



## THE ROLE OF FAMILY ENVIRONMENT IN DISTANCE LEARNING

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### **Abstract:**

This paper aims to discuss the role of family environment in distance learning. It presents the research conducted regarding parents' views on distance learning, the way they experience it, the obstacles and the assets that are associated with distance learning. School-family collaborative relations are regarded crucial in enhancing students' learning experience. Parents can contribute to their children's learning by cultivating a positive relationship with their children, providing advice and guidance, organizing time, recording, and encouraging participation (motivation), teaching with the aim of supporting children. Parents can also supervise the completion of tasks and seek help when needed, time management, identifying students' needs, communication, and access to useful resources. It is important that parents understand the essential role that children play online. Parents need to be trained to organize their children's time, motivate students, and provide them with learning support when needed and make sure their child is learning. Finally, recommendations are presented about supporting students' online learning by their parents.

**Keywords:** distance learning, parents, family

### **1. Introduction**

It is widely accepted that parental involvement in children's education contributes to their academic achievement (Daniel, 2011). Parental involvement and a supportive family environment have a positive effect on students' performance. Students can learn more while at the same time having more academic achievements when the contexts in which they live work together to enhance their learning and support. The aim of this paper is to

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discuss the contribution of family and parental involvement in distance learning and highlight the implications derived from the relevant research studies and literature.

## 2. Theoretical background

The two dominant conceptual frameworks that demonstrate the importance of cooperation between family, school and community are Bronfenbrenner's theory, which discusses the full range of influences on child development, and Epstein's theory, which also emphasizes the importance of the formation of cooperative relationships in child development.

Bronfenbrenner (1986) proposed an ecological model for interpreting influences on children's development. This conceptual framework assumes that family, peer group and school are the subsystems that directly affect children and they are called microsystems. Mesosystem refers to the relationships between microsystems. In addition, there is the exosystem that indirectly affects the child (e.g. parents' working conditions and the social network of the family) which can have positive or negative influences on the dynamics of family interactions. The macrosystem refers to the effect of culture on children's development.

Epstein (2001) uses the sphere of influences to explain the dynamics of relationships between family, community members, and schools. The overlap of the spheres of influence is based on the nature and degree of communication and cooperation between the spheres. School's effective communication and support for interactions with family and community members, is associated with a high degree of family engagement, which can have positive impact on students. School can develop open communication with families and community members by using blogs, websites and online databases (Hohlfeld, Ritzhaupt & Barron, 2010).

Epstein's six types of involvement provide the schools with the organizational framework for organizing activities to ensure parental support and involvement in children's education. Schools should contribute to informing parents and expanding their knowledge of children's development and provide them with the equipment that will help them shape an environment that will enhance learning. Simultaneously, two-way and effective communication is important, as well as volunteering, which can include the organization and participation in activities aimed at supporting students and school programs. In addition, it is necessary to provide parents with information about school procedures (expectations in relation to assignments, grades) that facilitates children's learning. Another type of parental involvement is parental decision-making and parental participation in school committees. Moreover, cooperation with community and the provision of services and resources by the community for meeting students', family's and teachers' needs is also crucial. In general, family, school and community can enhance children's learning. Collaborative efforts can support children's development (Epstein, 1995; Epstein, Galindo, & Sheldon, 2011; Stefansky, Valli, & Jacobson, 2016).

Research has shown that parent-child collaboration on homework can be enhanced by providing parents with information about the importance of collaboration.

For example, assigning homework on reading in collaboration with parents that involves interacting with parents is associated with improving reading ability. In addition, discussing with parents about the importance of working with their child on homework assignments leads to even greater improvement. Discussing schoolwork can increase children's participation in school and their performance. School can also provide guidance on assignment expectations. Volunteering is another way in which parents can be directly involved in their children's school life (Thompson, Gillis, Fairman, & Mason, 2014).

According to Boulton (2008), schools have a responsibility to prepare students and parents for their role before participating in online lessons. Parents can benefit from training in specific teaching support strategies. Teachers believe that parents play an important role in supporting learning in online education (Borup, 2016). Borup, Graham, & Davies (2013) point out that parents fail to understand their role in children's online learning. It is important that they understand the essential role that they can play online. Parents need to be trained to organize their children's time, motivate students and provide them with learning support when needed and make sure their child is learning.

### **3. Literature review regarding the role of family environment in distance learning**

According to Yu, Yuen, & Park (2012), the role of the family environment is not limited to the provision of technological means. The social environment associated with the use of new technologies must also be taken into account. Researchers define the family social environment as the family context in which children interact with new technologies. It includes parental influence, parent-child interactions, and sibling influence. The forms of parental influence are the parents' skills in the use of new technologies, supervision, control, and guidance from parents. This research highlighted that the level of parents' skills in using their new technologies facilitated their interaction with children and their better monitoring. Children with less skilled parents turned to their peers and teachers for help. Parents who supervised the use of the internet by their children claimed that children copied information from the internet about their work and that they did not visit websites with inappropriate content.

More generally, it has been pointed out in the literature that parental attitudes are influenced by parents' perceived self-efficacy, which has been widely identified as the level of parental beliefs about their ability to succeed in their parental role (Jones & Prinz, 2005). Students' perceptions of themselves (self-perception) and self-esteem play an important role in the levels of their personal ambitions and expectations for themselves while also influencing their academic achievement (Koutsoulis, & Campbell, 2001).

Festl & Gniewosz's (2018) research points out that parents' confidence in using internet can be considered as an important resource for family cohesion. Parents with higher self-confidence in using the internet were more involved in their children's activities, which was associated with a more positive family atmosphere. Parental involvement in children's use of the internet is not necessarily a measure of children's control, but it may reflect parents' interest in children's leisure activities and at the same

time constitutes an opportunity to spend time together. Using the internet as a joint activity between parents and children is associated with less conflict and positive family ties, as all family members reported.

Anastasiades, Vitalaki, & Gertzaki (2008) argue that parents who were less familiar with new technologies seem to believe that online teaching requires more preparation and were more wary of introducing new technologies to school. The above researchers pointed out that the socio-cultural context (urban environment in contrast to rural areas) can explain the above findings. They believed that interaction in the use of technological means is an alternative form of communication. Parents were not confident enough to support their children's digital activities, especially those related to their children's activities. Mothers were more likely to control their children's learning and interpersonal experiences through the use of the internet. Using the internet for learning purposes such as preparing homework, and learning internet usage skills is related not only to the number of time children and parents spend together but also to the extent to which children feel close to their parents. It is possible that the mothers of the sample spent more time with their children at home than fathers and took responsibility for supervising the conventional activities that their children were assigned for homework. Parents with more technology skills were less cautious compared to parents with less or no skills in the educational use of technology. For example, many parents argued that children needed more time to do homework, while parents with better skill profiles were more confident about pedagogical conditions at home.

Borup, Graham & Davies (2013) argued that parents believe that communication between students and teachers constitutes a stronger motivation for children than the communication between learners. Students point out that parents-student interactions are a strong motivator far more than parents thought (there was a statistically significant difference in the relevant responses).

Burdette & Greer (2014) argued that most parents consider their role to be divided into the following dimensions: helping children with learning tasks and time management. They also said that they could have a greater influence on designing the program for the completion of children's homework, the organization of children's time and family-school communication. Parents took on some responsibilities that are usually assigned to teachers, such as setting up the online learning space, recording children's participation, organizing the school day, supporting access to the course content and ensuring the completion of tasks.

Parents play a critical role in supporting children's learning in online education as children navigate online material and assign tasks. They take responsibility for answering questions, facilitating the completion of lessons and ensuring that students participate and remain committed to the learning task. Teachers recognize that parents do not always understand the importance of their role and may not always have the knowledge necessary to facilitate learning effectively (Currie-Rubin & Smith, 2014).

Borup, Stevens, & Waters (2015) interviewed parents and students in an online high school. They highlighted the following types of parental involvement with the aim of supporting children: cultivating a positive relationship with children, providing

advice and guidance, organizing time, recording and encouraging participation (motivation), and teaching. Cultivating a relationship with children involves building trust and strengthening students' efforts. They stressed the importance of developing a positive relationship with children and other forms of parental involvement in children's learning. The students seemed to appreciate their parents' love and trust. Parents encouraged the cultivation of positive relationships with teachers. Helping students organize time is important to keep them focused on the goal. Children need to know how to learn online. The parents found that students were lagging behind in the management of time and space. They set expectations for student performance and provided incentives for children to meet those expectations. Monitoring students' behavior in online learning is important because it is easy for them to be distracted. They used to praise and encouragement words to enhance student participation when students did not live up to their expectations and made the necessary adjustments to the organization of students' learning time. Simultaneously, they helped students develop good study habits such as taking notes. Parents and teachers worked together to support learning, and this was reassuring for children. Parents mostly appreciated the communication with teachers. However, some of them were not satisfied with the level of support from teachers. The main obstacles to parental involvement were time constraints, conflict with their children, and ambiguity about their responsibilities. In addition, Borup, Stevens & Waters (2015), who studied parental involvement in online education of high school students, found that parents try to cultivate in children perseverance, internal control as well as organization and time management skills.

Motivation to learn is reinforced when students believe they can succeed. Self-confidence is enhanced when parents help children develop positive expectations for success and experience success in situations where they attribute achievement to their own abilities and efforts, rather than to external factors such as luck and the difficulty of the task. When success in a learning task is attributed to good luck or the ease of the learning task, it is unlikely that children's self-confidence will be enhanced (Keller, 2008). Smith et al (2016) interviewed parents of students who had enrolled in an online school in the United States. Parents understood their role as a parent-teacher. Online learning means increased parent-teacher interaction and parental commitment to their children's learning success. Parents also asserted that their role in educating their children had changed. They also claimed to be the leading figure in their children's online education. They facilitated teaching, supported children, were responsible for maintaining children's progress, reported the progress and incorporated teaching ideas and interventions suggested by the online teachers. Although parents reported that they were the primary persons assuming the role of the teacher in the education of their children, some expressed concern that the requirements of the role affected their family's dynamics. They felt that they did not have the right qualifications to support their child. When children attended online school, parents had higher levels of participation in their children's learning. Online education required higher levels of communication between teachers and parents. Parents argued that it was easier for them to have access to teachers while having flexibility in time, which allows for more frequent interaction.

Communication included e-mails, telephone conversations, and in some cases teleconferences through the school's electronic platform.

Patrikakou (2016) points out that parents can be informed by the school website about children's progress as well as about specific issues, activities and assignments for their children. For these reasons, parental involvement and family-school communication can be enhanced to support children's learning. Parents can cultivate in children empathy, self-control, mental curiosity, motivation and a desire for academic achievement.

Cwetna's (2016) survey participants expressed the expectation that the school would communicate with parents about ways to support children at home. When asked about communication methods, parents replied that e-mails should be the primary means of communication and that telephone conversations are appropriate for more personal or immediate matters. The analysis of the questionnaires and interviews highlighted some common issues regarding the roles and responsibilities of parents: supervising the completion of tasks and seeking help when needed, time management, identifying students' needs, communication, and access to useful resources. The parents who participated in the study re-taught the mathematical concepts or encouraged children to seek help from teachers. They considered it as their primary responsibility to get to know the needs of their children and to provide or secure assistance.

#### **4. Recommendations for parents to support children in online education**

The following guidelines can help facilitate children in online education (Patrikakou, 2016; Zhao, Wu, & Lin, 2020; Hayes, 2020): In primary school, parents play an essential role in facilitating teaching. Their role evolves as students mature. Younger children will need more time to support distance learning. In high school, parents provide less guidance as students become more responsible for their learning. They participate to the appropriate degree and shape the daily schedule with various activities and breaks. They also contribute to recording students' progress and to their comprehension of the material. Children need help to organize their time, stay focused on learning tasks and complete them.

Parents need to create a specific space where children will do their homework, to form a quiet study space and determine the time for work and play. It is also essential to formulate a new program and dedicate time to children to show their work and explain what they have learned on a systematic basis. Moreover, it is crucial to encourage children to take responsibility for their own learning.

Parents are encouraged to have a dialogue with their children, discuss their weekly school schedule, assign tasks and formulate weekly goals for children. Parents are also urged to encourage children and celebrate their achievements, create a supportive learning environment at home and cultivate support among siblings. Furthermore, they are also encouraged to ask children to share their ideas with them, to provide children with time for play and leisure activities and take care of their social and emotional needs. In addition, it is documented that collaboration between family and

school plays a vital role in promoting children's learning and psychosocial adaptation (Stamatis & Nikolaou, 2020; Nikolaou et al., 2021).

## 5. Conclusions

This paper addresses the role that parents can play in their children's online education. The importance of parental involvement in children's online learning is highlighted. It describes the types of parental involvement and the ways in which parents can inspire children in online education. Research data from the literature review on the role of the family environment in distance education are presented. Simultaneously, guidelines are given and suggested ways in which parents can support their children in distance education. Parents may not be sure about their responsibilities and how to support their children's learning. A meeting with parents could educate them on the above issues. School can help students fulfill their responsibilities more effectively. Family can contribute to enhancing children's time management and organization skills as well as positive study habits. In addition, parents can nurture children's self-control, self-efficacy and their motivation. Two-way communication between school and family is of vital importance for rendering distance learning effective.

## Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

## About the Author

Eleni N. Nikolaou is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Sciences of Preschool Education and Educational Design, University of the Aegean, Greece. Her articles have been published in reputable scientific peer-reviewed journals and conferences, either in national or international level. She participates as a reviewer in Greek as well as in international journals. Her published work is uploaded in the following web page <https://nikolaoueleni.wordpress.com/>

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