

## VALUES HELD BY PARENTS OF PUPILS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS DUE TO SOCIOCULTURAL BACKGROUND

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of the study was to investigate the values behind the nature and behaviour of parents with children who have Special Educational Needs, and the way they approach their children's schooling. The views of two hundred and sixty-eight parents living in a socially and culturally disadvantaged area, were evaluated using the Hall-Tonna Inventory of Values. The results showed that there are differences in the parents' hierarchy of values according to whether the school they have chosen for their children is inside or outside the area. The principle differences are in the content of some of the priority values selected by each group, and/or in the priority that each group gives to some of the values common to both groups. The implications of how the parents prioritise the values are discussed with regard to their own personal development and the education of their children.

**Keywords:** Values, family education, compensatory education, education

### 1. INTRODUCTION

A number of research projects have identified the impact of sociocultural variables on pupils' progress and how well they adapt academically. Currently, research in this field tends to focus on dynamic-type variables, given that these appear to have a more direct influence on pupils' academic success. Within this group of variables is a child's home learning environment, which is influenced by the attitude of parents towards learning, how much they know about the education system, the emotional atmosphere within the household where the child grows up and the expectations the parents have of their child. A great number of authors highlight the important role played in children's academic development by parents' attitudes, expectations and involvement in their learning processes (Marchesi & Martín, 2002; Huston & Rosenkrantz, 2005; Summers, Turnbull, Poston, Hoffman & Nelson, 2005; Jacobs & Harvey, 2005; Halawah, 2006; Potril, Deater-Deckard, Thompson, DeThorne & Schatschneider, 2006). We could say the same of parenting styles. The type of rules a family establishes, the resources and processes they use to put these rules into practice, and the level of affection, communication and support between parents and children are fundamental factors in personal growth, academic development and the extent to which children internalise values. A number of studies highlight the positive effects of democratic parenting styles on children's education compared to the negative consequences of authoritarian methods (Peregrina, García & Casanova, 2002; Stoll, 2000; Bean, Bush, McKenry & Wilson, 2003; Molfese, Modglin & Molfese, 2003; Kim & Rohner, 2002; González, Holbein & Quilter, 2002), and the studies also note the importance of school-parent relationships (Redding, 2005).

Inextricably linked to the above are other variables associated with academic performance, such as a family's social, economic and cultural circumstances brought about by the parents' socioprofessional and economic background, and the environment and sociocultural resources with which the child grows up. Although these so-called structural variables have been analysed more than any others over the years, they only seem to have an indirect bearing on a child's academic learning (Valle, González & Frías, 2006; Marjoribanks, 2003). Since the 1960s, the socio-cultural background of the family has been highlighted in terms of the important role it plays in children's performance at school, because of the stimulation and options it offers for learning. The present research points to the fact that socioeconomic influences are affected by the family's cultural level, and that this, in turn, is influenced by the family environment in terms of the attitudes, expectations and values the family has regarding the learning process. These factors have a direct bearing on school achievement, as they affect personal issues such as children's motivation and how they perceive themselves (De Miguel, 2001).

This study therefore examines parents' attitudes and values in more detail, and relates them to the way they approach their children's schooling. It is based on an observation made by a neighbourhood association in an area where a special needs education project has been operating for four years. The association noticed that some families decide to send their children to schools outside the area even though the family continues to live there.

Initial attempts to study this phenomenon indicate that, while certain variables connected with family circumstances have some relevance, such as the sociocultural, educational, economic and professional background of the parents, they do not sufficiently explain the phenomenon of parents sending their children to school outside the area where they live. Despite the fact that all these families have similar sociocultural and professional circumstances with similar learning and income levels, only some of them choose to send their children to schools outside the area. We therefore need to look at the different values parents in each of the two groups may have, in order to study more specifically and in more detail how parents' attitudes and values influence whether or not they send their children to school outside their own area (Siles, 2001).

## **2. AIM**

The overall aim of this research is to study the differences in values between the *group of parents who send their children to schools in their own area* and the *group who send them to schools outside the area*.

## **3. HYPOTHESIS**

The results of our observations and a review of the literature enable us to form a number of hypotheses, including the following three which we test in the current study.

1. We can expect parents to prioritise their values differently in terms of where they choose to send their children to school (within or outside their own area).

2. We can assume that the *parents who send their children to school in their own area* have a more authoritarian style of leadership than the *parents who send them to schools outside the area*.
3. We suspect that *parents whose children go to schools in their own area* have a less balanced approach to development than *parents who send their children to schools outside the area*.

## **4. METHOD**

### **4.1. Participants**

The empirical data required for this study were obtained from two samples of parents of pupils aged 12-14 years, chosen from eight schools, four within the area and four outside it. The first sample contained 183 *parents living in the area and with children at school in the area*. The second sample contained 85 *parents living in the area but with children at schools outside the area*.

In each school we selected groups through random sampling, each with a 0.05 confidence level, and with a tolerance level of 0.5 for the first sample and 0.4 for the second. A total of 268 parents took part.

### **4.2. Data collection instruments**

To gather the data, we chose the Hall-Tonna Inventory of Values (Hall, 1994), as it was the most compatible with our objectives in terms of both the theoretical model and the techniques used. We made a few changes to the Spanish language version of the Inventory to make it easier for the parents to understand the content of the questions.

The Individual Inventory of Values used in this research contains 77 questions with four response options (the latest version contains 125 questions), and each of these is assigned a value which must be selected. Each item appears in the form of a statement and, rather than requiring an answer, it asks the person to choose the closest approximation to their circumstances and current behaviour. The Inventory, therefore, is not asking what the respondent would prefer, but the way they can best describe their current situation. In this way, it attempts to extract information from how respondents prioritise their values in terms of the events, behaviour and actions into which they put the most time and effort.

We also used the Group Inventory of Values, a computer program designed by the creators of the model for measuring priority values within groups through a system based on a set of individual points for responses in the above-mentioned questionnaire. The results obtained through this program appear as a group profile. This profile does not give complete or direct information about the group, it only allows us to extract a basic hierarchy of values which indicate behaviour, but which require subsequent interpretation and processing on the part of the researcher, who will have been briefed on the system beforehand. The data is only ultimately understood and clarified when the group reflects on

the questions generated by the profile in order to understand its values in detail and consider options for future personal development.

### **4.3. Procedure**

To collect our data, we chose to conduct interviews based on the Inventory of Values. The people responsible for each pupil were interviewed in all 268 families. In each case, the interviewer read the question to the interviewees and then marked on the questionnaire the option they had chosen.

### **4.4. Data Analysis**

The information gathered through the Individual Inventory was processed using the Inventory's own computer program for analysing the data.

The information in this group profile is divided into four sections: table of values, graph and table showing leadership data, skills, use of time and type of activity, and priority values. These four sections illustrate the different angles from which the profile and values are analysed. The values from the first three are considered from the point of view of development and how it manifests itself in behaviour. The priority values, on the other hand, analyse the relationship established between the various priority values and the overall trajectory they follow, illustrating whether each combination favours or impedes development.

## **5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The empirical results are extracted from the quantitative and qualitative analyses applied to the data generated by the profiles for each of the two groups of parents.

### **5.1. The table of values**

If we look at Table 1 which lists the values that exert the greatest influence on the day-to-day conduct of the parents in each group (categorised as baseline values, current ideals and future aspirations), we can see that the differences between the groups lie in the content and/or priority assigned to the values by each group. If we compare these priority values, we find significant differences between groups in terms of their baseline needs, and less marked, but nevertheless substantial differences in the most common ideals and aspirations underlying the day-to-day behaviour of the parents.

With regard to baseline values or needs, for *parents whose children go to schools in their own area*, personal survival is a priority, whereas parents *whose children go to schools outside the area* go beyond individual survival and are more concerned with social and personal development. For the parents *whose children go to school in their own area*, survival means having the ability to fulfil physical human needs by acquiring skills which guarantee their security in the outside world. For *parents whose children go to schools outside the area*, however, survival means having the ability to develop as an individual.

This provides clear evidence that *parents whose children go to schools outside their own area* have a higher level of personal development.

PARENTS WHOSE CHILDREN GO TO SCHOOLS IN THEIR OWN AREA N= 183		PARENTS WHOSE CHILDREN GO TO SCHOOLS OUTSIDE THEIR OWN AREA N= 85	
<b>Baseline (baseline needs)</b>			
<b>Value</b>	<b>Number of times selected</b>	<b>Value</b>	<b>Number of times selected</b>
<i>Goals</i>		<i>Goals</i>	
Family/belonging	650	Family/belonging	311
Awe/wonder/destiny	218	Awe/wonder/destiny	95
Security	212	Self-esteem	95
Self-esteem	170	Security	79
<i>Means</i>		<i>Means</i>	
Food/warmth/shelter	197	Politeness/hospitality	96
Patience/resistance	186	Patience/resistance	93
Rights/respect	166	Rights/respect	93
Survival	151	Tradition	78
<b>CURRENT (current ideals)</b>			
<i>Goals</i>		<i>Goals</i>	
Equality/freedom	450	Equality/freedom	191
Competence/confidence	225	Competence/confidence	113
Service/vocation	216	Play/entertainment	105
Play/entertainment	177	Service/vocation	79
<i>Means</i>		<i>Means</i>	
Authority/honesty	294	Health/well-being	140
Health/well-being	289	Authority/honesty	139
Productivity	212	Efficiency/planning	130
Efficiency/planning	205	Sharing/listening/trust	124
<b>FUTURE (Future aspirations)</b>			
<i>Goals</i>		<i>Goals</i>	
World peace	241	World peace	136
Being yourself	140	Being yourself	81
Art/Beauty	131	Privacy/solitude	68
Privacy/solitude	126	Appearance	57
<i>Means</i>		<i>Means</i>	
World justice	264	World justice	111
Justice/social order	220	Justice/social order	95
Simplicity/play	181	Sharing responsibility	87
Sharing responsibility	179	Ethics/responsibility	78

We showed that the *parents whose children go to schools in their own area* are more concerned with ensuring they have basic confidence and can take care of themselves physically, and that the *parents whose children go to schools outside the area* are more concerned that they should be self-confident and able to take care of themselves both physically and emotionally. Taking this data into account, and given that high self-esteem is heavily influenced by the level of emotional care the child receives at home (Warash & Markstrom, 2001; Alonso & Román, 2005), we suspect that the children who go to schools

outside their own area have higher self-esteem than those who go to schools within the area. This hypothesis may be worth testing in future studies.

For the group of *parents whose children go to schools in their own area*, food and physical protection have to be taken care of before they can think about any higher aspirations, and this could be a source of limitation, raising barriers to personal growth within this group of parents, and consequently also for their children. On the other hand, for the group of *parents whose children go to schools outside the area*, important aspects of personal development are not just physical needs but also emotional care, polite, respectful behaviour and a sense of belonging, things which develop self-esteem. As a result, these aspirations are also important to their children.

In terms of “current ideals” or the everyday ethos parents live with, one of the differences between groups is that the group of *parents whose children go to schools in their own area* attributes more importance to confidence in their own ability to make a positive contribution to society than it does to rest and leisure, in contrast to the group of *parents whose children go to schools outside the area*. Perhaps this difference in priorities reflects the fact that the *parents whose children go to school outside the area* are anxious for their children to acquire personal and interpersonal skills in all aspects of their development.

A particularly important difference between the groups can be seen in one of the ways the parents said they can best achieve their most immediate goals. We discovered that the *parents whose children go to schools in their own area* spend part of their day looking for meaning and justifying themselves by pleasing people they consider important, such as their children. The *parents whose children go to schools outside the area*, on the other hand, spend more time looking for personal fulfilment, as shown by the high priority they give to sharing, trusting and listening. As Rigo (2002) points out, many parents believe that the greatest gift they can give their children is giving them everything they want, such as sophisticated toys, etc., when we know that these have little effect on personal and academic development processes if they are not supported by emotional care, quality time, communication and trust, effort and the development of self control. This disparity clearly shows that the *parents whose children go to schools outside the area* have a higher level of personal development than the *parents who send their children to schools in their own area*.

Finally, where future aspirations or values are concerned, there are two important differences between the groups in terms of the substance of their values. On the one hand, *the parents who send their children to schools outside the area* attribute greater importance to the ability to experience personal well-being than *the parents who send their children to schools in their own area*. Another considerable difference in their aspirations is that, while *the parents who send their children to school in their own area* consider it important to appreciate beauty and art, *the parents who send their children to schools outside the area* give a higher priority to an ability to be sociable and get on well with people.

We can highlight two differences in how each group considers that these aspirations can best be fulfilled. Compared to the *parents who send their children to schools in their*

*own area, the parents who send their children to schools outside the area* place greater importance on having the skills for sharing responsibility. The other difference is that the *parents who send their children to schools outside the area* hope to be able to act in accordance with their own moral principles, while the *parents who send their children to schools in their own area* aspire to making everything as simple as possible and being able to distance themselves from the material side of life.

## **5.2. Development Cycle and Leadership Style**

If we compare the development cycles or world view of the group of respondents, we note that the core group from both samples seems to be immersed in a transitional cycle which the authors call Institutional/Use of initiative. This means that these parents are often presented with the dilemma of choosing between acting decisively and fulfilling the aims of institutions, or remaining true to their principles and acting on their own judgement. It is difficult for them to choose between these two world views as they are less inclined to think for themselves. This makes it difficult for them to make decisions, and they will communicate this trait to the people around them, including their children. This is why the *parents who send their children to schools outside the area* attribute such importance to being able to act according to their own principles and share responsibility, as these skills will help them to understand things happening around them without being concerned that they won't be able to understand them. This will make it easier for them to make decisions and be accountable.

Because they live with ethical considerations such as these, the average parent has a relaxed style of leadership or way of influencing others, tending, in fact, towards a *lack of leadership* or “laid back” attitude. There are, however, important differences between the groups. The group of *parents who send their children to schools in their own area* prefers to be influenced by institutional requirements, demonstrated by their need to please others, whereas the *parents who send their children to schools outside the area* try to be less dependent on institutional values and be more assertive. This is highlighted by their interest in interpersonal communication, acting according to their own principles, the ability to get along with people and share responsibility and the capacity to be at ease with themselves. In fact, there were 3.4% less parents with a relaxed attitude in the *group which sends their children to schools outside the area*. Allowing children to do as they wish, and giving into them easily is indicative of a relaxed/negligent style (Torío, Peña & Rodríguez, 2008). Parents' tendency to give in to their children encourages them not to make an effort. Two-way communication, however, is indicative of a democratic learning style (Chao, 2001; Winsler, Madigan & Aquilino, 2005), while a lack of encouragement to join in the conversation points to an authoritarian style (Belsky, Sligo, Jaffee, Woodward & Silva, 2005). Parents with a relaxed/negligent attitude tend not to have rules precisely so that they do not have to enter into dialogue with their children, as rules involve conversing with their children and keeping an eye on them.

In this sense, we can show that the *parents who send their children to schools in their own area* have very little ability to influence others as the ethos behind their actions is clearly oriented towards achieving other people's goals, including their children's. The *parents who send their children to schools outside the area*, however, enable and support,

even if it is not easy, which means that they begin to test their own ability to influence others, and consequently their ability to influence their children.

### **5.3. Skills, use of time and type of activity**

By skills, we mean those the parents in the sample use to achieve their aims. These are interpersonal skills (connected with independence), and initiative and skills involving the system, such as understanding how the law affects them personally, mutual support and cooperation. In other words, these are skills they need to be able to develop.

In this sense, the group of *parents who send their children to schools outside the area* demonstrate interpersonal skills such as an ability to express themselves, share, listen, get along with others, take care of themselves physically and emotionally, behave with courtesy and respect and be respected by others, and accept others, meaning they themselves are also accepted. In addition, they have skills related to the system, such as the ability to recognise the importance of tradition, commitment to a personal value system and sharing responsibility. Although sharing responsibility also comes into the priorities of the group of *parents who send their children to schools in their own area*, they attribute less importance to it than the *parents who send their children to schools outside the area*. This makes sense, as sharing responsibility requires living with a set of personal values, something which does not feature strongly in the group profile for these parents.

The *parents who send their children to schools outside the area* have more interpersonal and system-related skills than the *parents who send their children to schools in their own area*. Nevertheless, the low percentage of each type of skill in the overall group of parents brings into question whether they are developing their skills adequately.

In terms of how parents in the two samples spend their time, their lifestyle involves a certain balance between the time spent on work and well-being and the time reserved for leisure and relaxation. In the *group of parents who send their children to schools outside the area*, there is not much difference between these two categories. However, if we take a closer look at the responses from each group of parents, some thought may need to be given to the quality of the time dedicated to relaxation and leisure, especially in the group of *parents who send their children to schools in their own area*.

When it comes to the way in which the parents interact with their children, activities tend to be partly normative, which indicates that the parents feel comfortable with conforming to convention. In another sense, however, there are important differences between the groups. The *parents who send their children to schools in their own area* tend towards family-oriented activity, and this is where their personal development takes place. The *parents who send their children to schools outside the area*, on the other hand, focus on an interdependent and cooperative approach to life's problems, particularly at family level.

### **5.4. Priority values**

When we analyse the relationship between the three basic needs and the way the parents consider they can best be met, we find that the *parents who send their children to schools in their own area* tend towards less balanced approaches to development than the *parents who send their children to schools outside the area*.

In terms of how the parents prioritise their aspirations, we once again find that their hopes do not correspond to reality. The future is more of an ideal than a genuinely motivating force. They see it from a point of view of cooperation and interdependence, but they will not be able to use their personal skills and talents for helping humanity or promoting basic human rights if they have not developed adequately as individuals.

The problem lies in the fact that the parents pay insufficient attention to personal development because of family pressure. The group of *parents who send their children to schools in their own area* add to this the burden of such basic necessities as survival, and material or emotional security, paying little attention to self-esteem. Moreover, the skills linked to imagination or a knowledge of the system, which are required to bring into play the values the parents selected, are poorly developed in the group of parents themselves. This suggests that they would like to go far but do not have the skills required to find ways of doing so.

If we combine the values which appear most frequently in the responses given by each group of parents, it becomes clear that a great deal of energy which could be spent on individual activity is going into “helping the family get on in life”. This is jeopardising personal development, especially for those *parents who send their children to schools within their own area*. These parents spend their lives concerning themselves with their family and their family’s needs, and ultimately cannot respond to them adequately. For the *group of families who send their children to schools outside the area*, this is because they need a greater level of self-confidence, and for the *group who send their children to schools within their own area* it is because they also need to consolidate basic needs such as food, housing and self-esteem.

In terms of a *linear relationship between aspirational values at each end of the scale*, we find that the parents’ immediate concern is enjoying good relations with others, largely within the family, although *the group of parents who send their children to school within in their own area* are more inclined to see this as more important.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The results of the research pose a series of general questions, and in addressing them we consider not only the overall interpretation of the main results, but also the limitations of the theoretical and methodological frameworks within which they are based. We also make recommendations for future research in this field on the basis of the experiences from this study.

In terms of our methodology, perhaps one of the most important contributions of this study is that it was approached from the point of view of one of the most neglected variables in the field of education, the values underlying how parents behave and act, and

how these affect the way they approach their children's schooling. The best methodological decision was to approach the subject using the thought-provoking, but complex Hall-Tonna Model of Values.

As we suggested in the first hypothesis, there is a difference in the priorities the parents' attribute to their values in terms of the location of the school they choose for their children.

One of the most striking differences between the groups is in the way they describe how they meet the needs of their most important priority, the family. The *parents who send their children to schools in their own area* meet their family's needs through physical care, food and physical presence and protection, whereas the *parents who send their children to schools outside the area* are more exacting in how they meet these needs. This partly involves a broader sense of the terms "care", "food and instruction", "physical presence", polite and respectful behaviour and acceptance, and partly involves cultural legacy.

There was a marked difference in how important the groups considered self-esteem. The *parents with children at schools outside the area* placed self-esteem in second place only to the family.

There are significant differences between the two groups of parents in terms of their levels of development. The group of *parents with children at schools outside the area* have a higher level of personal development than the *parents whose children go to schools in their own area*. This is confirmed by the fact that the group of *parents whose children go to schools in their own area* is looking first and foremost for security, meaning and self justification by pleasing others, where the group of parents whose children go to schools outside the area prefers to do this by self affirmation. Furthermore, the *parents whose children go to schools in their own area* have a more balanced approach to development than the *parents who send their children to schools outside the area*, as we suggested in the second hypothesis. The leadership style of the whole sample of parents, and particularly *the group whose children go to schools in their own area* seems to be a bureaucratic model in terms of decision-making. This is because their ethos seems to be determined by the family and belonging to the family, as well as by planning and productivity. These are fundamental features of the development cycle mentioned above (Family/Institutional), as opposed to values pertaining to confidence in one's own abilities, serving others, planning and being assertive, which are characteristic of the cycle to which the bulk of the parents in both groups belong (Institutional/Initiative). This situation is particularly noticeable in the group of *parents who send their children to schools in their own area*, in keeping with the third hypothesis, due to the burden of such basic needs as physical survival and physical and emotional security, and because of the low incidence of self-esteem.

The most important similarity is the emphasis on family and the fact that belonging to the family comes first for both groups. However, there is a very marked difference in how they see the need to experience equality and freedom, which is the second general priority.

In short, taking into account that the differences in priority and/or content between the two groups of parents are to be found in the values self-esteem, security, interpersonal communication, mutual respect, passing on cultural legacy, physical protection, confidence in abilities, creative relaxation and recreation, satisfying others' needs, planning, personal well-being, capacity for getting along with people, sharing responsibility, freedom to use the imagination, personal enjoyment and acting on principles, it would be interesting to consider whether there is any relationship between each of these values and the personal and academic development of the children. We have therefore provided a basis for studying in more detail the impact of family life on children's academic progress and how well they adapt to learning. The main contribution of this work is therefore that it could be the starting point for defining the real influence parents and families have on personal and academic development in humans. This, at the same time, could contribute to an interesting and innovative form of positive intervention in better parenting processes.

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