families and professionals. However, this does not mean that there are no successful experiences.

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