

The Quality of  
Parental Participation  
and Student  
Achievement  
in Peruvian  
Government Schools

Maria Balarin  
Santiago Cueto

November 2007

Young Lives   
An International Study of Childhood Poverty

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- inform the development and implementation of future policies and practices that will reduce child poverty.

Young Lives is a collaborative partnership between research and government institutes in the 4 study countries, the University of Oxford, the Open University, other UK universities and Save the Children UK.

Young Lives is core-funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), with sub-studies funded by IDRC (in Ethiopia), UNICEF (in India) and the Bernard van Leer Foundation (in India and Peru).



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First published by Young Lives in November 2007  
© Young Lives 2007  
ISBN: 978-1-904427-36-0

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Typeset and printed by Copyprint UK Ltd, Westminster Square, London, UK.

## THE QUALITY OF PARENTAL PARTICIPATION AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IN PERUVIAN GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

MARIA BALARIN AND SANTIAGO CUETO

# Summary

The paper presents and discusses the findings of a study on families' and teachers' understanding of parental involvement in children's schooling in public primary schools in Peru. The study was undertaken against a background of encouragement of parental participation in education as a means to democratise and improve the quality of educational services. In Peru, as elsewhere, parental involvement in schooling is increasingly seen as contributing to learning and achievement. A sample of 16 children in four departments of Peru was interviewed, together with their teachers and parents. Researchers found parents have limited knowledge about how learning takes place in schools and how they can support their children. Hardly any schools have strategies to guide parental involvement in schooling. Understanding of learning is especially inadequate among poorer and less-educated families. The authors draw the attention of policy-makers to the need to develop better strategies to shape and promote parental involvement in ways that might help enhance children's learning and achievement.

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# Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank the Grupo de Análisis para el Desarrollo (GRADE) for the contribution to this publication.

This publication is an output from a project funded by the United Kingdom Department for International Development (DFID) for the benefit of developing countries. The views expressed are not necessarily those of DFID.

# Introduction

The issue of parental participation in schooling has acquired a central place in recent educational discussions. Parental involvement is seen as a necessary condition to guarantee a more transparent and democratic administration of schools. It is also argued that certain forms of parental involvement can have a positive impact on children's learning. In Peru, the emphasis on parental participation in schooling has acquired particular importance during the democratic transition from the authoritarian rule of Alberto Fujimori, Peru's president from 1990 to 2000. A General Law of Education approved by the Peruvian Congress in 2003 (the *Ley General de Educación N° 28044*) emphasises the need to promote parental participation in school matters.

Although the literature suggests strong linkages between community and family participation in schooling and children's educational achievement, Peru has prioritised parental participation for political and administrative reasons. Education policies highlight the need to democratise decision-making in schools in order to guarantee more transparent resource management (e.g. through parental oversight of school expenditure) or to get parents involved in the improvement of school infrastructure and provision of material resources. Less emphasis has been put on parents' role in supporting their children's learning processes in school. This is particularly worrying given the evidence about the very low achievement of Peruvian students as measured by national and international tests (UNESCO 2003; Unidad de Medición de la Calidad Educativa 2005). Improving educational outcomes will require the deployment of better strategies for involving parents in their children's education.

This paper reports on the findings of a study that explores parents' and teachers' understanding of parental participation in schooling, especially in relation to learning and achievement. The study suggests serious flaws in the manner in which the new policies of increasing parental participation in schooling are being implemented. Both school teachers and parents appear to have a rather limited understanding of what the role of parents should be. There are few strategies to promote parental involvement in ways that might have a positive impact on children's educational achievement.

Parents can get involved in their children's education in various ways, not all of them equally contributing to children's achievement in school. More positive forms of involvement seem to depend on an understanding by both parents and teachers of their complementary roles, in terms of a partnership in which some basic continuities exist between the home and the school (in terms of expectations about children's learning, for instance) (Epstein 1995).

The aim of the study was to explore parents' and schools' understanding of parental involvement in schooling. More specifically, it sought to explore existing limitations to parental involvement and the extent to which the latter had some kind of orientation towards the improvement of children's learning and achievement. The questions that guided the study were how:

- parents understand their role in relation to their children's learning and the importance of their involvement in their schooling
- they see the possibilities of supporting their children's education
- they understand their participation in school matters
- teachers see the role of parental support
- teachers promote parental involvement in schooling
- they analyse existing difficulties for parental involvement.

The present article is based on an exploratory study carried out with the parents and teachers of a group of children that form part of the Young Lives Project (known as *Niños del Milenio*) in Peru. Young Lives is a longitudinal research project working in four countries (Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam), which aims to understand the causes and outcomes of childhood poverty and with this knowledge influences public policies for childhood well-being. Our study suggests that in Peru continuities between home and school are almost non-existent and that the extent of home-school linkages varies according to families' socio-economic background. Better-off families appear to have more time and access to information to get involved and understand their role in relation to their children's achievement in school. The study points to the scant guidance which families receive as to how to make sense of their children's learning experiences and their role in them. Schools provide only loose directions to parents as to how they could support their children's learning or understand achievement related issues. Parents are thus left to their own devices when it comes to contributing to their children's learning. This means that even in those cases in which parental participation in school activities is stronger, there is rarely significant positive impact on children's learning, motivation and achievement.

The findings suggest the need to further explore the ways in which parents develop their understanding of learning and achievement issues, how this understanding is shaped by schools and how better strategies to promote better home-school linkages and more positive forms of involvement could be developed.



# Why parental participation in schooling matters

The issue of parental participation in schooling has acquired a central space in educational literature. One major line of research focusing on family and school links comes from the sociology of education, where the focus is set on how family background influences educational attainment. It has been found that schools cannot fully compensate for social differences and that they often contribute to the reproduction of existing social inequalities or to the deepening of class, gender and ethnic differences. Education systems often reinforce existing differences between groups who supposedly have the same opportunities for learning but who relate to such opportunities differently. Authors focusing on this have noted that success in school tends to be dependent on the possession of social, economic and cultural capital and schools often lead to the systematic (although not overt) exclusion of those individuals who do not possess it ( Bourdieu 1997). It is now realised that while improving school practices is important it is equally important to understand that ‘schools are not solely responsible for promoting... young people’s academic success’ (Israel *et al.* 2001:44). The conditions under which education is provided must be taken into account. We need better understanding of those aspects of children’s lives which influence their school experiences and which the school cannot influence directly (López and Tedesco 2002; Moore 2004).

A body of research has emerged from these ideas which seeks to develop a better conceptualisation of family and school links and the ways in which they can be improved. The literature on the influence of social and cultural capital is particularly relevant in this area. Coleman’s (1987; 1997) research, for instance, has shown the important role that social capital – understood both in terms of the presence of parents and other relatives in the household, and in terms of ‘the attention given by the adults to the child’ – plays in educational achievement. According to Coleman, the effects of family and community social capital on educational attainment do not necessarily occur as a result of specifically educational relations but, rather, through transmission of values that define obligations and expectations, norms and sanctions for different types of behaviour. Exchanges between community members facilitate the development of educationally relevant strategies such as information about how parents can contribute to their children’s education.

This characterisation takes the concept of social capital beyond Bourdieu’s original definition, in which it was understood as ‘a “credential” which entitles [the members of a community]... to credit, in the various senses of the word’ (Bordieu 1997: 51). Coleman goes further by noting how social capital contributes to formation of values and the dissemination of information which fundamentally determines capacity for making use of educational opportunities. His critique questions the over-focus on school effectiveness research. It is not just a question of how schools can improve educational opportunities, provide opportunities, meet demands and offer rewards for educational attainment. For Coleman, ‘a second [equally important] class of educational inputs comes only from the child’s closer, more intimate, and more persisting environment [the family]’, and help shape children’s attitudes, effort and conception of self’ (1987: 35).

Following this line of research, Israel *et al.* (2001) have differentiated the structural and process elements of social capital – where the latter is understood as ‘the norms, social networks and relationships between adults and children that are valuable for children when they are growing up’ and which is ‘invested in relations that emerge through interpersonal interaction’ (p.7). The central idea that emerges from research into the links between social capital and educational achievement is that ‘parents can foster positive relationships with their children that reinforce school learning at home and provide opportunities, encouragement and emotional support for children’s ongoing education’ (Hao and Bonstead-Bruns 1998: 176).

It is relevant to note how in these definitions, the notion of social capital is not related to the idea of parental participation in school decisions, but refers, rather, to the *relations* established within the family environment which play an important role in determining whether children can grasp educational opportunities. This understanding relates to Epstein and Becker’s (1982) research on practices of parental involvement. They suggested that ‘of all types of parent involvement, supervision of learning activities at home may be the most educationally significant’ (p.111). It also appears to be a more realistic expectation given many parents’ material limitations to ‘participate’ more actively in school meetings and activities. It should be noted that parental involvement in education is usually shaped by educational institutions (Lareau 1987) – i.e. by the information and guidance they provide to parents as to the ways in which they can engage and support their children’s learning process. So rather than simply putting the focus on family dynamics, what the research suggests is the need to enhance family-school links in ways that might lead to better educational practices at home (e.g. better parental understanding of learning and achievement issues that could lead to better support for children’s learning).

Whereas this line of research highlights factors that are exogenous to the school, school-effectiveness research focuses on intra-school factors that contribute to differences in achievement and highlights the crucial importance of facilitating better good family-school relations ( Moore 2004). There is thus an agreement within various lines of research as to the importance of parental and community involvement in schooling. Of central significance is Epstein’s idea about the three major contexts that influence education and learning: families, schools and communities. This leads her to suggest that since ‘some of the objectives of the various institutions are shared’, they are ‘therefore best reached by communicating and cooperating’ (Driessen *et al.* 2005: 511).

The creation of home school partnerships based on a shared understanding of educational goals links with a complementary line of analysis that stresses the need to create knowledge continuities between home and school. This line of literature suggests that relevant knowledge is to be found even in communities or families with apparently limited social and cultural capital. Home-school linkages can be developed by incorporating local knowledge into school work. This perspective is also in line with theories such as those of Bernstein, which stress the need to understand the relations and differences between the culture of the school and that of the home, the ways in which they interact and the consequences for children’s ability to adapt and learn in school (Power *et al.* 1998).

Existing research generally supports the idea that parental and community involvement in schooling plays a crucial role in children’s school achievement. It suggests that adequate parental involvement can be especially relevant to improve the learning conditions of disadvantaged groups and that

families from higher socio-economic backgrounds are better equipped to provide adequate support for their children's learning (Driessen *et al.* 2005). Research suggests that not all forms of parental involvement are equally relevant for improving achievement. What is important is to promote family school relations that are meaningful for children's achievement and that promote children's learning, motivation and development (Driessen *et al.* 2005). By exploring teacher and school practices of parental involvement, Epstein (1995; 1982) has contributed largely to the theorisation of how family-school relations should take place so as to be meaningful for children's learning. She emphasises the idea of family/school partnerships, where active participation in school activities is not necessarily the most important way to promote good home-school relations. The most important issue in such partnerships is to develop a shared understanding of achievement, learning and school objectives, where parents can interpret and contribute to their children's progress in school, and where they are guided by the school as to how to better support their children's learning.

As in the case of the literature on social capital in education, this line of research suggests that the role played by families in schooling should translate into the creation of a learning environment in which children acquire values and attitudes towards education and learning. Such an environment, furthermore, is characterised by the relations that children hold with parents and other relatives within the household, and although these relations are shaped by educational institutions they are not necessarily equivalent to parental participation in school activities.<sup>1</sup>

## Expectations and assumptions about parental participation in Peru

Confirming with these understanding of the benefits of parental involvement in schooling, the new General Law of Education places great emphasis on enhancing community participation in educational matters at all levels. Current policies have potential to address some of the central concerns of education reformers: the need to improve the quality of educational services and to democratise educational decision-making.

The first set of objectives of the Law, those related to quality improvement, respond to the evidence from national and international assessments of the low quality of educational services in Peru. In the first assessment carried out by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2002-2001 which evaluates 15 year-old students of public and private schools, Peru came last of 41 participating countries (Cueto *et al.* 2004). Results showed that 54 per cent of students do not even reach the most basic level of reading comprehension (Level 1), which means that they 'have serious difficulties to use reading as an effective tool to amplify and extend their knowledge and skills in other areas' (Caro *et al.* 2004). Only 0.6 per cent of students reached the highest expected level (level 5), while a considerable 26 per cent scored at level 1, which indicates only basic reading comprehension

<sup>1</sup> Parental participation in school activities, of course, can be relevant for other aims – i.e. democratic decision-making within schools, transparent resource management, etc. – but it does not necessarily lead to better learning practices.

skills. These results are low even considering the country's poor investment levels (Cueto and Rodriguez 2003).

In line with these results, the most recent national assessment carried out in 2004 based on the aims set in the National Curriculum, showed that by the end of their primary education only about 12 per cent of students achieve expected reading comprehension levels and only about 8 per cent do so in maths. These percentages decline as students reach the end of their secondary schooling, with only about 10 per cent reaching expected standards in reading comprehension and only around 3 per cent in mathematics (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Peru National Assessment 2004: Percentage of students who reach expected learning levels in maths and reading comprehension**

	Primary		Secondary	
	2nd grade	6th grade	3rd grade	5th grade
Reading comprehension	15.1	12.1	15.1	9.8
Maths	9.6	7.9	6.0	2.9

Source: Unidad de Medición de la Calidad Educativa (2005)

National assessments have not only highlighted the gap between curriculum expectations and children's achievement but have also generated alarming evidence of inequalities. Children from private schools perform considerably better than those in state schools. Children from urban areas outperform those in rural areas. The new law attempts to address this by reforming the way in which public education is administered. It is in accordance with Peru's broader commitment to decentralisation and devolving of decision-making to local and regional levels (tiers) of government. Decentralisation, it is argued, is crucial for attaining more homogeneous economic development, democratising decision-making and bridging the gap between citizens and policy-makers.

In the case of education, the need to decentralise decision-making has been on the agenda since the early 1990s. During the early years of Fujimori's government an attempt was made to give municipalities responsibility for educational administration. But due to strong opposition – especially from teachers' unions and church authorities who feared this was a prelude to privatisation – these proposed reforms were abandoned. However, some measures were taken to increase schools' decision-making capacities. For example, the 016 Decree in which headteachers were given capacities to raise funds to invest in schools (Du Bois 2004).

With the return of democracy in 2000 a new impulse was given to decentralisation policies, but this time in a context that emphasised the need to democratise decision-making and spread the fruits of national development across the country. The 2003 education law shares this spirit and it is thus heavily oriented towards increasing participation of members of the educational community (parents, pupils, local organisations, etc.) in schooling. By promoting the participation of non-traditional actors in school decisions, the Law also aims to overcome restricted notions of schooling as something that

takes place only within the school limits. With this in mind, the law specifies the various ways in which educational actors should participate in school matters. It calls on:

- students to ‘give their opinion about the quality of the educational service they receive’
- families to ‘keep up-to-date about and help ensure the quality of educational services, and watch over children’s academic achievement and behaviour’
- families to ‘participate and collaborate in their children’s educational process’; and they should also take part in teacher assessment
- headteachers to ‘promote harmonious human relations, team work and participation among members of the education community’.

The emphasis on children’s opinions and parental involvement is encouraging, but in practice at school level there is limited awareness of links between the involvement of the community in school matters and children’s attainment. Emphasis on community participation chimes with post-Fujimori commitment to democratic and transparent decision-making, and wider civil society engagement with public administration. It is also in accordance with decentralisation processes taking place across Peru. As more power and decision-making capacities are devolved, parents and communities have new opportunities to acquire responsibility and to counter-balance the power of school headteachers.

Peru’s education policy environment now generally reflects the global trend towards an understanding of education as something that takes place not only within the school but also in the family and the community in which children grow up. This is reflected in such international policy frameworks as UNESCO’s (2000) ‘Education for All’ which clearly emphasises the importance of involving families and communities in education. Educationalists increasingly realise that families are active educational actors and that much of what can be achieved by schools depends on the support that children get from their families.

A recent UNESCO report on ‘Family participation in children’s education in Latin America’ (UNESCO-OREALC 2004) emphasises the role that families and communities play, or should play, in children’s learning and achievement. Many countries in the continent now have general laws on education sharing which are also characteristics of Peru’s 2003 legislation.

## Assumptions and limitations of current policies

Findings set out below indicate that some of the assumptions underpinning new policies do not reflect the realities faced by many families, communities and schools. Many of these actors have a very limited understanding of why and how they should get involved in children’s schooling. Schools do not seem to have come up with adequate strategies to shape and improve understanding. In Peru as elsewhere, conventional understanding of community involvement and participation is limited (UNESCO — OREALC 2004); Epstein and Becker 1982). Peru’s new education law, like similar legislation in Latin

America, tends to exclusively focus on the economic or labour contributions that families can make to the school, its infrastructure and materials. Such a narrow focus on ‘participation’ overlooks the role of families in accompanying and supporting children’s learning processes at home and often fails to acknowledge the inability of many parents to commit time or money for school activities. Policies do not recognise the need to understand parents’ perceptions of their role in their children’s education.

## The study

### SAMPLING AND DATA COLLECTION

The study was carried out with a sub-sample of children participating in the Young Lives Study in Peru. The study follows a cohort of 8,000 children during a 15-year period. The Peruvian case includes two cohorts, which at the time of the initial data collection (2002) were between 0.5 and 1.5 and 7.5 and 8.5 years of age. This study focused only on the latter.

The sample included children with different levels of achievement according to the Young Lives survey,<sup>2</sup> which would allow us to explore the ways in which different forms of parental involvement might be impacting on children’s achievement in school. Only those schools with more than five children from the Young Lives survey were included in the sample in order to facilitate the final case selection. An initial sample of 75 children was thus defined.

A smaller sub-sample was then defined, consisting of 16 children whose parents’ involvement in school would be analysed. These children were selected on the basis of their results in the 2002 Young Lives tests, whether they had repeated a school year or not and information on student achievement provided by teachers in initial short interviews. These criteria provided the basis for developing an achievement variable, which was the main criterion for selecting the cases. The idea was to include sample children with high and low achievement, so as to have some basis for comparing the impact of parental involvement on their performance in school. Finally, the children were selected on the basis of their location, as we wanted to include the greatest degree of geographical variety (coast, highlands, Amazonian, urban and rural settings) in the sample.

Two schools were selected in each of the four chosen departments (Ayacucho, Piura, Lima and San Martín), and two children (one with high achievement and one with low achievement) were selected in each school. The details of the final sample can be seen in Table 2.

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2 The tests measured achievement through reading, writing and numeracy items which required children to identify letters, read whole sentences, write a basic sentence and solve a simple mathematical operation. A more detailed account of the tests and children’s results can be found in (Cueto *et al.* 2004).

**Table 2. Details of the study sample**

School location (Department - district)	Malnutrition	Sex	School grade 2005	Grades repeated	Achieve- ment in 2002 test <sup>3</sup>	DoB	Parents' highest education level	
							Mother	Father
<b>Low- achieving children</b>								
Ayacucho-Lucanas	None	M	4	4	47.37	28/05/95	Technical (incomplete)	Technical (incomplete)
Ayacucho-Apurimac	Severe	M	5	3	78.71	30/01/94	Secondary	Secondary
Lima-San Juan de Lurigancho	Severe	F	5	None	78.71	10/06/94	Secondary	Technical (incomplete)
Lima-Villa Maria del Triunfo	Mild	M	2	2, 2	47.37	27/06/94	Technical (incomplete)	Technical (incomplete)
Piura-La Noria, Marvavelica	Severe	M	5	None	63.04	21/10/94	Secondary	unknown
Piura-Saman Grande	Mild	M	3	2, 3	78.71	29/05/94	Secondary	Secondary
San Martin-Rioja	Severe	M	4	2	47.37	13/07/94	Technical (incomplete)	Secondary
San Martin-Tarapoto	Severe	F	4	2	47.37	18/03/95	Technical (incomplete)	Technical (incomplete)
<b>High-achieving children</b>								
Ayacucho-Lucanas	Mild	M	6	None	122.73	12/04/94	University (incomplete)	Technical (incomplete)
Ayacucho-Apurimac	Moderate	F	5	None	100.41	17/01/95	None	Unknown
Lima-San Juan de Lurigancho	Mild	M	6	None	122.73	30/07/94	Technical (incomplete)	Technical (incomplete)
Lima-Villa Maria del Triunfo	Severe	M	5	None	122.73	26/11/94	Technical (incomplete)	Technical (incomplete)
Piura-La Noria, Marvavelica	Mild	F	6	None	122.73	12/04/94	Technical (incomplete)	Secondary
Piura-Saman Grande	Moderate	F	5	None	101.02	19/08/94	Secondary	Secondary
San Martin-Rioja	Moderate	F	5	None	122.73	25/09/94	Secondary	Secondary
San Martin-Tarapoto	Moderate	F	6	None	122.73	24/06/94	Technical (incomplete)	Technical (incomplete)

As can be seen, most of the low achievers had repeated at least one school year, while none of the high achievers had. Five of the eight low achievers suffered from severe malnourishment, while only one of the high achievers did. In terms of the children's family background, there was very little variance in terms of the parents' education – most parents had secondary or some level of post-secondary education.

3 The achievement variable was developed on the basis of three scores. The first relates to the child's reading ability, where if the child could read a simple sentence s/he scored one and zero if otherwise. The second score measures the child's writing ability, where one was assigned to those cases where the children could write a simple sentence and zero to those cases where they could not. The third score measured numeracy skills, where one meant that the child could solve a basic maths operation and zero that s/he could not. The final score was developed using Factor Analysis, which consists in finding a linear combination of these variables to explain the strongest possible variance between them. Once this combination is found the variables are standardised and new variables are developed with the weight assigned in the analysis. The result of this analysis showed only one factor or variable explaining 58 per cent of the variance between the three variables. The weight assigned to each variable was: 0.45 for reading, 0.44 for writing and 0.43 for numeracy.

## DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

For each of the 16 cases semi-structured interviews were conducted with the children and their parents, as well as with their teachers and headteachers. Interview guides were prepared for each kind of respondent. The interviews explored parental and staff perceptions about the links between families and schools; existing forms of parental participation in schooling; respondents' understanding of achievement issues; the quality and forms of support that children get at home with their learning activities and the ways in which schools and parents monitor children's learning. Interviews were carried out over a three week period in October 2005 by a team of four field-workers who had been involved in the first stages of data collection of the Young Lives project. Their familiarity with the sites in which the study was carried out and with some of the selected families considerably facilitated access. Interviews were transcribed and analysed using the widely available qualitative data analysis software, *ATLAS.ti*. Data reduction and analysis proceeded from open to more structured coding, following grounded theory techniques which allow for the identification of analytical categories that are the basis of explanatory developments.

The study offers an initial exploration of family and school links which contributes to understand existing limitations to some of the new policy orientations which promote families' participation in schooling, especially in relation to the positive effects that participation might have in relation to educational achievement. The findings suggest the need to further explore these topics through more extended fieldwork that could involve recurrent interviews, focus groups and especially observations of family-school interactions.

## What do parents understand by participation?

Our key finding was that parents and pupils have poor understanding of educational achievement and how to enhance it. The 'rules of the game' – in terms of what parents and schools should do to support children's achievement – are unclear. Very few interviewed parents, especially those with poorly-achieving children, could specify what their role is in relation to their children's learning process and how they might offer home support. Parents are often surprised when they find out that their children have to repeat a school year, as are the children themselves. The guidance that parents receive from schools about how to make sense of achievement is largely unstructured, leaving most parents to their own devices. In general, this means families with the most resources – parental education levels, time to dedicate to their children and access to computers and learning materials – are best positioned to support their children's learning while marginalised children are left behind. Many poorer parents appear unaware of the future consequences of their children's poor attainment. While some individual teachers have taken initiatives to engage with parents, most schools lack formal mechanisms to support children with low achievement.



## PARENTAL UNDERSTANDING OF ACHIEVEMENT AND CHILDREN'S GRADE PROMOTION

The study suggests the existence of problems in parents' and children's' understanding of achievement issues, related to how they are doing and what kind of support they get at home. Compare, for instance, the two following extracts from interviews with the mothers of one high achiever and one low achiever.

<p><i>Mother, high achiever (San Juan de Lurigancho, Lima)</i></p> <p><b>Do you consider, Mrs. X, that you have some kind of responsibility in relation to your child's achievement in school? What does it consist of?</b>                  If my child achieves well it's because I'm aware of him, if he doesn't achieve it's my fault. I feel guilty, I feel bad when he doesn't do well... if I don't pay attention to him, if I don't support him. If I see that his marks are going down I start thinking myself, I mean I feel bad. I feel worse than him.                  (...)</p> <p><b>How do you think you're complying with that responsibility?</b>                  Being with him, trying not to leave him on his own for so long, helping him, asking him what he needs, what does lack. If we have to study, the two of us study. Sometimes I realize, now that he's in the middle of exams, how he sits or lies down and falls asleep. So I ask him, do you need to study some more? Or is there something you don't understand? So I try to explain it to him again. One teaches them, grows closer to them. It's then that you realize that maybe it wasn't like that for yourself and you become closer to them. With me it wasn't like that so I'll be like that with them, I support them, I'm with them.</p>	<p><i>Mother, low achiever (San Martín, Tarapoto)</i></p> <p><b>How do you think Rosita is doing in school, is she okay or not?</b>                  She's doing so so, she's regular, and I also wonder, I don't know why, let's say, she doesn't get much of her classes, no?                  (...)                  She doesn't get much [of what she does at school].                  (...)</p> <p><b>And Rosita has had to repeat any year?</b>                  Second grade, she had to repeat. But the problem was that she repeated the grade not because she didn't know, she did know, but when I went to register her at school in March, I went to register her in March, and I was surprised when the headteacher told me 'Madame, your daughter is repeating the grade'. Why? I asked him, and he said my daughter hadn't attended the recovery lessons [during the holidays]. So I asked him why, because when they have recovery lessons it should be stated in their report card. Yes that's it, and hers didn't say yes or no, it was blank. So I went to talk to the headteacher and then I came home and told her dad, Rosa will have to repeat the grade. 'Why' he asked me... 'cos she had to take recovery lessons but her report card didn't say so, and the headteacher says she did have to. So I went to the headteacher and he said I'd have to pay 30 soles for her to have recovery lessons... So I asked him why should I pay that when the cost is only 10 soles. And he said that if I didn't pay my daughter would have to repeat the grade.</p>
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The first mother has a clearer concept of her role in her child's learning. She is aware of the importance of accompanying her child, and relates his achievement in school with her own degree of involvement in his education. Indeed, she sees his achievement problems as her own 'fault'. She is able to specify the way in which her involvement with her child's learning should take place: 'being with him', 'asking him what he needs', and 'studying with him'. In the second case, however, the mother cannot specify the causes for her child's low achievement: 'I also ask myself why she doesn't learn much', she says. Data from the 2002 Young Lives survey indicate that her child suffers from severe malnutrition. This might explain her low achievement in school but the mother seems unaware of any possible link. This is highlighted by the explanation she gives about why her child failed a grade: 'she didn't fail because she didn't know', but because she was not well informed about the child's need to attend revision classes during the holidays. Not only is her understanding of what leads a child to achieve well in school vague, but she also appears to be misinformed about school matters. Her views, and misunderstanding, are shared by many other parents of low-achieving children.

*Mother, low achiever (Saman Grande, Piura)*

**The second time he had to repeat a grade, did you go to speak with the teachers?**

Yes, I did all that was possible for him to pass the year, because he knew, he wasn't so little. And also the teachers, they did very bad because at the last minute they took a maths test, and it should be more fresh when they go to [a test]. How could they know from one day to the other?

**So the teacher did a last minute maths test and he failed?**

Sure.

**And this is why you think he repeated the grade?**

Sure.

*Mother, low achiever (San Juan de Lurigancho, Lima)*

**Has he had to repeat some grade?**

It seems to me that he has repeated, I think so. They all repeat over here. First grade, second grade.

*Mother, low achiever (Lucanas, Ayacucho)*

**In previous years did you visit the school as often as you do now?**

Yes, I did go and they told me he wasn't doing well. After a week I went again and he wasn't doing well. Last week I spoke to the teacher, [he said] my son didn't even know what an exam was. But the previous teacher lied to me, he told me yes, yes, yes, I'll send you [his exams]. When I went to the class he told me not right now I'm in a meeting, I can't show you his exams. This year my child knows what an exam is. I've also talked about this with the teachers.

In all three cases one can note inability to explain low achievement – especially in the second interviewee's comment that 'she must have failed a grade... here everyone fails', which shows a very loose knowledge of how the child is doing in school and the reasons for her poor achievement.

Another issue that comes up in these two quotes, as in the previous low achievement ones, is the weak guidance that parents appear to get from schools as to how to interpret their children's achievement. In the first case the mother attributes the child's failing a grade to one single test that the teacher carried out without telling the children; and in the last case feeling that the school doesn't provide adequate information to the parents and children about what they need to do to have better results.

Other testimonies show that lack of understanding of the reasons for grade repetition is widespread:

*Child, low achiever (San Martín, Tarapoto)*

**And you failed this grade... you didn't know until the end of the year... did you think you were going to get into the next grade?**

No

**No?**

I didn't know.

**What grade did you repeat?**

Second

**Second, ok. But when you get your report it always says there if you've failed or if you've passed?**

Nothing.

**It didn't say anything, or you don't know?**

Nothing.

**Do you get to see your report?**

Sometimes.

*Child, low achiever (San Martín, Rioja)*

**Pedro, have you had to repeat a grade?**

Yes

**What grade did you repeat?**

Second

**What happened, tell me?**

(silence)

**You didn't pass?**

Yes

**Tell me, why?**

My handwriting was ugly.

**Who told you this?**

The teacher

*Child, low achiever (Lima, San Juan de Lurigancho)*

**Have you had to repeat a year?**

First grade.

**And why was this, what happened?**

No, it's because the first grade teacher wrote on the blackboard and didn't explain anything, she only asked us to copy.

In the first two quotes the children provide only vague explanations for their low achievement, and they seem unable to make sense of their failure to achieve. The third quote may be actually true but nevertheless places responsibility completely on the teacher.

What these comments suggest is that there are problems in the ways in which parents and children comprehend achievement. Both the children's and the parents' comments suggest that the guidance they receive from schools is weak and unstructured, and does not really help them in making sense of why a child is achieving poorly or what can be done to improve his/her achievement. This highlights the need to study in more detail (through more extended observations and discussions for instance), the specific practices through which schools shape parent's and children's understanding of achievement. What are the factors leading to high or low achievement? How can parents be more supportive of their children's learning?

The mother of the high-achieving child quoted above is one of the few able to coherently analyse her involvement in her child's learning. It is particularly relevant to note her statement about how if her child achieves poorly she feels it is her own fault. This is one of the few cases in which we could find a position that resembles Epstein's (1995) description of 'partnership' models of family school relations in which a child's achievement is seen as a joint home-school responsibility. Few other mothers came up with accounts showing a similarly clear understanding of how parental support for children's learning should take place. Although parents, especially those of high achievers, tend to be aware of the importance of supporting children at home, they do not appear to be able to translate that into concrete activities.

## PARENTAL POSSIBILITIES OF HELPING IN-SCHOOL LEARNING

Parents often appear to be at a loss as to how to understand what their children are learning at school and how to help them at home. Although, schools say they inform parents about their practices, parents often feel that they lack adequate guidance. The following quote illustrates this:

*Parents, low achiever (San Martín, Tarapoto)*

The teacher never tells us anything, she never gives us any information. Sometimes she only gives us maths exercises. But sometimes the teacher is very mean, we don't get a single example from her. Or when she does, we don't know for which course an example is and we have to go ask another teacher to explain it to us.

Here the mother suggests that teachers only communicate with them when children experience problems in school, and she complains that she gets no guidance or examples of how she could help her child with difficult subjects.

A mother of a low-achieving student in Ayacucho also complains about problems in the ways teachers communicate with parents. The child, who has repeated fourth grade, has recently got a new teacher. Both the child's mother and the new teacher suggest that the child is progressing, and it is clear from their accounts that the mother shows interest in learning how to better help her child. They both relate how the mother has asked the new teacher for help:

*Mother, low achiever (Ayacucho, Lucanas)*

I can't help him with the work he gets from school. I go to look for the teacher, to ask him to teach me how I can help my son, yes, so he teaches me, you're going to help him like this, he shows me. I've talked to the teacher. Which method I can teach my son with in order to help him.

*Teacher, low achiever (Ayacucho, Lucanas)*

(...) that's what he told me in the meeting he came to here: I want you to please teach me that subject of combined operation. So I asked her, until what grade did you go to school? Until third grade she said. So if her son's in fourth grade, what can her mother teach him, how can she help him? Now, this year, the lady says that things, the school subjects, have changed a lot from what she studied. So I gave her an alternative. I told her that she could come to school with her son during the afternoons when I'm teaching the kids. You can sit down at the back of the class while I'm explaining, take notes and this will help you to support your child.

The cooperation established between the mother and the teacher is, according to the teacher 'producing improvements in the child's achievement'. The problem, however, is that this kind of support is scarce and unsystematic and not a routine part of schools' and teachers' ways of working. It places time demands on teachers who get no recognition or support from the Ministry of Education for educating parents.

The problems experienced by the child in previous years, however, seem to have been due to the lack of guidance to the mother from the child's previous teacher.

*Mother, low achiever (Ayacucho, Lucanas)*

**Before, in the previous years, did you visit the school like you do now?**

Yes, I did go, and they told me he was okay. After a week I went back and he wasn't okay, even last week I spoke to the teacher... my son didn't even know what an exam was. But the previous teacher lied to me, he said, yes yes yes, I'll send [information to] you. And when I went to the classroom he told me yes lady, I'm in a meeting right now, so I can't show you his exams. And only this year my son knows what an exam is, what a test is. And I've also spoken about this with the teachers.

What this case suggests is that communication between teachers and parents and the guidance that teachers give to parents are not part of schools' institutional strategies to generate family community partnerships, but takes place only when there is a spontaneous combination of parents' and teachers' interests. Unfortunately, this appears to occur only on some occasions. In many cases, however, parents are at a loss as to how to understand what their children are doing in school and how to help them at home.

Moreover, there is also some evidence that parents' difficulties in providing better support for their children at home stems from the lack of guidance they receive from schools about their learning and teaching practices.

*Mother, low achiever (San Martín, Rioja)*

If I don't understand my son's homework I tell him to go to his friends. And right now it's very difficult to understand, it's not like what we were taught, it has changed...

*Mother, high achiever (Piura, La Noria)*

(...) we were taught in one way and students today are taught in a different way, and we cannot help the children with their homework, because we don't know what they're doing.

These two parents mention that now children are taught in a different way from that in which they were taught, and suggest that this is one of the main reasons why they cannot offer them adequate learning support. It is also worth noting that parents do not appear to have any strategies to compensate for their lack of knowledge about school practices: they do not mention going to school to ask for guidance, nor do schools seem to have any strategies to help parents to make sense of current curricular and pedagogical changes, and of the ways in which they could support their children at home. Like in the first case, due to the lack of knowledge and guidance as to how to help their kids, parents often send them out to resolve problems with other kids from the school:

*Sister, low achiever (San Juan de Lurigancho, Lima)*

**When she does her homework, does anyone help her? Or does she do it on her own?**

She does her homework on her own. Some things she asks my sister, or my brother, when she doesn't know, or she looks in books. Otherwise she goes to her friends to ask about the homework she's got, and they solve things between them.

*Mother, low achiever (Villa María del Triunfo, Lima)*

**How do you check her schoolwork?**

For instance, he tells me 'mom, I haven't done my homework because the teacher has explained things very fast, and I didn't copy.' So, since a friend of his from school lives around here, I make him copy his homework so that he's up to date. Otherwise the teacher can review her copybook and give him a bad mark.

*Mother, low achiever (San Martín, Rioja)*

**And does anyone help the kids do their homework?**

They just do it between them.

This appears to be a strategy particularly among the parents of low-achieving children. It suggests that they are the ones who have less resources (i.e. understanding of how to help their children, knowledge of school processes) to help their children themselves.

## WHAT PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IS ABOUT

As noted, the framework established by the new education law stresses parental involvement in schooling. Schools' expectations about parental involvement are often understood in terms of participation in concrete activities for fund raising or improving infrastructure, or for giving parents information through talks about specific issues. The link between such activities and children's achievement, however, is rarely explicit.

The following quotes illustrate how parents often understand their involvement with their children's schools:

*Mother, low achiever (Ayacucho, Lucanas)*

**When asked about how she gets involved in school activities this mother replies:**

We can do an activity, like a picaronada<sup>4</sup>. I go to help, all the mothers get together and we make picarones.

*Mother, high achiever (Ayacucho, Apurímac)*

**How do you participate?**

We do activities with all the school parents.

**And apart from the parents' activities, do you participate in any other way, do you go to school meetings?**

Yes

**Is there any training?**

Yes, they do some workshops for the parents to check the schoolwork.

**Is there any parent schooling?**

Yes, to fix lamp posts, and sometimes there's classrooms to fix.

<sup>4</sup> *Picarones* are a popular form of fried dumplings. A *picaronada* is a party where these are made and sold.

As we will see below, together with participation in specific activities such as the ones that the parents quoted above, the other main form of parental involvement takes place through parental assistance to talks organised by the school about more or less relevant topics, but which are often far from promoting a better understanding of educational processes. The tendency to understand participation in this way is widespread not only in Peru, but all over the region (UNESCO - OREALC 2004). Not only does involvement rarely require parents to give their opinion about school matters, but when they do participate in discussions, the latter are rarely linked to achievement related issues (parents discuss about school events, improving infrastructure, school expenditure, etc.).

## PARENTAL UNDERSTANDING OF PARTICIPATION AND ACHIEVEMENT

Comments from mothers of low-achieving students are revealing:

### Low achievers' mothers

*Mother (San Martín, Tarapoto)*

#### **And when he's had low marks, have you spoken to the teacher, has she talked to you to explain why?**

Yes, whenever we have a meeting I stay with the teacher and ask her about Rosita. She tells me that Rosita needs to put more effort. So I tell the teacher to be very strict with Rosita. That's what I say to her. ... The teacher is very strict. She's very strict because she's a good teacher, and that's for my benefit. Because there's other mothers that as soon as the teacher puts a hand on their kids they complain with the headteacher, or look down on the teacher. Not me. On the contrary I tell the teacher to have a strong hand with my children, not to give them slack, and that's what she does. I tell her to teach them well, and sometimes I tell her not to let them go out for break if they don't work well...

*Mother (Lima, Villa María del Triunfo)*

#### **Mrs. Aide, what do you think is the role of parents in relation to the school, in relation to what kids learn?**

##### **What is your role in relation to the school?**

Behaving well.

##### **Sure, but what does that mean, that you should...?**

... go to the school, to see how he's behaving, how he's doing, if he's behaving well with the teacher or not. So when I go I ask the teacher about how my Johnny is behaving. He's behaving well, she tells me. Ok then if that's how things are. If anything happens you tell me and I'll tell him to behave well. But the teacher tells me he is behaving well.

*Mother (Ayacucho, Apurímac, interview in Quechua with translator)*

#### **Do you think you've got some kind of responsibility in relation to your kid's achievement in school? What does it consist of?**

*(Translator):* She says yes.

##### **What is that responsibility about?**

*(Translator)* She says that, for instance, when he gets a bad mark she goes to the teacher and begs her to let him do the test again, that she gives him an opportunity.

The three quotes illustrate a relation between parents and teachers that could be described as delegative (Driessen *et al.* 2005), and in which parents assume a rather passive role *vis-à-vis* the school. In the first case, the mother almost explicitly describes her responsibility in these terms. She suggests that her role consists in giving the teacher the authority to use a 'strong hand' with her child (the relation to the use of physical force is quite explicit). In the second case, the mother's role is limited to asking about the

child's behaviour, and telling the child to behave well in school. In the third case, the mother describes her role as 'imploring' the teacher to give her child a second opportunity when she has achieved poorly.

These three extracts contrast with some from mothers of high-achieving students:

Mothers, high achievers

*(Lima, San Juan de Lurigancho)*

**Do you think you have some kind of responsibility in relation to your son's achievement in school?**

As a parent, of course I do.

**What is that responsibility about?**

In everything. In relation to his dedication, for instance or I have to check his marks, ask his teachers how he's doing. A parent must always do that, no? Register him at the beginning of the year, and then maybe after a month I go to the school to check what he needs, what are his weaknesses.

*(Lima, Villa María del Triunfo)*

**How do you support your child's school achievement?**

I have to visit the school and work with him. If he tells me there's a meeting or a talk, or work to do. We've had the sports championship, for three days, and I've been with him, I cheered him, and supported him. It's very nice being with him, and they feel good. So I think it's a way of giving him more trust, more self-esteem. I think, no?

(...)

**Do you consider that the school promotes parents' participation?**

Yes, always. They don't do it so often, but when there are activities. The parents also never... they don't participate much, they just send their kids on their own, so that's why there are not so many activities in the school. Before there were things happening more often, but now the parents have become a bit estranged from the school because they cannot participate, and it's just a few of us who participate in the activities.

*(San Martín, Tarapoto)*

We always have meetings with the classroom teachers, they always call us to the sessions to see how the kids are doing. That's why I like this school, because the teachers are concerned.

(...)

we also motivate the teachers in that there always has to be that parent-teacher relationship, so that they can tell us how the kids are doing.

(...)

Well, about the children's achievement, because there are a lot of children who lead a very disordered life, they don't put much dedication to their studies, they don't have their work ready. But in my case it's different. I'm always behind my children.

Before the classes begin I have to buy them everything they need, I'm always with the children, so that they're not lacking anything. I tell them, I didn't study more, I don't want my children to be like I've been, I want my children to come out well.

(...)

the children who don't achieve well are mostly those whose parents are... they don't show much interest, they don't attend meetings.

*(Ayacucho, Apurímac)*

**How should you participate?**

Us? As a parent... well, how they are, asking, meetings...

**Do you consider that you should participate in school activities, in what way would this be?**

Like that, overseeing how her language becomes tamed<sup>5</sup>... yes, participating with the teachers when they call me.

**Why do you think you should do this?**

Because she progresses, if we leave them they don't progress.

<sup>5</sup> This idea of the child's language being tamed when s/he learns Spanish is illustrative of the way in which the mother understands her child's learning process.



In all four cases it is clear that the mothers consider it is important to follow their children's progress in school. They mention things like: 'If we leave them alone they do not progress'; 'participating in activities is good for the child's self-esteem'; 'there has always got to be a relation between parents and teachers so that the latter can inform about children's progress'.

This awareness about the importance of parental involvement for the child's achievement in school contrasts with the way the first parents quoted above are prepared to delegate all responsibility to the school. It should be noted how in these extracts, with the exception of the first one, parental involvement is also seen in terms of participation in specific activities. In the second and fourth cases it still has a rather passive character, i.e. parents going to sports, cultural or information exchange events only when they are called by the school.

The third extract is especially interesting because the mother explicitly mention her expectations about her child's education and her hopes for her daughter to be 'better' than her. It is worth noting that the four older children in this family have all gone on to higher education, two to university and two to technical education institutes. This case was particularly interesting, as the girl whose mother is talking in the extract, gave a very coherent account about her interest in going to university. While some of the other children also mentioned having an interest in attending university, in this case the girl gave very specific reasons that appear to stem from the fact that other members in her immediate family have done well in their studies and their professional lives. This example shows how having a personal aspiration allow students to commit themselves to their studies. One final issue is that in the view of some parents, school meetings and participation in school councils is seen as overly politicised and this is a deterrent for participating more actively in them:

*Parents, low achiever (San Martín, Tarapoto)*

I'm going to tell you, according to what my wife told me (she's the one who goes to the meetings), they've agreed (...) the meetings are about dirty laundry, dirty laundry that is exposed, things that have been stolen... that shouldn't be that way, they should comment things about the children, about how their education is going, no? But they just discuss other things.

(...)

for instance, 15 days ago, in an extraordinary assembly meeting, the parents were called. The agenda was meant to deal with school matters, and then with the third grade teacher. Oh, but, however, the session didn't deal with any of this, it didn't coordinate anything. In the first place, because they started fighting, and they even had to bring in the cops. Never before had something like this happened. The headteacher had to bring a police patrol.

## LIVING CONDITIONS CAN HINDER INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOLING

It is evident that the material living conditions in which many families live are at the root of many problems. Conditions of extreme poverty not only limit children's possibilities of achieving better in school, but also constrain parental capacity to get more actively involved with their children's schooling. The following case shows how many parents are understandably more concerned about day-to-day survival.

*Mother, low achiever (Villa María del Triunfo, Lima)*

**Why does Johnny miss class so often?**

Sometimes there's no money for... since there are some weeks in which my husband doesn't have any work, there's no money to eat. So I tell Johnny, there's nothing to eat, wait a little bit. 'But mom, how am I going to go to school without having eaten, I'm going to be starving at school.' Okay, baby, I'll try anything to get something and make you some food. That's how I have to take him. My husband doesn't have a job. This week, for instance, there's no work, jobs are very scarce. And since he doesn't have a job, what I do, I'd go to work, but since I suffer from headaches, sometimes I get really bad pain, I can't stand it. Sometimes I take pills, but that doesn't calm me.

*Child – explaining why he failed a grade three times and why he often misses school*

(...)

yes, toothache, and sometimes my stomach hurts.

**This week you missed class on Monday and Tuesday didn't you?**

Yes, because my tooth was hurting. But on Thursday and Friday I did go to school.

**And have you been to the doctor?**

No, my mom doesn't have any money.

**That's why you miss class?**

It was hurting very badly.

(...)

I couldn't let my mom and my brother sleep.

My tooth was hurting very badly.

**Do you eat regularly?**

Yes, sometimes I eat.

Because we don't have money, my dad doesn't work, he doesn't have a job.

The quotes refer to a case of a child in Villa Maria del Triunfo, Lima, who is malnourished and has repeated second grade twice. Both the mother and the child talk about the father being unemployed and the consequent lack of food in the household. The two of them also talk about ailments (headaches, tooth aches) which interfere with their involvement in schooling. The case makes one wonder whether getting all parents to actively participate and contribute to their children's education, and getting children to give their opinion about the quality of the education they receive, is realistic. Paraphrasing Charlesworth (2000), we could say that 'the immediate situation' of this woman and child's 'economic position constitutes a horizon within which perception of life [and, by extension, of learning and schooling] takes place' (p.52). The mother and child's possibility of participating in school decisions and of contributing to the improvement of learning opportunities are curtailed by the immediate situation of poverty and hunger in which they live.

The case also illustrates parents' lack of knowledge about the benefits of going to school. The child could have used the free school insurance to have his ailment treated, but the parents apparently had no knowledge about this.

# School teachers and headteachers

## EXPLAINING ACHIEVEMENT DIFFERENCES: THE ROLE OF PARENTAL SUPPORT

Interviews with teachers of low-achieving students show how most teachers relate student's low achievement to family-related issues.

### Teachers of low achievers

*(Lima, San Juan de Lurigancho)*

There are some days when she comes and is attentive, and other days when she feels distraught, her achievement goes down, and that's because of family problems.

#### Because of family problems?

I think that in the economic aspects... I think sometimes she comes without having had lunch. So, anyone who doesn't have lunch on time and comes to school, or eats a minimum quantity, she's thinking about something else, they're tired, exhausted, and their achievement is low.

*(Lima, Villa María del Triunfo)*

#### On which basis do you know his achievement is low?

I think his achievement is low because he doesn't have a very solid home, because the father sometimes doesn't have a job, and the mother has hardly any work, she works at the communal kitchen. And so there's not enough for his nourishment so that he can have a better achievement in school.

*(San Martín, Tarapoto)*

#### Tell me a little more about his achievement

She needs support from her parents at home, maybe that way she can succeed.

#### Ok, so you tell me that Rosa's low achievement has to do with the lack of support from home?

At home also.... they lack... she's also malnourished.

*(Ayacucho, Apurímac)*

The factors that contribute to a child's achievement are these: firstly there'd be the psychological factor, this child, for instance, I think he has some mental retardation, and secondly, there'd be the economic factor, that their parents don't support him with adequate nourishment, that they don't give them an adequate daily food diet.

These teachers suggest that the children's low achievement can be explained by the families' poor economic status. They mention children being malnourished as one of the central causes for their low achievement, as they are too tired at school.

The following extract suggests a different set of problems, more related to parental involvement in the school:

*Teacher, low achiever (San Martín, Rioja)*

Sure, as I'm telling you, his achievement is low, I think, because of his parents' lack of concern, because they leave everything to the teacher, so that the teacher... so that we do as much as we can (...)

The teacher feels that the parents have left him alone to do whatever he can. His criticism reinforces the idea that many parents shrug off their responsibilities to help the learning process. This is reflected in another testimony:

*Teacher, low achiever (Piura, La Noria)*

**Which factors do you think explain his good or low achievement?**

Well, as I told you, basically it's the psychological factors, because a child who doesn't have any affection from his parents is not a child that develops with the same capacities as one who does, that has an impact. Of course the aunt, or the grandparents can give him affection, but it's not the same as the mother.

(...)

They don't (do their homework), no. But I think there are various factors, because sometimes the father hasn't had the opportunity of coming to the school, he doesn't know how to support his child, he will despair, I mean, as a parent one wants the child to improve, no? And seeing that he doesn't develop, they start to beat them...

Here the teacher mentions that the child lacks parental support at home, and suggests that this relates to the fact that the child's parents rarely go to the school. This testimony indicates that parents are often ready to resort to physical violence when they see that their children do not do well in school. The same view comes through in the following extracts:

*Teacher, low achiever (Ayacucho, Apurimac)*

(...) This child is not doing well because of the lack of support from his parents. They shouldn't be so aggressive! The child is truly concerned about his studies, but his parents sometimes put him aside.

*Teacher, low achiever (Piura, Saman Grande)*

**Why do you think he has had to repeat the grade?**

Well, in part because he didn't have support at home, he had gone through family conflicts, violence and, well, that didn't help him to excel. So I think that's where the problem also stems from, because his sister has followed the same road, she also had to repeat school years.

These extracts indicate how teachers explain low attainment in terms of poor economic conditions, malnourishment, and lack of support from parents and corporal punishment for poor performance. They illustrate that there is often a fundamental lack of congruence between the views of families and schools. Parents appear to receive little (and not very adequate) guidance as to how to support their children's learning, while teachers appear to put the blame of achievement problems on home-related factors. While teachers highlight the importance of parental support at home, they do not develop adequate strategies to promote and shape parental involvement.

## SCHOOLS' UNDERSTANDING AND SUPPORT FOR PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

*Teacher, low achiever (Ayacucho, Lucanas)*

**Talking about parental participation:**

For us it should be active, in the sense that... when we say active we mean not only attending meetings, no? I should be active in this way: now that we're trying to start a parental school, we want them to participate in it, we don't only want them to come and listen to talks... talk, talk, that makes the parents tired. In the parental school<sup>6</sup> we also want to give them theoretical talks, but so that they don't get bored, we also want to do other things, like baking cakes, weaving, different things... because they also get tired. So we want to attract the parents and coordinate with other instances so that they can support us.

As UNESCO's report on parental involvement in Latin America suggests, this is one of the main ways in which family participation is understood (UNESCO-OREALL 2004). In the second quote, the teacher refers to one of the other main forms through which schools attempt to promote parental participation in schooling: giving talks for parents on specific issues (nutrition and values being some of the preferred topics). It is worth noting how the teacher perceives that parents tend to get bored, or are simply not interested in attending and then moves on to propose that other more interesting activities should be carried out, like 'baking cakes'. This illustrates the paucity of ideas on how to promote parental involvement and potentially boost children's achievement.

The format of promoting parental involvement in schooling through talks has serious limitations. It wrongly assumes that all parents have the time to go to these talks and that they are, or should, necessarily be interested in attending. The model assumes that the links between family and school can be enhanced in this way, without reflecting on where parents come from (in terms of their interests, culture and previous knowledge) and whether they will be able to make use of the knowledge that is 'transmitted' to them and incorporate it in their child raising practices. There is little reflection – either from parents or teachers – about children's learning processes in school and how families can contribute to them. Parents, in these events, tend to be passive recipients of information about issues the school considers important. They are, however, not allowed to become active participants in the construction of knowledge about how to support their children at home. The model of parental involvement understood as 'participation' seems to overlook the role that families can play at home, and which can also strengthen family-school links - i.e. in terms of the development of a partnership that promotes children's learning and achievement (Epstein and Becker 1982).

Most teachers point to family factors as the main explanation for high or low achievement. When questioned about parental guidance to children's learning, teachers often identify limitations in terms of parents' knowledge and capacities:

<sup>6</sup> Some schools run classes for parents as a way of helping them provide better support for their children.

*Headteacher (San Martín, Tarapoto)*

(...) but because of the parents' lack of knowledge and capacity to discern, because over here we have a very low cultural level, that's why we have our children like we do.

(...)

Because we have parents with incomplete schooling, some of them haven't had a basic education. How could they guide their children? It's very difficult.

(...)

Basically because, as it's usually said, things are brought from home and complemented at school, and that a child's need that isn't covered by the parents simply because of their cultural level, and among other things, because of the work situation they have to cope with.

Our study suggests that although parental support to children's learning at home is perceived as important, the guidance that teachers give to parents as to how to support their children's learning or make sense of achievement related issues is very unstructured – some teachers are better than others at doing this, but whether parents get adequate guidance to make sense of their children's learning experience is largely a matter of teachers and headteachers assuming this as one of their responsibilities. This is reflected in parents' loose understanding of their children's marks in school. Parents report being 'taken by surprise' when they find that their children are asked to repeat a year. When describing the guidance that they provide to parents, teachers and headteachers generally refer to the ways in which they 'instruct' parents on specific issues. This usually takes place through talks on selected topics to which parents are invited (but not always attend). But even this sort of guidance is very irregular, especially in isolated rural schools.

## SCHOOLS' EXPLANATIONS FOR LIMITED PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

As the following teacher suggests, parents rarely go to the school to inquire about their children's achievement.

*Teacher, high achiever (San Martín, Rioja)*

**Have you ever been in a position where a parent has come to you and asked you to show him/her what you'll be working on with your pupils during the year, your programme...?**

No.

**(... ) or shown some kind of interest?**

They ask about the school materials, the copybooks they need, but not other things.

(...)

Nothing, nothing. Maybe because they don't know or have the mentality that the teacher is the only one (responsible for the classroom), for teaching their children.

Like in some of the interviews with parents, teachers also mention that parents find it difficult to help their children with school matters because nowadays they are being taught in a way that differs from the one they were taught in:

*Teacher, low achiever (San Martín, Rioja)*

Parental participation, I think, should be closer... maybe by showing concern, helping them, demanding that they do their homework. And also by giving talks to the parents, through the parental school, teaching them some activities in different areas that they don't understand ... teaching is different now from what it was before. We should tell the parents what's going on, give them some strategies or information about today's way of teaching, so that they can take on that responsibility.

*Teacher, low achiever (Piura, Saman Grande)*

I think, no? That first should come parental training, making them participate, for instance in making materials, teaching materials that will be useful for the children, so that in the end they are more supportive when we ask them to do something, not give money, but making some kind material. And above all train them for teaching. For them it's really difficult to act, because they say, 'I haven't been taught in this way, how can I now teach (my children)?' that's their worry. So, in relation to the parents, we need to make them put more effort in (their children's) education. 'No, no, education is free,' that's what they say, 'and because it's free we shouldn't give more.'

The possibilities for establishing better partnerships between teachers and schools are hindered by the economic and working conditions of many families. This is clearly identified by some teachers:

*Teacher, low and high achievers (Ayacucho, Lucanas)*

I have invited them to the meeting, and what do they say? That they don't have any time that they have many children that they need to take care of their animals. I tell them they should spare some time to be with their children. But they say they have their animals up (in the fields), and that they make a living from that.  
(...)

I've seen that the parents have other responsibilities, and here I think the economy is also important. My pupils are children of parents who don't have many resources, so they're busy working, and I haven't been able to do any activities.

Here in Lucanas I can see that when there's a party they participate or when there are meetings they come in order to avoid being sanctioned. But I can see that the parents who have many children... it's like they're tired. New parents, however, who have only one child, are more active.

*Headteacher (San Martín, Rioja)*

I suggested that they did a parental school, so that they would support the teachers and do joint work, which nowadays has good results. But the parents' different concerns... sometimes they don't sleep at home, and they cannot follow their children's academic achievement. In the first years it [the parental school] did give good results. When I started working as headteacher in this school, I called the parental school, where parents came through their own will. But then it started to become difficult. The parents don't want to attend in spite of that we give them many facilities, even in spite of that they complain that they're not satisfied with the meetings. But, unfortunately, the economic factor is the worse enemy, as it hinders them from receiving continuous training. That's one of the main factors, facing the economic problems so that in that way they can solve some of the children's academic deficiencies.

These quotes indicate how parental involvement is understood in terms of passive participation and indicate the need to think of more feasible ways of getting parents involved in their children's education, bearing in mind how they are constrained by household economic circumstances.

While economic limitations are clearly a hindrance for greater parental involvement many schools do stimulate participation. Indeed, some fine parents who do not attend school meetings:

*Headteacher (Ayacucho, Lucanas)*

Well, parents active participation takes place, firstly, through meetings where we programme some works to do, and we assign responsibilities to each parent, so in a certain time, say one or two months, they have to comply. But there are some parents, most of them, who are disregarding this. So through the authorities we're trying to make them comply with the meetings' agreements.

*Teacher, high achiever (San Martín, Rioja)*

You can see this in the meetings. Anything that we try to do, any activity that will benefit the children, cultural activities, when we ask them [the parents] to support us, they say no, that it's too costly, and they don't participate... only very few times. But if we punish them then they do participate.

**So you fine them?**

Yes, and in that way they do come.

The first quote again shows how parental participation is understood. The teacher is talking about the targets that they put to parents, and which usually imply monetary contributions. Note how the headteacher talks about calling the 'authorities' to make parents comply with the school's demands. This implies that parents have an obligation to make economic contributions to the school, regardless of their economic possibilities. In the second quote, the reference to parental fines is more explicit.

The fact that schools need to fine parents in order to get them to participate in their children's schooling reflects parental attitudes towards participation. This can be explained by the kinds of demands that schools make on parents and their failure to take into account the economic and time constraints preventing greater parental engagement in school. Clearly, many parents do not see their involvement in school as something necessary or relevant to their children's educational attainment.

The stark contrast between parental and school views about parental involvement for learning and achievement highlights the challenges of forging an educational partnership between homes and schools. On one hand, parents appear to lack adequate guidance about how to get involved in their children's education, and especially about how to make sense of their children's progress in school. On the other hand, while schools appear to have a clear view about the importance of parental involvement, they do not count with adequate strategies to guide and shape parents' understanding of their children's achievement. The lack of a common understanding about learning and achievement matters and the role of parents in supporting the children's learning is especially worrying as it is one of the most necessary conditions for the development of educational partnerships between homes and schools (Epstein 1995).

The above discussion also shows how parental involvement in education tends to be seen in terms of participation in activities that, although relevant to improve decision-making processes and increase transparency in school management, are often unrelated to learning processes. Moreover, participation in school-selected activities overlooks what parents can and should do at home to help their children's learning process. As it is understood in these schools, participation requires parents to invest time and often money which they often do not have, and many parents are therefore deterred from getting more actively involved with their children's schooling.



One final point is worth mentioning is the contradictions between parents' and teachers' accounts. The first say that parents do not get properly involved in their children's education, while the latter suggest that they do not get adequate guidance from the teachers. While probably both statements are true in their way, they reflect each group's expectations and perceptions of the possibilities and limitations of involvement. Furthermore, the contradictions contribute to confirm the existing limitations to the establishment of better forms of home-school partnerships. On one hand the lack of reflection on the part of the teachers about how they could help promote better involvement is quite evident. On the other hand, parents blame the teachers for not helping them understand issues related to their children's learning and achievement in school. This clearly calls for the development of strategies to help both parents and teachers develop better forms of collaboration.

### POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper discussed some of the main limitations for parental involvement in education. Moreover, potential ways for achieving the intended impact of the 2003 education law which promotes home-school linkages in order to support children's achievement in school were identified. We have shown that in Peru parents' understanding of achievement is very weak. Many parents acknowledge that they should have a role in supporting their children's academic learning, for instance through homework support or participation in school meetings but do not appear to know how to do so. Many parents say that they do not feel competent to improve their children's learning environment, a perception often shared by school teachers. This lack of understanding of learning and achievement issues makes it hard for parents to offer adequate support and to work in partnership with schools for their children's learning. Lack of parental understanding of achievement-related issues indicates the poor support they receive from schools.

School teachers and headteachers often complain that parents are not interested in their children's education or are unwilling or unable to help them. Our research shows, however, that many families find it extremely hard to fulfil the expectations for participating in school activities, partly because of their time and money limitations but also because they often lack the necessary cultural capital to understand how schools are run and learning takes place.

Many teachers and parents understand parental and community involvement in schooling in terms of participation in specific non-academic school activities – and not in relation to children's achievement. Whereas the law clarifies that participation should relate to the quality of educational practice, parental participation is usually understood by headteachers, teachers and parents as involvement in activities related to school maintenance and improvement. Parents are expected to only be involved in oversight of school expenditures and organisation of fundraising and social events. The focus of parental involvement is taken away from the need to establish meaningful relations – between home and school, but also within the home - that might promote children's learning, motivation and development.

The paper also discussed socio-economic factors which might influence parents' capacity to offer adequate support and to involve themselves in their children's formal education. Parents with fewer resources appear to be considerably less prepared and able to offer adequate support to their children, to get involved in school matters and to take advantage of the opportunities provided by schools – such as information on their children's achievement and free in-school health services. This is in line with other current research which suggests that 'parents from disadvantaged groups experience barriers to communication with the school and, as a result, barriers to cooperation with the school' (Driessen *et al.* 2005: 513).

Although schools may emphasise the role of families in supporting children's learning there is a lack of adequate capacities to shape parental involvement in ways that can have a positive impact on children's learning and achievement. Parental involvement is often understood simply as participation in activities that bear no clear relation to learning and achievement and which many poor parents are unable to get involved in. Epstein's comments in this context 'just about all teachers and administrators would like to involve families, but many do not know how to go about building positive and productive programs and are consequently fearful about trying. (...) educators are stuck, expressing support for partnership without taking any action' (1995: 703).

While we acknowledge that the limited nature of the study makes it hard to derive robust policy implications from it, there are, nevertheless, clear pointers to help policy-makers to gain a better understanding of parental involvement in schooling.

While the 2003 law has created a policy environment that emphasises parental involvement in schooling the links between such involvement and school achievement remain unclear. It needs to be appreciated that family and community involvement in education can ensure better and more transparent school administration while contributing to children's learning and achievement. Involvement should not be confined to participation in designated school activities but through the broader home support that parents can give to their children's learning. It is important to develop new ways to enhance schools' capacities to shape parental involvement, to promote family-school partnerships and bridge discontinuities between home and school. This is especially urgent given the reality that parents seem unaware of what their children are learning in school, what they should learn and the implications for their futures Vega (2005) pertinently notes that parents think that their children are getting an adequate education when they are promoted year after year, they graduate and get an end-of-school certificate. However, they are unaware that schools are not meeting expectations as seen in the National Curriculum. The author therefore highlights the need to 'educate the demand' for educational services, as only when parents become aware of the low quality of the education that their children are getting and of the consequences this will have for their future development, that they will be able to exert the necessary pressure over schools for them to improve.

Addressing inequalities and widening access to opportunities will require focalised policies catering for those families with less cultural and economic resources. Policy-makers and headteachers need to consider ways of giving special support to those families who are less able and less prepared to get involved in their children's schooling.

More research is needed on how to help schools (and other institutions) to promote better parental involvement in schooling. Developing strategies to enhance parental involvement will require better understanding of the ways in which parents construct their knowledge about learning and achievement issues and how schools shape this understanding. Echoing Epstein and Becker, we need to understand 'the kinds of tutoring or supervisory skills all parents can learn quickly. We need to know how effective parents help their children during the relatively short time they often have to spend with them doing school work' (1982: 112).

It would also be important to gain a better understanding of the actual practices through which parental and community involvement in schooling is shaped. This could be through participant observation of teacher-parent beginning-of-year meetings (to see the kinds of indications that parents receive at the beginning of the year); discussion of report cards with parents (to see how they make sense of their children's marks); observation of end-of-term meetings between teachers and parents and observation of school staff meetings to discuss pupils' achievement.

A range of comparative case studies would help to improve understanding and to generate hypotheses. It would be helpful to compare parental attitudes in private and public schools, to compare schools where special programmes are in operation with others that do not and to include children who have dropped out from school. It is important to analyse in more detail the work done by parental associations and by the recently established education councils. These bring together representatives of parents, students, teachers and the headteacher, however, the extent to which they might help to generate changes in the relations between families and schools is still unclear. We do not argue that academic achievement is the be-all and end-all of schooling. However, there are other areas of learning that take place inside and outside of school which are also relevant. These are linked to the acquisition of cultural norms and values. These may have not been the focus of the current study but are nevertheless, important areas of concern for future research into home-school discontinuities.

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