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From problem to mystery. How to approach family as a partner in education?

Abstract

Research objectives (aims) and problem(s): In current studies on the educational triangle of school, family, and local community, the distinct character of the family is generally assumed rather than explicitly articulated or critically examined. This study aims to fill this gap as a contribution to dealing with the difficulties of cooperation within the educational triangle.

Research methods: This study employs a critical cultural-philosophical analysis of contemporary tendencies in how families are approached in Western societies. This analysis clarifies the main trends in recent studies in pedagogy and educational sciences on educational partnerships between school and family. An investigation of personalist philosophical understandings of family is used to develop an alternative to current dominant views.

Process of argumentation: First, the research problem is defined by analyzing how recent pedagogical studies on the educational triangle approach family. Second, the problem is placed in a broader perspective of current social tendencies in viewing the family: either with suspicion or appreciation. Third, the reasons for this dual evaluation are discussed and shown to lead to an impasse: the family is expected to be both opened up and protected and is often instrumentalized, while its specific character remains assumed rather than clarified. Fourth, an alternative approach is explored through the personalist philosophical perspectives on family offered by Gabriel Marcel and Jean Lacroix. They distinguish between approaching the family as "problem" and as "mystery." The conclusion indicates the value of the mystery approach for addressing the risks inherent in the current impasse regarding how to deal with family, including as a partner of schools.

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Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: The impact of the findings on educational sciences is presented in relation to four acute risks arising from the impasse, which are also relevant in school–family relations:

1. The risk of overlooking the family's distinct character.
2. The risk of asking too much of the family.
3. The risk of judging the family.
4. The risk of overly negative, one-sided evaluations of the family's strong influence.

Conclusions and/or recommendations: The findings lead to the following recommendations:

1. In schools' interactions with families, the unnamable distinctiveness of the family must be respected.
2. To prevent the erosion of the family through excessive external demands, families must be granted adequate non-instrumental space to develop and sustain their own specific identity
3. This distinctiveness should be protected through restraint in judging whether a family is "good."
4. This also requires restraint in intervening in families from the outside.

Introduction

The idea that strong and positive relationships among schools, families, and communities are crucial for children's development is widely accepted in pedagogy and educational sciences (Epstein et al., 2019, p. 1; Johnson, 2015, p. 77; Swindler Boutte & Johnson, 2021, p. 167). There is extensive scientific evidence supporting this view, and educational policies are developed accordingly. However, this does not mean that such educational partnerships function well on a broad scale. As a result, there is ongoing discussion among academics about how to improve partnerships within this educational triangle.

Two issues stand out in the academic literature addressing these improvements, particularly in how the family is approached. First, the distinct character of the family—especially in comparison with school and community—is usually assumed rather than explicitly articulated or critically

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examined. Second, the family is portrayed both as an obstacle to education and as a unique, valuable contributor to it. Consequently, there are pressures to make the family more open to the broader community and to schools, while at the same time preserving its unique value. These tendencies of suspicion and appreciation in relation to the family extend far beyond educational research. Because they contradict each other, they create an impasse: How can we respect and support the family's distinct value in education, while also encouraging interaction with other communities?

This study aims to address the lack of critical exploration of the family's distinct character and to move beyond the impasse created by these dual approaches. It does so through a somewhat unconventional method within educational science: a critical, conceptual, and evaluative analysis of major contemporary tendencies, combined with a constructive proposal for alternative approaches based on personalist philosophy. The personalist perspective is chosen because it offers a better understanding of both the need and the difficulty of articulating what family might mean. Central to this perspective is the distinction between approaching the family as a *problem* and approaching it as a *mystery*. The value of this distinction lies in making space for the family's distinct character and its particular role in education, while also acknowledging that this distinctiveness cannot be fully captured through general definitions or functional descriptions. This contribution brings a new dimension to current debates on the educational triangle, which tend to begin from—and remain focused on—the perspective of the school.

Family in recent studies of the educational triangle

A key focus of recent academic discussions on improving educational partnerships among schools, families, and communities is the need to better account for the diversity of family forms and the differences in how they are embedded in wider communities (Sheldon & Turner-Vorbeck, 2019, pp. 9–138). In particular, the distinctiveness of urban

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settings compared with suburban and rural contexts deserves greater attention (Johnson, 2015; Swindler Boutte & Johnson, 2021).

When families are discussed, earlier research has tended to view them primarily in negative terms, with suspicion, namely, as obstacles to a successful school career. This has been described as the "deficit approach" (Johnson, 2015, p. 2). A "strengths-based approach" is often presented as an alternative, with Joyce Epstein's extensive work from the 1990s onward as its leading example (Epstein et al., 2019). However, Epstein's appreciative approach has also been criticized for allowing the school's perspective to dominate and for suggesting that school and family are equivalent partners in education. Critics argue that her approach pays too little attention to ideology (Johnson, 2015, p. 8), to what parents actually do for their children (Sheldon & Turner-Vorbeck, 2019, p. 4), and to how they wish to be involved in their children's schooling (Swindler Boutte & Johnson, 2021, p. 180).

Negative approaches to the family overlook the tremendous effort that low-income families, in particular, invest in providing daily necessities and striving to participate fully in society. As a result, concerns about inclusion (Kroeger, 2019) and families' freedom to bring their own character to their children's upbringing are not sufficiently addressed. In short, recent critical discussions of collaboration within the educational triangle emphasize the importance of reciprocity in the relationship between schools and families. Epstein, for instance, advocates a "family-like school" and a "school-like family" (Epstein, 2010, p. 83). Others refer to "bringing home learning to school and school learning home" (Sheldon & Turner-Vorbeck, 2019, p. 4). This call for reciprocity is further nuanced by closer attention to the complexity of family life, especially families' struggles with discrimination based on race and ethnicity, unequal access to learning opportunities, and non-mainstream family forms (Sheldon & Turner-Vorbeck, 2019, p. 4).

Underlying this shift is a self-critical recognition that the school's perspective has long dominated the conversation, whereas the distinctive character of the family has received far less attention. Yet in practice, the turn toward reciprocity has led less to an examination of what

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characterizes the family as such, and more toward documenting the specific pressures that families face due to discrimination and limited—especially financial—resources. What exactly is "family-like" about the struggles is largely assumed rather than made central to the analysis. Family thus often comes to stand primarily for acknowledging each person's uniqueness as well as for intimate, longstanding relationships between its members, whereas the school's defining feature is that it recognizes children primarily as students. Families are then expected to support this role by emphasizing the importance of schooling and helping to shape related activities such as homework.

It is remarkable that these approaches in favor of stronger partnerships do not give more attention to the distinct character of the family as a phenomenon. Clearly, the family is a different kind of community from the school or the neighborhood. To name just a few distinguishing aspects, family relationships are usually marked by a greater degree of givenness and enduring connectedness than those found in school or neighborhood settings. Being born into a family places all relatives in certain predetermined roles: child, sibling, (grand)mother or father, aunt, uncle, and so on. These positions usually imply strong responsibilities toward other members. This givenness takes shape in the specific culture of a family. Such a culture is not just the result of socioeconomic, ethnic, or religious factors: every family has its own distinctiveness in language, customs, physicality, and more and these differences are often difficult for outsiders to understand or evaluate. This contributes to a certain closedness or seclusion characteristic of families. The givenness of relationships, strong mutual responsibilities, and a distinct closed character are not nearly as prominent in school or neighborhood communities, where relationships tend to be much more functional and individuals can, in principle, be replaced by others with the same competence.

These differences among the communities of family, school, and neighborhood also help explain the dual evaluation of the family that is visible in literature on the educational triangle. The opposing approaches of suspicion and appreciation can easily be understood in light of the givenness, interdependence, and seclusion just mentioned. These aspects

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carry both positive and negative potential, value and risk. Greater attention to these basic characteristics of the family and their dual evaluation seems important for improving reciprocity within the educational triangle. However, education is not unique in its ambivalent assessment of the family. This duality is widespread across Western societies. This wider climate of evaluating the family is important to consider as a backdrop for how it appears in education. Let us first examine the more general negative views of the family.

Suspicion of family

A suspicious attitude toward family often stems from the harm that it can cause to its members. In a very direct sense, this includes abuse. The majority of sexual abuse occurs in families. Psychological manipulation, especially of older people, also frequently takes place there. More broadly, families can transmit problems across generations: poverty, unemployment, limited integration into society, illiteracy, addiction, or criminal behavior. Finally, harm can arise from the moral demands that family places on its members to care for one another. Family is the context of "informal care," ranging from physical assistance, medical support, cleaning, or shopping to psychological help or assistance with schoolwork. Such care includes raising one's own children, with all the educational responsibilities that entails, as well as caring for aging parents. It may also take the form of more demanding long-term care for relatives with chronic illnesses or disabilities. Family care does not come only from parents for children or children for parents, but also for aunts, uncles, cousins, and nieces. Although in many countries part of this care is provided by professionals, much of it still takes place informally, and many governments take this for granted.

Although this care often benefits people and brings them satisfaction, its risks are clear. It is care that frequently takes place out of sight and for which there is no financial compensation. As a result, the appreciation people receive for it is often limited—both from society and

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within families themselves. Caregiving is hard work and can partly alienate people from one another. It can also simply become overwhelming, especially when combined with paid employment, the well-known "second shift," and the "third shift" that women in particular tend to shoulder. Family therefore becomes a troublesome factor for critics because of the taken-for-granted expectation that it should provide unpaid, invisible care. The family, in this view, perpetuates an unjust system of caregiving.

These concerns are real. Of course, much good happens in the family sphere: people find joy, recognition, and fulfilment there. But precisely in the characteristic assumption of "selfless caring" lie certain dangers. Family, in general, has a "preserving" character; it tends to reinforce the status quo. Because human beings are familial creatures, they never start from scratch. Trauma, addictions, and illnesses are passed down through generations. In modern societies that try to give individuals as many opportunities as possible, family therefore becomes an object of suspicion. Legal systems ensure that wealth is inherited by family members, regardless of whether they actually need it. Put bluntly, thanks to family structures, people with substantial resources keep getting richer, while those with limited means remain poor. This suggests that the family circle should be opened up and made more transparent so that the unseen can come to light. Inequality, injustice, and abuse should be confronted, and the responsibility for care should be shared more broadly by society as a whole.

Appreciation of family

While these negative evaluations stem from the family's presumed tendency to preserve inequality, opposite approaches also exist. These often arise from a broader dissatisfaction with a one-sided, emancipatory emphasis on individual freedom and opportunity. As a result of this individualist focus, people may lose trust in government and democracy and feel compelled to fight for their own rights. Government institutions, including schools, come to be viewed as service providers for individual comfort and well-being, rather than as common goods in which citizens

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also have a duty to invest, even when the benefits are not immediately visible. Liberal individualism can indeed be empowering in the struggle for equal opportunities, but it can also mercilessly attribute people's circumstances to their own failings and leave them to fend for themselves.

Beginning from these concerns about the limitations of individualism, the family is then presented as the alternative. The very aspects considered risky or problematic in negative evaluations are now seen as revealing something essential about human nature: the fact that we have family ties shows that we are not isolated individuals. We cannot survive without the care of others. The specific character of the family reveals that human beings are relational creatures, naturally oriented toward social connection.

A concrete example of an educational practice that proceeds from this conviction is homeschooling. It often begins with dissatisfaction with rigid and ideologically charged public education (Greenwalt, 2021, p. 365). This dissatisfaction concerns the values conveyed in schools or the narrow mold of "good behavior" and learnability that schools tend to enforce. Another example, found in social work, is Family Group Conferencing (FGC) or Family Group Decision Making (FGDM). These methods seek to involve a wider kinship network when an individual is in distress, instead of relying solely on professional support. Their underlying assumption is that, when provided with accurate information and adequate resources, families are capable of protecting their members—especially children—in ways that public institutions cannot (Doolan, 2012; Marsh & Crow, 1998, pp. 37–38). Research shows that these practices are evaluated positively: families feel heard, feel that they have a voice and can manage their own affairs, rather than being silenced and rendered helpless as often happens under the traditional welfare strategies of the modern interventionist state (De Jong & Schout, 2013; Pennell, 2006).

Thus, positive approaches begin with the assumption that the family is a distinct sphere that reveals the relational nature of being human and highlights the value of family relationships for a wide range of purposes: parenting, education, care, and more. These approaches, however, do not in themselves explain what makes the family distinctive. Instead,

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the family is often treated as an instrument for solving social or individual problems. What precisely constitutes the family's distinctiveness in these solutions is not an obvious or central question. Nor do these approaches encourage critical reflection on the possible risks or weaknesses of family life.

An impasse in approaches to family

What emerges from this broader analysis of contemporary suspicious and appreciative approaches to family is a contradictory picture which parallels the dual evaluation of family in the literature on the educational triangle. Family is said to possess unique value in raising children or providing care in times of difficulty, yet it remains unclear how this value relates to the negative aspects of inherited problems or the risk that caregiving responsibilities may overburden people. It is also unclear how one can both open the family to outside scrutiny and professional involvement—for tasks such as education and care—while simultaneously respecting and nurturing the family's distinctive nature. In short, there seems to be an impasse in approaches to family, both in educational discussions and more broadly. Suspicious and appreciative perspectives sit side by side, yet they lead to contradictory courses of action. Moreover, across these approaches, the distinct character of the family is assumed rather than thoroughly examined, which increases the risk of treating the family primarily as an instrument: something valuable only insofar as it serves other aims.

To move beyond this impasse, we turn to a different kind of reflection on family—one that cannot be easily classified as either negative or positive. Such reflections are found in the philosophical and political movement of personalism beginning in the 1930s (Bréchon, 1976, pp. 149–167). Personalism emerged as a countermovement to the dominant ideologies of that period: fascism, communism, and capitalism. It stresses that human beings should be valued as persons: unique, irreplaceable beings. From this comprehensive perspective, the value or meaning of human beings

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should never be reduced to their membership in a community or to their role in an economic system. At the same time, a personalist view holds that this uniqueness becomes visible and can flourish only in relationships with others. People cannot be seen as self-contained; they are always embedded in relationships. For this reason, personalism gives particular attention to intimate relationships as they take shape in the family. This does not, however, imply an uncritical appreciation of family. Rather, its attention to the family's distinct character includes recognition of its risks and weaknesses. Finally, the comprehensive approach of personalism includes a spiritual or transcendent dimension. With this in mind, let us take a closer look at how family is understood in the work of Gabriel Marcel (1889–1973) and his younger contemporary Jean Lacroix (1900–1986).

Marcel: Family as mystery

Marcel approaches the family as a "mystery" (Marcel, 2010, pp. 62–117). *Mystery* is a central term throughout his work. He uses it to describe a way of engaging with reality that must be distinguished from approaching it as a "problem" (Marcel, 2010, p. 62). A problem approach is detached; it seeks objectivity by analyzing issues in commonly understood terms in order to arrive at a solution acceptable to all. Yet not all matters can be grasped in such a detached way. For Marcel, the best example of something requiring a mystery approach is the topic of family (Marcel, 1950, pp. 197–219). Of course, one can identify concrete problems related to family: divorce, having children, or obligations toward parents. But focusing only on such issues easily loses sight of family as a comprehensive phenomenon (Marcel, 2010, p. 62). A mystery approach seeks this "constant element" (p. 93). Studying it is difficult because it is bound up with our own experience; it is something in which we are ourselves involved (p. 63). Family is "consubstantial with me, and I with them" (p. 65). For this reason, it cannot be fully objectified. It is difficult to analyze what family is. Yet family carries strong meanings that also motivate action (Marcel, 1950, p. 212). Often, people are not fully aware of these meanings, nor do they articulate

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them. Consider the naturalness with which people care for family members. One simply does it, without needing reasons.

Marcel uses spiritual or religious language to express this mystery approach. In the family, he suggests, we encounter what he calls "life"—an experience of life as gift or creation, something that human beings receive and pass on (Marcel, 2010, pp. 78–82). It is an experience of participating in a life that is larger or deeper than one's individual existence. The family shows us, for instance, that we live from what we have inherited from those before us, and that we, in turn, pass on. Family places us in a posture of receptivity and gratitude for what befalls us. Passing on life also requires humble availability. We express this concretely when we assume responsibility for our own lives and for the lives of others as part of this wider community, becoming creative with the gift of life that we encounter there. According to Marcel, this mystery of the family receives decreasing recognition in his time, which leads to the domination of the public sphere (Marcel, 2010, pp. 66–67).

Lacroix: Reticence and confession

In his book entitled *Force et faiblesses de la famille* (Lacroix, 1948), Lacroix also approaches family as a mystery. He distinguishes this view from the dominant negative and positive approaches, as well as from instrumentalizing ones (pp. 7–8), which treat the family as an object. To approach the family as a mystery is to understand it as something of which the reflecting subject is a part. Moreover, the individual becomes a person through belonging to this particular kind of community. The family shows that we owe our personhood to others (pp. 49–52). The meaning of this specific community experienced in family life is "non-public": family ties may be invisible to others, they do not need to be named, and may remain implicit. A certain seclusion from the public sphere is precisely what allows this special intimacy to emerge. This non-public character is what Lacroix calls the "diffidence" of the family: its modesty or reticence (*pudeur*, p. 49).

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"Reticence" echoes Marcel's characterisation of the family as mystery: both involve inscrutability or unnameability. This does not mean nothing can be said about what characterizes family. Lacroix identifies one act as particularly distinctive of family: confession (*aveu*, p. 43). Confession is twofold: of love and of guilt (pp. 54–55). Those who confess guilt seek re-entry into the social world. In the public sphere of justice, this occurs through a complex legal process of judgement and punishment, which never fully restores what was broken (pp. 59–60). In the family, however, such a confession can be received differently. The restoration of relationships and the recognition of the person as more than their fault become possible here, sometimes even without explicit expression. The same applies to the confession of love. This does not arise in the public sphere, where relationships are often shaped by the general human struggle rooted in the desire to possess another (pp. 58, 66). In the family, by contrast, this can be transformed into a confession *to* the other, placing the other first and making oneself available in service. It is precisely in this way, Lacroix argues, that one becomes a person.

Mystery as critical potential

Clearly, Marcel and Lacroix speak highly of the family, and the danger of idealization therefore looms. Yet both aspects—the mysterious nature of the family and the reticence expressed in confession—also illuminate the risks or, in Lacroix's words, the weaknesses of family. Its inscrutable and non-public character brings with it a seclusion that can become fertile ground for abuse. The family can become too close-knit (Lacroix, 1948, pp. 112–113) and isolated, turning in on itself and becoming an end in itself. A counterweight to this must come from a higher aim that can, paradoxically, only be experienced within the family: "there is something that goes beyond every human community, and that cannot be denied without failing to recognize the community and degrading it" (p. 116). Like Marcel, Lacroix uses religious terms—"life itself," "the Other," "the Absolute," "God"—to indicate this higher aim. Openness to

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this dimension also means openness to other communities (p. 117). Moreover, it guards against the idealization and absolutization of the family.

Approaching family as mystery, then, for these two personalist thinkers, means drawing attention to the depth of existence that can be encountered in family life. Family is the place where new life can emerge, which evokes awe and wonder. Here, life is experienced as something that has a past and a future, and that is embodied in people with whom one can live in relationships of love and service. Having such experiences requires a certain seclusion, which always carries the risk of becoming enclosed in itself and losing a sense of connection to the transcendent and to others beyond the family. Yet it is precisely that connection to transcendence that can act as a critical force that always calls the family toward openness again (Schaafsma, 2023, pp. 277–278).

Conclusions

We turned to these personalist thinkers on family because of the impasse visible in current approaches to family in discussions of the educational triangle. This impasse stems from a lack of attention to the family's distinct character, from the dual and contradictory evaluations of the family, and from its instrumentalization. The result is a set of incompatible tendencies: on the one hand, a push to open the family to wider communities such as schools because of its limitations in educating children; on the other, a desire to preserve the family because of its supposedly unique contribution to education. Approaching family as mystery offers a counterbalance to four risks arising from this impasse—risks that are also directly relevant to how schools engage with families. These four counterbalances elucidate the impact of a mystery approach on the development of educational sciences:

1. Risk of overlooking the family's distinct character: We observed that in many reflections on family and education, the family's unique character is assumed rather than examined. Approaching family as

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mystery makes one more emphatically aware of this distinctiveness and of why it is so hard to articulate. It draws attention to the difficulty of naming what family might mean. But it also clarifies that this difficulty stems from the deep experiences of "life itself" that take place in the family. Making space for such experiences requires a certain degree of seclusion. Educational partnerships should respect this seclusion insofar as it is necessary for the family to be a family. This distinct character of family implies that mutual cooperation within the educational triangle will never be entirely smooth; it will always involve some friction.

2. Risk of asking too much of the family: When the distinct character of family is understood in terms of its relationship to the depth of existence, this can guard against a one-sided instrumental focus on the family's usefulness for tasks such as education. Such a focus risks undermining or eroding the family, as much is expected from it while its distinct character is neither nourished nor supported in these functional roles. A mystery approach stresses the importance of time spent together without any particular purpose. An awareness of "life itself" cannot be scheduled or produced on demand; it often arises precisely in the unstructured, seemingly useless activities of sharing everyday life. Without this, the family becomes eroded and loses its distinctive value.

3. Risk of judging the family: Improving cooperation within the educational triangle is often envisaged as a matter of increasing reciprocity. A mystery approach draws attention to the fact that reciprocity is only possible up to a point. An outsider can never experience what family means in the way its members do. The mystery of what it means to be "among us" is something a non-family member cannot fully grasp and, as noted above, even family members themselves often struggle to put it into words. Furthermore, families today take increasingly diverse forms, including same-sex parents or parents who come from disrupted family backgrounds and form new family units. This growing diversity may make mutual understanding and recognition across families even more difficult, and even more so between families and

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schools. It takes effort to step outside one's own assumptions about what is "normal." Yet this is necessary in order to create space for others to experience the depth of existence in their own specific family circumstances. Approaching every family as involving a dimension of mystery therefore calls for restraint and humility when judging the family life of others.

4. Risk of overly negative, one-sided evaluations of the strong influence of family: Precisely because of its mystery character, family is a community shaped by powerful impulses arising from a mode of connection that presupposes a relationship with "life itself." The impact of this kind of community on an individual is different from that of school or the local community. It produces a distinctive kind of moral experience: one marked by strong feelings of responsibility and indebtedness to others. This is what Lacroix highlights through the family's characteristic confessions of love and guilt. The moral appeal felt within the family often seems inescapable. It can generate deep loyalty, especially between children and parents. From the standpoint of schools or neighborhoods, this attachment is not always easy to understand. It can come across as overly demanding on the individual and thus a reason to intervene in family life. Of course, it is important to remain alert to this danger. Yet meaningful critical discussion, or possible intervention, becomes possible only when one first fully acknowledges the family's distinct way of being connected. Only with this recognition in place can the individual be protected from a moral appeal that risks becoming oppressive.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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