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The Family Concept in Spain: Textbooks and Students' Conceptions

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Abstract: This article is concerned with the concept of family at the stage of Early Childhood Education in Spain. The assumption under investigation is that textbooks printed in Spain do not provide an adequate treatment of family, and students better represent an abstract idea than their own circumstances. The methodological approach adopted includes an assessment of family conception through a questionnaire to 118 students between 4 and 5 years old, and a qualitative analysis of six of the most representative publishers in Spain. The need of a deeper and adequate treatment of the family concept at school emerges as the main conclusion of this research.

Keywords: Family, Textbooks, Images, Early Childhood Education, Students

Framework

THE FAMILY AS an institution has suffered fast and deep transformations in the last decades. They are characterized by instability in the relationships between family members, as well as the progressive reduction in the number of members in it. In the last quarter of the 20th century the patterns of family formation and dissolution across Europe have been altered (see Bures, 2009). Family size is declining, while divorce rates and the number of extramarital births are rising. "Lone parenthood, one-person households, unmarried and same-sex cohabitation, and reconstituted families, became more common and more socially acceptable living arrangements." (Hantrais, 2004, p. 8). The aim of this paper is how the family concept is treated in the Early Childhood Education. By doing so, the research bases on two lines: the students' conception and the curricular materials. The hypothesis is that curriculum materials of Early Childhood Education deals insufficiently with such a significant topic. Besides, textbooks do not depict the current social context featured by the profound modifications of couple stability and the family members' relationships. Furthermore, the idea of family that Early Childhood students have is ambiguous and does not often match with their experience, which leads us to defend the need of a didactic approach of this concept at this educational stage.

The article begins by enumerating some of the relevant literature about the family concept, which shows the complexity of such a social construction. Then, we focus on the methodology followed in the research, with a description of the data, which are coded and processed with a statistical outlook. Afterwards, the empirical data are commented from a dual perspective, that is to say, from a didactic approach to the textbooks and the analysis of the students' conceptions. Finally the discussion brings the results and the conclusions reached, along with the future lines that this research supposes.

Family is a worldwide used concept, although there is not a consensus about its definition. Levin & Trost (1992) suggest: “when teaching about family matters, it is essential to be aware of the apparent contradiction between personal perspectives and ‘scientific knowledge’” (p. 348). The authors state “the concept of family is not just one thing”, it depends on the subject who defines it. Rodrigo & Palacios (1998) understand the family concept in an open, flexible and inclusive way, which means a union of stable coexistence with people who share a common project of life, with emotional and intimate relationships. The family is a reference for the identity of individuals because of the protection, assistance and commitment that this idea involves.

There are different types of families: nuclear (parents and children), extended (encompassing other relatives), single parent households (only father or mother and a child), or stepfamily (is the family one acquires when a parent enters a new marriage, whether the parent was widowed or divorced). The nuclear family is the most used definition, although since 1998 the word married is left out in the United Nations recommendation, which specifies:

A family nucleus is defined in the narrow sense as two or more persons within a private or institutional household who are related as husband and wife, as cohabiting partners, or as parent and child. Thus a family comprises a couple without children or a couple with one or more children or a lone parent with one or more children (United Nations, 1998).

The learning of this social concept begins in the pupils’ homes, where they spend most of their time. Hirschi (2005) said that young children used two principles to construe the meaning of kinship terms. The first one is the expectation that a group of individuals that is interrelated in some basic, predictable, and enduring way. The second one, children rely on certain patterns of association in constructing the family meanings.

The family plays a crucial role in learning mechanisms and it is a keystone in the process of knowledge, skills and values transmission. Hence “children who experienced higher quality parenting styles (emotional and autonomy support) during infancy and early childhood were more likely in first grade to have greater academic competence, better social skills, and better relationships with teachers and peers than children experiencing poorer quality parenting.” (Stright, Gallagher & Kelley, 2008, p. 193). That is why it is needed to deal with this concept at school and the essential collaboration between educators and families. In following this assumption this paper focuses on the treatment of family concept in Early Childhood Education by analyzing school textbooks, assessing its contents and images. Likewise, the student’s family understanding is pivotal in this research in order to compare such assumption with the textbook’s representations and students’ own experiences.

Regarding to handbooks, Martínez Santos (1987) proposes an assessment model based on the theory curriculum, keeping in mind diverse didactic criteria, namely: adequacy of contents at the level of student development, scientific update, coherence between objectives and methodology, realism and precision, alteration and simplicity in the use of the language and objectives of the illustrations and quality. It has to be taken into account the analysis of textbook pictures because of its help in the process of learning. In this sense, it can be noted the often inexistence of them in such books. Villafañe (1996) indicates every image is a model of the reality, and he establishes a scale of iconicity to determine which level of

reality the picture offers. This scale goes from degree 1 (not figurative representation), to 11 (natural image).

About the concept of family in childhood, there are some studies relevant for our research. González, Hidalgo & Moreno (1998) did conduct a comparative analysis between different European countries to study the characteristics of family contexts on four-year-old children. The study emphasized a profile of Spanish family marked by the diversity, or inequality, in terms of resources, lifestyles and stimulation provided to children. There is also a diverse role of fathers and mothers as agents of development of their children, leading to inequities in the academic child life.

Simón, Triana & Camacho (2001) explores the creation of social representations in the human being, pointed out family as a social organization learnt since the early childhood. By studying the evolution of family concept, the research reveals dissociation between the explicit and implicit knowledge in the early years of life. There is an approximate idea of family because knowledge is still being acquired, so it allows an educational intervention to incorporate alternative dimension to the concept.

Adame & Donoso's research (2001) seek to enrich the teaching learning process with qualitative and quantitative analyses of family features, in children among 5 to 11 years old. The conclusions show that: a) the age does not influence within the same level, but it does influence at the Early Childhood Education and Primary Education stages. As children grow they represent family features better; b) the living in a family home does not influence in childhood students; c) when representing by pictures the family concept, boys have fathers as reference while girls have mothers; d) children's pictures in Primary Education clearly represent the family, whilst a 46% do not draw even the complete family in Childhood Education; e) just a 14% of the students draws the family (father, mother and sons) in Early Childhood Education stage, although almost a 45% live under that conditions; f) the socio-cultural environment does not affect the construction of the family concept.

Data and Method

To carry out the research there were analysed eighteen textbooks of Early Childhood Education (3 to 5 years old students). There were not just observed the pedagogical approach to family concept through contents but also pictures. Parallel, it was elaborated a survey among 118 students (4 to 5 years old) in order to know whether actual curriculum materials give enough and adequate treatment to family.

The textbooks taken into account were from *Edebé*, *Everest*, *Santillana*, *SM*, *Algaida* (*Anaya*) and *Edelvives*, the most widespread publishers in Spain as Gimeno notes (2000, pp. 29-30). The books were edited from 1996 to 2004, and they are widely used by teachers consulted in the research. A questionnaire, validated by a workgroup that allowed coherent criteria, was designed to analyse the textbook didactic content and their images. Each book has been reviewed by two people (double assessment) to avoid biases in interpretation. The questionnaire covers: a) technical data, namely: publisher, educational level, authors, year and edition place. And it has specially been taken into account whether there are specific didactic unit about the family or not. Likewise, it has been sought if family contents appear in other units; b) curricular items: didactic objectives, contents, methodology and evaluation, and c) information about the family pictures, by having into account those that have at least an adult and a child in a context of familiar relationship. Images have been classified between

those that refer to objectives and contents and those which are merely used as an illustration without any pedagogical purpose. Besides, two large types of contents have been considered: formal and conceptual ones. Among the first, information about numbers and types of images (pictures, drawings, colours...), size of the familiar picture, real or childish representation, etc. Regarding to conceptual aspects, it has been paid attention to family representation, that is to say, if the approach assigns stereotypes to gender, ethnic condition, etc. or by contrast, there are family pictures with no roles preconceived.

About the survey on the student's conceptions, the universe covers 118 children -62 boys and 56 girls- 39 aged 4 (33.1%) and 79 aged 5 (66.9%). They attended to three different schools in Murcia (Spain) having similar environment: suburbs with short distance away from the centre, a medium-low cultural level and a population that mostly works in the services sector. In order to know the pupil's family situation, the questionnaire began with a collective activity in which the teacher guided a debate –it was recorded- with questions such as: “Who lives at home with you?” “Do you know what a family is?” “Who are the members of your family?” “Do you know other families?” “Are all the families just the same?” “Are all the people living in your house from your own family?” “Do fathers and mothers always live in the same house?”. Afterward, the pupils drew in a piece of paper a family under the epigraph “*your family*”. The pupils had a personal interview to explain what she or he drew, and also to answer a few questions. The data was recorded and registered on paper. Finally some information was gathered from official records given by parents in the registration of their children at school (family structure, number of children, order in the family, etc.). The analysis and the valuation have been not only qualitative but also quantitative. The data analysis was coded and processed with SPSS software pack. An exploring analysis was done in order to find inconsistencies or errors in data entry. After cleaning the data and elaborating frequency tables for each one of the variables, they were crossed to detect associations among them and also to check the level of the significance by creating contingency tables and signification tests. Also, an analysis of multiple correlations is done by Homals module, allowing finding a reduction factor to explain the distribution of the cases on several variables (see Levy and Varela, 2003). It was considered as independent variables: a) the academic level, publishers and if it was included a specific didactic unit referred to family in textbooks; b) the student age and gender.

Empirical Findings

Didactic Approach of Textbooks (Content and Images)

The results show that most textbooks barely deal with the family concept. The majority of them tend to present the contents about family in didactic units related to Christmas, the first school day or the house (“Family Christmas”, “First school day”, “The garden of my house”, “The house”, etc.) Just in six of eighteen books there is a specific teaching unit devoted to family. Furthermore, the textbooks show that:

The *didactic objectives* are enough and adequate to the level they are addressed/aimed to. They treat the current family social-concept and they pretend to promote gender equality. The analysed textbooks can be classified according to three ideological family types: a) Conservative. It designs a family in which images and texts appear with a traditional structure: mother, father and children. Both the father and mother represent the traditional roles to each

gender. The mother does the housework, the father appears sited and reading, and the children clearly reproduce the established roles of gender. In some occasions grandparents appear in it. b) Progressive. Images and texts do not reproduce those traditionally gender duties. Actually, both parents appear doing the housework or in outdoor activities. Children cannot observe differences in gender roles. c) Eclectic. The term eclectic is used to design the middle position between both the conservative and the progressive types.

Textbooks face family matters from an ideological approach (43.75%), pointing out that the 37.5% has a progressive perspective and 18.75% a conservative one. In none of the six textbooks that contain a specific teaching unit about the family the conservative view appears. In addition, those books destined to aged 4/5 pupils score higher than those for younger children in every item established to evaluate the texts.

Contents. All the textbooks include the three different types of contents (concepts, procedures and attitudes). However they do not reflect adequately the different types of families properly. The nuclear family appears in eight textbooks, along with the extended family in two of them. Just in one book all the types are depicted, even the single-parent one. Textbooks which include a specific didactic unit about the family show a good correspondence between contents and objectives, but better achieved in 5 years old pupils' books. That is to say, there are enough contents to reach the objectives along with a plural vision of family types. In the other hand, textbooks intended for 4 year old students get their higher scores in insisting equality between genders, along with a major balance among the three types of contents. The worse rated textbooks were those for 3 year old students.

Methodology and activities. The most positive evaluations are obtained in methodologies that favour cooperation activities among students, and those based in motivating activities which are adapted to student circumstances. In that issue, it does not matter whether family concept appears as a specific didactic unit or not. Again textbooks for 5 years old students are better valued than those for 4 or 3 years old.

The assessment. It is the worst curricular items in all analysed books. The assessment is always summative and not formative. But, in any case, there is much more coherence in those textbooks which include a specific family unit. Even more, they bring along guidance for evaluating objectives and activities. In that case the better valued books are those for 5 year old students followed by those for 3 years old.

Images. There were analysed 4175 images in 18 textbooks evaluated from which only 198 can be related to family approach, although only 83 of those images have an explicit didactic treatment and correspond to specific family contents. The other 115 images are just family illustrations, that is to say, images with a decorative or emotional purpose unable to be considered as information source. The majority of the images used to depict families are childish forms (61%), almost the double of real pictures (39%). This tendency to use childish illustrations is led by drawings (96.4%), followed by photographies (2.6%), and other techniques (1%). Whole page images are preferred (65.5%), instead of quarter of a page (15.1%) or half pages (11.5%). Small illustrations are barely chosen (7.8%). Coloured illustrations area abundant, being testimonial black and white ones (2.6%).

Again, nuclear family is the model most depicted (51%). Only an 24.7% of the images are single-parents. The extent to which the presence of grandparents appears along with parents allows us to talk about extended families (17.2%). Anyway, the average matches with the situation of Spain, even in the number of children. Family pictures with one or two children are the common illustrations (83.9%), among them a single families leads (44.9%)

to two children families (38.4%). The images represent oftener males than females as family members such as son, daughter, grandfather or grandmother. Mother and father are represented in the same frequency, and it is generally avoided gender roles. Other members such as cousins, relatives, friends or pets could be included in drawings and pictures. The images illustrate outdoor scenes, mainly urban (33.8%) while 17.7% are in rural area, but almost half of the scenes are indoors, being at home the most popular ones with 98 examples (49.5%). It is interesting to point out that the elements which are parts of children’s environment are, in this sequence, furniture, household objects, toys and children books; notebooks, newspapers and stationary items; and also pictures or handbags. In a few cases, family is represented only by animals (2.5%), animals and people (3.5%), but, as it can be supposed, the 94% of the images about family members are just people.

From a conceptual scope is not just taken into account the visual items but also the treatment and the images interpretation, as well as the objectives and contents included in teachers’ guide books. The family model represented has a fashioned look and it belongs to Western middle-class. The 69.2% represent current families, 21% has a fashioned aspect and only in 8.6% of the cases can be said from other epochs, among them the Holy Family. As it said, by focusing on the objects and material goods, the 90.4% belongs to middle-class, in a few cases families seem to be lower-class, and just once an upper-class is depicted. The Western European cultural model is represented in the 98%, of the images, a South American family appears once, as well as a sub-Saharan family. Regarding to disabled persons, the images represent them in the 7.1% of the family pictures, being only the latter data according to the Spanish context.

The analysis of the images confirms that there is a conventional or gender discrimination treatment in 26.8% of the cases. Considering the activities in the pictures, it can be said that the 70% of the duties done by different family members has gender bias (table 1). So, when quantifying the housework (to do the cooking, the cleaning, the washing up, the ironing, the shopping, the mending, the hanging up, setting the table...), there are women those duties in a greater extend doing those duties, much more mothers than fathers, more daughters than sons and much more grandmothers than grandfathers. Nevertheless, illustrators are starting leaving gender roles from their images, and it is already likely to see fathers doing the ironing or making the beds. However, women keep on leading the family cares tasks, and it is interesting to note that sons receive much more cares than daughters.

Table 1: Tasks Performed by the Different Family Roles

	Father	Mother	Son	Daughter	Grandfather	Grandmother
Stroke, walk	9.7	5.3	7.3	12.6	13.8	9.5
Observe, look	23.9	12.1	16.8	5.8	3.4	9.5
Attention and care (gives/ receives)	17.2	33.3	13.9	2.9	24.1	28.6
Does the house duties	19.4	20.5	13.1	16.5	6.9	9.5
Play, sing, eat	14.2	20.5	32.8	49.5	24.1	14.3

Read and watch television	3.0	1.5	2.2	1.9	10.3	14.3
Sit, rest	4.5	3.0	6.6	4.9	10.3	14.3
Others (driving, phone...)	8.2	3.8	7.3	5.8	3.4	0.0
(Expressed in %, where 100 are all the tasks each one performs)						

Sons and daughters do fewer duties than their parents and even their grandparents, and those activities are auxiliary ones, such as setting the table or tidying their rooms. Games are a pivotal theme of children activities in the pictures, followed by those actions that are done with their parents at home or outdoor, for instance, doing the cooking, talking a walk, visiting the doctor or going to school.

Some interesting aspects emerge thanks to the analysis of multiple correspondences data. The first one is an apparently contradiction in the accurate treatment of reality by pictures. The belief is the more mature the child is the more real picture can be (level of significance 0.05). But the analysis of textbooks proves that those intended for five year old students use more childish forms when representing the family (69.9%) than those for three year old student (42.1%). In the latter, realistic representation dominate. Besides, about the number of family members there are significant differences (level of significance 0.01) depending on the educative level, as textbooks addressed to the younger children do not show as many members per family as the others one (families with no children or a smaller number).

The second one aspect to point it out is that those textbooks which dedicate a didactic unit to the family concept present a more equilibrated gender treatment, although it has to be said that males figures are characterized in all pictures and the extended and nuclear models are defined clearly. Images with a didactic approach try to avoid gender roles such in children as in grandparents, and they often are framed at home, whereas pictures without didactic aim are usually outdoors. Regarding to technical image features, only two publishers prefer pictures to treat the family instead of the majority that use drawings. Thirdly, by using the Homals model in textbooks with a specific didactic unit, the family model ad publishers were crossed. As a result, each publisher supports its own conception and gender role. *Edebé* publisher states a nuclear family with parents doing the housework. *SM* presents an extended family where the most important activities are “looking, reading and cares to children”. *Algaida* and *Everest* decide a nuclear or single-parent family. *Edeivives* and *Santillana* are more eclectic in their treatment and the other types of family appear on them further.

Analysis of Students' Conceptions

The most predominant familiar model among the three schools studied was the nuclear one, with two children (61.9%); families with one child were second (20.3%), followed by three children families (14.4%), parents with four children were scarce (2.5%) and five children families were testimonial (0.8%). The living into families is traditional (children and parents). In a few cases grandparents or children's older relatives live with their family (5.9%). Divorce situations appears in nine cases, in eight of them the children live with the mother, and only in one divorce the kids were under the father responsibility. On these data, it was studied the correlation between the family reality and the representation the students drew. After

analyzing the drawings, it has to be remarked that the majority of children (51%) did not describe their own real family. Only 43.2% pictures correspond to reality. Some children omitted or added a family member. In general we can say that 39 omissions and 35 additions were produced. Among the first ones brothers are the most omitted, along with the child itself. Among the second another figures considered family by the student are added, for instance, pets. That situation proves the children's unformed idea about family.

This vagueness is supported by students' opinions in interviews. When asked "Do you know what is a family?" 66.9% of the pupils answer "no" or responded incorrectly. The comparison between the answers to "Who lives in your house?" and "Who are part of your family?" did not match in the half of the cases; also corroborated by the response to "Are all the people that live in your house part of your family?". In that situation a high rate says "no" (19.5%), the same average that answered that fathers and mothers do not usually live together. Around a sixth of the children said not to know other families, and when the response was affirmative those families were relatives or friends of theirs.

In using a double variable analysis (age and gender), after applying χ^2 significance test and corresponding contingency tables, there is no significant differences about the concept of family between boys and girls although it exists among aged five and four children, as it supposed due to maturity. As Simón, Triana & Camacho address (2001), at these ages there is dissociation between explicit and implicit knowledge because knowledge is being acquired, and therefore the concept of family is still forming. According to children's age significant differences appear in answering "Are all families the same?" and "Are all the people that live in your house of your family?". Aged four pupils respond "yes" in the 50% of the cases regarding to the former question, whereas the averages reduces to 22.8% in five years old interviewers. The same happens on the latter question, in which there were not as many aged five students who responded affirmatively (72.2%) as the four years old ones (97.4%) (Test of χ^2 , level of significance $\alpha = 0.01$).

Conclusions

The data seems to confirm that the more mature the children are the more capable to describe accurately their family environment. In addition, they are ready to understand the multiple types of family and to comprehend that the living at home is not just linked to consanguinity. The research has reached the following conclusions:

First it should be pointed out the little importance given by publishers to the family, which is reflected in a large amount of sings: a) most textbooks do not offer a didactic unit focused on family, although they deal with the issue in other units; b) textbooks for five year-old-students show a better didactic treatment (objectives, contents, methodology, activities and evaluation) and reflect better today's current family social context; c) evaluation is the worst treated didactic aspect, because it is summative rather than formative. Besides there is not a solid correspondence between the objectives and its assessment; d) images in textbooks give little significance to the family concept.

Secondly, the more used family model is the eclectic, followed by the progressive, and finally the conservative one. The images printed with a didactic objective usually represent a nuclear or extended family at home. The images with not clear didactic aims may oftener depict a single-parent model, with fewer children and outdoor activities in public places (at the park, at school, or supermarkets). The family look is actual, Western world middle-class

which tries to correspond with the current circumstances, although it does not take into account the progressive immigration in the country, creating an abusive stereotype of Spanish society. Barely families from other ethnic groups appear in the textbooks; something similar to disable people (may be a child in a wheelchair). In general, the treatment is not as equalitarian as it should be, and it is possible to appreciate gender roles assignment.

Thirdly, images in Early Childhood Education textbooks have an illustrative function, with little teaching. The family is represented with coloured and detailed pictures, preferring drawings to photographs. The pictures are quite often childish appearance (usually doing activities outdoor but drawn in profile perspective) in a whole page size. According to the Villafañe scale of iconicity (1996) to appreciate the reality level of images, the Early Childhood books scores 5 and 6. That is to say, grade 5 means that the figures can be identified but the space relations are altered, while grade 6 involves a quite reasonably space relations in a two-dimensional plane.

The forth main idea is that children better describes their families with a picture rather than orally. However, these pictures hardly ever correspond to their family circumstances. According to gender, there are not significant differences about family understanding, but they exist regarding to age. Five years old children are ready to describe accurately their circumstances much better than younger pupils, supporting the Adame & Donoso results (2001). However, school textbooks do not follow this logic by representing family matters in a childish way in aged five student's books whereas the images in aged three textbooks are much more real. A significant number of students do not answer adequately who the families are or who are reflected in their pictures. Fewer pupils answered rightly but they do not draw all the members in their pictures, or vice versa.

Finally, children are capable to identify their family members, namely the father, the mother, brothers and sisters. Just a few adds other relatives. Omissions reflected in the pictures are mainly centred in brothers or in the child itself, being pets the most added. According to Delval (1983) the children's family representation is not a product of adult influence but rather the result of their own mental construction and perception. With an adequate pedagogical and didactic treatment the blanks in the student's conceptions could be solved and developed. But, in order to do so, the curricular materials analysed do not help enough because they do not sufficiently depict current family reality and human relationships. Besides, the images selection should follow ethical standards, paying much more attention to transmission of values and contents (conceptual and attitudinal) in a clear didactic way. Because of the family importance, the textbooks intended to Early Child Education should dedicate a specific didactic unit. In that sense, the research opens a large field of investigation in the Social Sciences teaching, focuses on a pedagogical treatment of family and the innovation in didactic techniques to reinforce the teaching-learning process of it. The student is able to learn it, but it will require teaching guidelines that give proper and adequate treatment.

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