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## **Family Education Improves Student's Academic Performance: Contributions from European Research**

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Date of publication: October 15th, 2012

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**To cite this article:** Flecha, A. (2012). Family Education Improve Student's Academic Performance: Contributions from European Research.

*Multidisciplinary Journal of Educational Research*, 3(2), 301-321. doi:  
10.4471/remie.2012.16

To link this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4471/remie.2012.16>

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# Family Education Improves Student's Academic Performance: Contributions from European Research

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## Abstract

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There is a wide body of literature about the relation between families' education and students' academic performance. Several contributions have focused its analysis on describing the gap between children of academic families and non-academic families, especially those with low socioeconomic status from underprivileged neighbourhoods. These kinds of conclusions have had an impact on educational actions which start from the point that children from non academic and underprivileged families are condemned to school failure. Findings from a large-scale European research project on schooling are refuting these conclusions. This research has provided evidences on those types of family and community participation that are contributing to educational success. This paper presents one of these types of participation, which is family education as a Successful Educational Action (SEA) that is improving students' performance by creating learning spaces between families and students where cultural and educational interactions are shared. Data provided here illustrates how these interactions contribute to accelerate children's learning.

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**Keywords:** family education, academic performance, successful educational actions

2012 Hipatia Press

ISSN 2014-2862

DOI: 10.4471/remie.2012.16



# La Formación de Familiares Mejora el Rendimiento Académico del Alumnado: Contribuciones de la Investigación Europea

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## Resumen

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Existe una amplia literatura sobre la relación entre la educación de las familias y el rendimiento académico del alumnado. Una parte importante de esta literatura ha centrado su análisis en describir la diferencia entre los resultados conseguidos por el alumnado proveniente de familias académicas y el de familias no académicas, principalmente las bajo nivel socioeconómico y residentes en barrios desfavorecidos. Este tipo de conclusiones ha tenido un impacto en las acciones educativas que parten de la premisa que los niños y las niñas de familias no académicas y en situaciones desfavorecidas están condenados al fracaso escolar. Asimismo, los resultados de un investigación europea de gran escala sobre en educación escolar están refutando esas conclusiones. Esta investigación ha aportado evidencias sobre los tipos de participación de las familias y la comunidad que están contribuyendo al éxito educativo. Este artículo presenta uno de esos tipos: la formación de familias como una actuación educativa de éxito que está mejorando el rendimiento educativo del alumnado a través de la creación de espacios de aprendizaje e interacción, en el cual se comparten interacciones educativas y culturales. Los datos que se presentan aquí ilustran cómo estas interacciones contribuyen a acelerar el aprendizaje de todos los niños y niñas.

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**Palabras claves:** formación de familiares, rendimiento académico, actuaciones educativas de éxito

2012 Hipatia Press

ISSN 2014-2862

DOI: 10.4471/remie.2012.16

The relation between families' educational level and academic performance of their children has been widely studied in the last decades (Coleman et al., 1966; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hill & Taylor, 2004; Pomerantz, Grolnick, & Price, 2005). There have been many misunderstandings about the consequences of this relation; these misunderstandings are connected to the school failure of those students coming from low educational family backgrounds. Recent international research on schooling has questioned this idea by demonstrating that the promotion of cultural and educational interactions between the students and their families contributes to improve academic results, even in children from non-academic families (Diez, Gatt & Racionero, 2011; Flecha et al., 2009; García, 2012; INCLUD-ED Consortium, 2009; Oliver et al., 2011). These findings come from the Integrated Project INCLUD-ED Strategies for inclusion and social cohesion in Europe from education (2006-2011) a large-scale project of the European Framework Programme of Research focused on schooling. The INCLUD-ED project analyzed which educational actions prevent and which ones lead to social exclusion. In order to do so, part of the research was focused on the role of families and communities in fostering educational success and social cohesion.

Analysing different European educational systems, theories and practices, INCLUD-ED shed light on the existing types of family and community participation according to level and area of involvement. Five main types were identified by the study: informative, consultative, decisive, evaluative and educative. However, the research evidenced that only three of these types were more likely to have a higher impact on students' learning. These are the evaluative, decisive and educative types (INCLUD-ED Consortium, 2009).

This article focuses on the educative type of family participation and particularly, on family education as a successful educational action that the INCLUD-ED project has proved as effective in transforming the established correlation between parental educational level and children's performance. Family education enhances the promotion of cultural and educational interactions among families and students. In doing so, family education programmes addressed to non-academic families increase

parents' own educational skills and enrich both students' sociocultural learning environments, and therefore, their academic performance (INCLUD-ED Consortium, 2009). This article will discuss the implementation of family education in the schools studied, as well as its relation to the students' academic improvement. The article is divided in three sections. First, we present contributions from scientific literature regarding to the relation between parents' educational level and children's academic performance. Second we explain the methodology used in the study. Particularly, the design of Project 6 (one of the research projects integrated within the INCLUD-ED large scale research) is briefly described here. Finally, we provide evidences about the implementation of family education in schools, making special emphasis on their positive incidence on students' academic performance.

### **The role of families and communities in education**

The relationship between the academic and social background of families and the school performance of their children has been explored for decades. Many studies have shown that students whose families have low educational levels and low socioeconomic status experience higher rates of early school leaving, low academic expectations, and exclusion from higher educational tracks than those from more advantaged social groups (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Oakes, 1985; Valenzuela, 1999). Although cultural inequalities persist, schools can critically promote social change beyond reproduction (Giroux, 1988; Willis, 1981) and families' involvement in their children's education can play an important role in this change. Although an extensive body of literature has focused on the impact of different types of family participation, the potential of family education to close the achievement gap between academic and non-academic families, still needs to be further developed.

There have been some research advances in this regard that are worth to be mentioned. A study from the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy at Harvard University (NCSALL) investigated the outcomes and impacts of adult literacy programs and identified changes in the family, community, and larger society (Beder, 1999). Participation

in particular types of adult literacy programs showed to improve parental involvement in their children's school education, however it did not tackle the children's results. Another longitudinal study assessed the long-term impacts of adult literacy programs (Bingman, Ebert & Smith, 1999) through the examination of changes in the lives of 450 participants in the domains of work, family, and community after enrolment in literacy programs. After one year, the participants reported a higher rate of employment, better self-esteem, increased involvement in community organizations, and an increase in certain uses of literacy. These positive effects of adult education in social capital (Balatti & Falk, 2002) and in the reduction of the expenses in public health systems indicate that investing in adult education is a gain for the whole citizenry of a country (Feinstein & Hammond, 2004).

The literature focused on family involvement has explored the benefits of the partnership between schools and families or communities. Specific studies have analyzed its impact on behavioral, cognitive and affective areas (Pomerantz, Grolnick & Price, 2005) and on academic and personal success (Sanders & Lewis, 2005). The *Harvard Family Research Project* studies since 1983 the relationships among the school, the family and the community, and emphasizes that outcomes in education improve when family participation increases. At the same time, it shows that the relationships between home and school have a positive impact on coexistence when they are based on two-way communication and when the families are given the opportunity to participate in all the different spaces within the school. Along the same lines, the Centre on School, Family and Community Partnerships at John Hopkins University identifies the participation of families and the community in education as a need in today's societies. In order to explain how family involvement influences academic results, Hill & Taylor (2004) pointed out that parents increase their skills in terms of school-related activities and can therefore help their children to a greater extent. Moreover, family education leads to agreements between the parents and the school on behavioral and academic issues and therefore children get the same messages from both, in relation to important issues. Similarly, Hidalgo, Epstein and Siu (2002) showed the importance of family participation in helping students to succeed in school more than other aspects such as family structure; socioeconomic

status; or parent education, among others. The fact that family education contributes to improve the parents' capacity to intervene in their children's education is well-supported with evidence, for instance, helping children out with their homework.

Studies document the benefits of the partnership between schools and families or communities on people from all economic, ethnic and educational backgrounds, including vulnerable groups (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). For example, this has been found in relation to the academic achievement of students with disabilities (Koutroba, Vamvakari & Steliou, 2006; Porter, 1997) or in the case of language minority students (Crawford, 1989; Cummins, 2000). Scientific literature has revealed a wide plurality of forms and strategies to engage parents and community members in schools. There have also been some contributions aimed at conceptualising and establishing categories for these types of participation (Epstein, 1995; Gordon, 1979; Honig, 1975; Jones, 1993; Lunenburg & Irby, 2002). Among their differences, these typologies aim at covering the wide range and diversity of participatory strategies rather than establishing a hierarchy between them. For instance, Gordon (1979) established different institutional levels of parental involvement that can be targeted (from a micro level – direct intervention between children and families – to a macro level– major political initiatives), and a set of categories regarding the roles that parents can play. These include teaching their own children, decision making, and classroom volunteering among others.

Epstein (1995) established a framework of six different types of parental involvement which has been used in other studies. Briefly, her categories are (1) Parenting: Helping all families to establish supportive home environments for children, (2) Communicating: Establishing two-way exchanges about school programs and children's progress, (3) Volunteering: Recruiting and organizing parental help at school, home, or other locations, (4). Learning at home: Providing information and ideas to families about how to help students with homework and other curriculum-related materials, (5). Decision-making: Having parents from all backgrounds serve as representatives and leaders on school committees, and (6) Collaborating with the community: Identifying and integrating resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs. As Sheldon and Epstein (2005) state, the different types involve different challenges for the schools which carry them out.



"There are many possible activities for each type of involvement, so schools must choose which partnership practices are likely to produce specific goals and how to implement the selected activities effectively" (p. 197).

Aiming at providing a better knowledge and understanding of family participation in European educational systems, the INCLUD-ED project has provided a new classification of five types of family and community participation (INCLUD-ED Consortium, 2009). As mentioned above, three types of family and community participation have shown to better contribute to increase student's achievement: evaluative, decisive and educative participation. Evaluative participation involves family and community members in the evaluation of students' learning processes or school programmes, together with teachers. This type of participation also includes family participation in the design and assessment of the school curriculum. Decisive participation refers to the participation of families in the decision-making processes by becoming representatives in decision-making bodies of the school. Finally, educative participation takes place when families and other community members participate in students' learning activities, both during regular school hours (for example, in the classroom helping children) and after school. Educative participation also includes attending family education programs which respond to their needs. The INCLUD-ED research has shown that this latter type is crucial in the case of non-academic families from underprivileged neighborhoods, to support the academic success of their children. Therefore, family education may reduce the existing determinism about the performance of the children from non-academic families through transforming these families' sociocultural context. The transformation of interactions at home through the adults' participation in family education also transforms children's learning interactions, which end up impacting their academic records. The case studies analyzed in this paper provide evidences of how particular types of family education programs impact children's school success. This is explained in detail in the following section.



## Method

This article presents data from six longitudinal case studies of successful schools in Europe that were analyzed by Project 6 of the integrated research project INCLUD-ED (2006-2011) following a communicative methodology approach (Gómez, Latorre, Sánchez & Flecha, 2006; Gómez, Puigvert & Flecha, 2011). This methodology is oriented towards providing a useful analysis that may contribute to reduce inequalities and transform the context studied. Therefore, it is necessary to establish a continuous dialogue between the existing knowledge in the international scientific community, on the one hand, and the daily lives and interpretations of the subjects being researched, on the other. This allows a deeper understanding of social situations and personal processes, which are analyzed through identifying two dimensions: exclusionary components (i.e., barriers faced by subjects and elements that create or represent inequalities) and transformative components (i.e. situations and conditions that represent opportunities or help to overcome these barriers). Consequently, research results become especially useful for vulnerable groups and have already achieved political impact (Gómez, Racionero & Sordé, 2010; Macías & Redondo, 2012). Here we will detail the procedures which were followed in relation to the issue addressed in this paper.

The six schools studied were located in five different countries: Finland, Lithuania, Malta, Spain and the United Kingdom. Among the six cases, five were primary schools and one was a pre-primary school. Case studies were selected based on three criteria: (1) evidence of school success in relation to their context, as reflected by students' educational attainment, (2) located in areas with a low SES and with students from minority background and (3) strong community involvement. The field work and analysis was performed between 2006 and 2010. During the first year of the project different existing educational strategies which promote school success were observed. Family and community involvement were outstanding in this first period. During the second year the specific types of participation previously defined in the literature review were analyzed. In the third year the links between those types of participation and improvement in academic and non-academic aspects were studied. Finally, in the fourth year the impact of improvement in education on

Each case study included both qualitative and quantitative fieldwork, which was developed through data collection techniques designed with a communicative orientation. For the purpose of this paper I only discuss results from the qualitative data. The qualitative techniques included an open-ended interviews, communicative daily life stories, communicative focus groups and communicative observations. The interviews were held with five representatives from local administration, five representatives of other community organizations involved in the school, and three professionals working in the school. Furthermore, thirteen communicative daily life stories were conducted in each school (six with family members and seven with students) aimed at analyzing in depth individuals' daily-life to know how the specific actions of family and community involvement have influenced their learning and their lives. We also conducted one communicative focus group with professionals of education, and 5 communicative observations in school spaces where the participation of the community could be observed (including classrooms, school meetings, training courses). The interpretation of what is being observed was done under an inter-subjective approach, based on egalitarian dialogue between the researcher and the people who are being researched.

The selection of the participants was done according to the fact that these people actually represent the particular reality or social group they stand for. The transcriptions of the qualitative data were analyzed according to previously defined categories. Following the communicative methodology, the analysis was conducted attending cross-sectional exclusionary and transformative dimensions. The three categories of analysis were the aforementioned types of community participation (evaluative, decisive and educative) which potentially have more impact in performance. Each of these categories was divided into three sub-categories of analysis: academic issues, non academic issues and strategies. Results presented in this article include the cross-sectional analysis between the category educative and the sub-category academic issues and specific narratives obtained are quoted in the next section. Hence, for the case of Lithuania there were not significant narratives for these categories. Data analyzed and participants whose quotes appear in this article are presented in table 1:

Table 1  
*Data Analysis*

<b>Technique</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Profile's description</b>
Communicative daily life story	S1	Naima	Spain	Moroccan girl in 6th grade of primary education
Communicative daily life story	S2	Saima	United Kingdom	Pakistani mother whose children attend a junior school
Communicative daily life story	S3	Leena	Finland	Mother of children in a day-care centre
Communicative daily life story	S4	Mandy	Malta	Mother involved in an after-school-hour club
Open-ended interview	I1	Olga	Spain	Female teacher in the school and the tutor for 3rd grade of primary
Open-ended interview	I2	Maria	Spain	Uruguayan woman who is Head of studies
Open-ended interview	I3	Paul	United Kingdom	Male teacher of a junior school
Open-ended interview	I4	Laura	Spain	Woman who is technical staff of the community services where the school is located
Open-ended interview	I5	Jordi	Spain	Male who is professional in the Teaching and Education Board in the town council where the school is located
Open-ended interview	I6	Maria	Malta	Woman who is professional of the Weekly Writing Skills Program
Open-ended interview	I7	Sandra	Malta	Female teacher of a school of primary education

### **Family education: Contributing to improve students' academic performance**

The schools studied in Project 6 are characterized by having a strong involvement of families and community members in different activities of their daily practice. There were three family education programs that were striking among the six schools: dialogic literary gatherings, literacy courses and a writing program. These programs are a significant source of transformation of the students' learning environment, in the school and in their homes, thus promoting educative and cultural interactions between parents and children beyond the school walls which directly influence the students' academic performance and motivation to learn.

*Dialogic literary gatherings.* The dialogic literary gatherings (Constantino, Morigo & Moreira, 2011; Flecha, 2000; Soler, 2004; Tellado & Sava, 2011) are a Successful Educational Action of family education which promote the acquisition and improvement of reading skills and have demonstrated to be crucial for breaking the closed circle of educational inequality. In dialogic literary gatherings mothers, fathers and other relatives get together to share and dialogue about their reading of classic literature books by authors such as Kafka, Joyce, García Lorca or Wolf among others. Many participants in these literary gatherings had never read a book before and perceived these as books for the educated people. Through the gatherings, families with low educational levels find a context to improve their academic skills and transform their self-image. Engaging in this Successful Educational Action allow these relatives gain access to culture and contribute to transform the perception that their children and they themselves have about them as readers, and as a consequence, they gain confidence in the academic domain.

Olga, a teacher in one of the Spanish school studied, explained the positive changes she observed in mothers participating in the dialogic literary gathering organized regularly by the school. She described the case of Naima, an immigrant mother who participated in the reading of *La casa de Bernarda Alba* from Lorca. Participating in the gathering, she became more self-confident about her learning possibilities.

Olga explained that the mothers like Naima, who participate in the dialogic literary gatherings, gain motivation for continuing learning and that this motivation is also being transmitted to their children. When relatives take part in the dialogic literary gatherings, they bring their books home to read the pages or chapters agreed for the next meeting, which allow sharing reading experiences with their children, their motivation for reading and, in the end, becoming a role model for them. Additionally, in Olga's school, dialogic literary gatherings have also been implemented in primary education with the children. This has contributed to transform the home environment because children and parents share similar learning experiences and so they can exchange their interpretations and dialogues about the classical literature books they read.

Overall, dialogic literary gatherings contribute to enrich the academic background of families, by increasing their reading skills, which is a basic competence for further learning, as well as by overcoming the stereotypes based on educational level or social class. A grandmother participating in one of these gatherings stated, when the researcher asked why they did not read easier books: "We the people understand everything, and the better written the better we understand". Her words countered a supposedly incapacity to read and understand this kind of classic literature books which belong to high culture. The dialogic literary gatherings help overcoming the determinism that high culture works are only for academic people and, as a consequence, help transforming the academic and cultural context of their children.

*Literacy courses.* These are basic courses where family members who are illiterate or low literate, or have little knowledge of the language used in their children's school, learn to read and write. Literacy courses are usually addressed to immigrant families who have difficulties to speak and write the language of the host countries. The analysis conducted in the schools about this program shows an increase in students' motivation to learn when their families are attending the course. Thanks to this family education program more interactions between children and family members take place. Maria, the first grade teacher in the Spanish primary school, explained the change she perceived in her students as a result of the participation of the mothers of some of her students in the literacy classes: she found that sharing with their mothers learning spaces and learning activities directly influenced students' motivation.

(...) when they see their mothers, because some of them [the mothers] come to our class to learn to read or write, they come and stay during the classes. This motivates them [the students].

Participation of migrant mothers in family education not only promotes children's motivation but also increases learning interactions among them. Maria has been a teacher at this school for more than 16 years and she knows the experience of many relatives who are involved in learning the host language and transfer this knowledge to their children. In the next quote she describes the process of an Arab mother who started to learn Spanish and Catalan in the school and how this had an impact on her child:

An Arab mother, who came to register a three year-old child, had an older child in the school. When we asked about what the little one knows, if he spoke any words in Spanish or Catalan (...) she said in Catalan "because since I have come to the classes", because she was attending Catalan classes, "I also tell him, I say to him, face, nose, eye" so then you can see that the mother also teaches the vocabulary she learns to her 3 year child and that child at least is aware of some things or they are at least a bit familiar to him.

Family education such as literacy courses contribute to create learning spaces between parents and children at their homes. Through these learning interactions children's performance in school is directly affected. Other opportunities for learning interaction occur when parents and children work together at home, studying or doing their homework. As a result of this, students start asking questions about their homework to their relatives. These relatives who now attend literacy classes feel more confident to help their children and they are in fact more capable to do so. Now many students will complete their homework, as Paul, a British teacher explained:

In staff meetings we have sometimes discussed the fact that specific families which are following classes... Well, until now, their children never did their homework, and now they do it.

Paul's experience as a teacher coincides with that of Saima, an immigrant Pakistani woman whose children attend a British school in the UK. She explained how their experience in family education courses allowed her to help her children better with their homework:

It helped me as well because I'd spend time with them and understand what I'm actually teaching them and make sure that I'm teaching them the right things...both of my children, the older ones, were struggling with maths and then there was a literacy a numeracy course that helped me to help them.

These positive effects came out in most of the schools studied. Another example is provided by Jordi, who is a responsible in the educational administration. He supports the family education activities and describes in his interview how the positive impact in parents' skills is transferred to their children. He states:

The benefits were not just for the parents of course, they were for the children because the parents' self-esteem grew, their ability to relate to their children grew, to manage relationships, the actual skills of reading to your children...they were given the confidence and the skills to be able to do that.

As a result of the learning opportunities created for the families and the transformation of the learning interactions with their children, literacy classes have also had an impact on children's perception of school. They started to perceive that the school is carrying out a real effort to help their family increase their skills, and as a consequence the image they had of the school improved. In some cases, this improved perception of the school led to the reduction of absenteeism. This is the case of a Spanish school, where before implementing these classes for families there was a high number of students who did not attend the classes. Since literacy courses started, an increase in students' interest and motivation was noted, which was reflected in increased attendance and improved behavior. Laura, an education professional who regularly visits the school, observed this transformation and described how this change could be reached because mothers initiated learning processes in the school.



Family education influences in a very significant way. For instance there are children that before their mother came to the centre, would escape from class, fall asleep in the classroom... and now, I don't now, if it is because they have here her reference or because his mother is also interested in education, it is like "look mum..." (...) "look mum I have done this!", "have you seen that I have behaved well?" "ask Conchi how good I was" (...) then this has really changed.

*The Writing Program.* The creation of shared learning spaces for families and children were identified in the Maltese school studied. Family members participate in the Writing Program which provides the relatives with reading and writing skills that enable them to help their children with homework, reading and writing processes. This program start from the premise that parents have a key role in promoting the learning progress of their children, and aim at preparing the parents to help their children with the school learning. In that case, the school promotes that parents' involvement in this program, as Sandra, a teacher from this school explains:

In these clubs, parents know about the process of learning to read and write, and teachers are aware that their participation contributes to accelerate students' learning.

As a result of participating in this program together with their relatives, students increase their motivation for studying and for getting better marks. Mandy, a Maltese relative involved in the activity, explained how she has experienced the impact of being involved in the program. She explains the influence in children's attitude and motivation for learning:

If he sees his mother at school he says, all right my mother is taking interest in me, but then, I think during the lesson, it is up to the child to do well in term of grades. Yet seeing parents at school participating does have an effect.

In sum, these family education programs contribute to improve families' skills related to the learning of their children in the school, and transform the learning context of the students at home: the learning ex-

experiences that both students and relatives have in the school separately, meet at home and reinforce students' learning process. Schools implementing literacy courses for families do not resign to the idea that some of their students cannot achieve good academic results because their families cannot help them with their homework, but create the conditions that enable them to help their children, thus overcoming deterministic perspectives.

### **Conclusions**

Based on the analysis of successful schools in Europe, the INCLUD-ED project has evidenced that certain types of family and community participation in school have demonstrated to be effective in achieving educational success. Throughout this article one of those types has been explored in depth: family education and its contribution to improve students' academic performance. The results obtained provide further understanding on the correlation between family socioeconomic status and students' outcomes, reducing deterministic perspectives that condemn children of unprivileged and non-academic families to school failure.

The results discussed above present evidences on how family education is contributing to educational success in disadvantaged settings. Family education is implemented in different contexts through different programs. In this article, three Successful Educational Actions (SEAs) involving family education were presented and analyzed. They have proven to bring an improvement in the students learning environment and results.

All these actions are favoring the creation of learning spaces where parents and children share new educative and cultural interactions, contributing to increase their motivation and improve their performance. The different actions create the contexts for families and children to work together on learning activities that are later transferred to the home context. In addition, families improve in academic and instrumental competences, which increases the family members' skills and confidence to help their children and transform their learning and cultural environment.

The positive impact of family education in students' educational results informs us that this type of family participation in schools can make a difference in academic performance especially for those children of non-

academic families. Through the involvement of parents in different family education programs they increase their own skills, transform the home learning environments and, indirectly, have an impact on children's academic success.

In conclusion, these findings point out that while dominant statistics describe a correlation between parent's level of education and children's school performance, and folk interpretations often establish a relation of causality between these two facts, INCLUD-ED research, through Project 6 has demonstrated that low SES children can also succeed in education through implementing Successful Educational Actions. Particularly, through certain types of family education programs, we do not need to wait for the next generation (that might be better prepared) to change the closed circle of educational inequality.

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