

Transforming rural education in Colombia through family participation

The case of school as a learning community

Marta Soler
University of Barcelona

Rosa Valls
University of Barcelona

Teresa Morlà-Folch
University Rovira i Virgili

Rocío García-Carrión
University of Deusto, Ikerbasque Science Foundation

Keywords: Learning communities, family participation, academic achievement, social cohesion, rural education

- The transformation of a rural school into a learning community in Colombia is reported
- Family participation occurs in teaching and learning strategies and decision making
- A dialogic learning approach contributes to a better school climate and social cohesion
- This project leads to better academic results that are above the national average in Colombia

Purpose: This article studies the impact of the implementation of learning communities in a rural context of Colombia, specifically concerning the improvements related to learning and social cohesion.

Design/methodology/approach: This longitudinal case study analyses the process and the impacts of the transformation of a school in 2015 and the subsequent years of 2016 and 2017. The data analysed include standardized external tests, a documentary analysis of the school and interviews with students, family members and the schoolteacher.

Findings: The results obtained indicate academic improvement within the school with results that exceed the national average of Colombia. The results also report how violence has been reduced by 80%. All of these outcomes were motivated by the participation of the community in the school.

Practical implications: The conclusions drawn are relevant as they show a success case that overcame the difficulties related to the lack of accessibility and quality of rural education in Colombia.

JSSE

Journal of Social Science
Education
Vol. 18, No. 4 (2019)
DOI 10.4119/jsse-1745
pp. 67-80

1 INTRODUCTION

The Sustainable Development Goals aim to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all people by 2030 (UN, 2019). Specifically, objective 4, i.e., quality education, refers to inclusive and effective learning environments for all. However, in the educational field, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2018) details that 263 million children, adolescents and youth worldwide are not in school. This means that one in five children of primary school age cannot benefit from the quality education goal. Likewise, previous research has shown a substantial

link between poverty and educational opportunities, which is especially present in situations of the persistence of extreme poverty (Ferguson, Bovaird & Mueller, 2007; Lampert, Ball, García-Carrión & Burnett, 2019).

Concern for education and a lack of accessibility for the entire population is a global problem. This global challenge is clearly manifested in the Latin American context and specifically in Colombia, where 34% of the population are recorded as living below the poverty line (Habitat for Humanity, 2019). According to the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE), the monetary level below which a person in Colombia is considered to be in poverty is \$105 per month. Colombia is the second-most unequal country in Latin America and ranks seventh in the world among 194 countries (Alvaredo, Chancel, Piketty, Saez & Zucman, 2018). The complex economic situation experienced by some families in Colombia requires that minors also participate in the production chain in many cases. According to the study by Serrano, Serrano, Mármol & Mesa (2015), this reality affects 15.4% of the population between 5 and 17 years old. Colombians living in rural areas have multiple disadvantages, such as higher poverty rates (43% compared to 27% in urban areas) (OECD, 2016). The educational exclusion suffered by young people in the Colombian context is even greater in rural sectors; in 2013, the average number of years of schooling among the rural population 15 years of age and older was 5.47 years, while that of the urban population was 9.36 years (MEN, 2015).

The concern for effectively addressing school failure is a globalized problem and has drawn the attention of many researchers. Specifically, the INCLUD-ED: Strategies for inclusion and social cohesion in Europe from education project (European Commission, FP6, 2006–2011) contributed educational actions in various European contexts that achieved the educational success and social cohesion of all involved students. As a result, the project identified what have been defined as Successful Educational Actions (Flecha, 2015) that have now been transferred to more than 6700 schools in 14 countries around the world¹. The model of using schools as learning communities recommended by the European Commission as being effective in reducing the school dropout rate in Europe is based on the implementation of such actions that highlight the importance of interactions and community participation as key elements of educational success (García, Ruiz, & Comas, 2019). Particularly, teaching and learning in schools as learning communities differ from conventional classroom practices wherein teachers mostly talk and students mostly listen. There is considerable evidence of the prevalence of the 'initiation-response-evaluation' (IRE) (Cazden, 1988; Reynolds, 2019). Instead, the dialogic approach in the learning communities transform the monologic classroom discourse by involving families and community members in all the learning spaces inside the school where they engage in productive interactions for learning and social cohesion (Flecha & Soler, 2013). The use of schools as learning communities (LC) is a widely replicated model in Europe and Latin America. Currently, there are more than 685 schools worldwide, 411 of which are in Latin America, that function as LCs. Although there is ample scientific literature on the improvements that these schools achieve in very diverse contexts (García-Carrión, 2016; 2013; Diez, Gatt, & Racionero, 2011), most studies have been carried out in the European context and especially in urban settings. In fact, there have been few studies carried out in the Latin American context; interestingly, one of them, a study conducted by García-Carrion, Gómez, Molina & Ionescu (2017) on four schools in South America, has explored teachers' professional development in schools as learning communities.

This article focuses on analysing the impact of the transformation into a LC of a rural primary school, Monteloro, which is part of the Rural Educational Institution of Altavista (Colombia). Particularly, the progress of improvements in learning and coexistence in the centre from the beginning of the project in 2015 through the subsequent years of 2016 and 2017 is examined. First, the current educational situation of the rural schools in Colombia is presented, as well as the characteristics of the LC model in the country. Second, the research site and the methods used are detailed. The results section presents the analysis of the data obtained on the educational impacts once the school transformed into a LC. The conclusions that are derived are consistent with those from previous research, which has studied the improvements achieved by the LC both at the level of student academic results and at the level of coexistence.

1.1 The challenge of rural education in Colombia

In recent years, the education situation in Colombia has improved in three relevant aspects: improvement in PISA test scores (although the national average is still below the OECD average), an increase in enrolment coverage and an increase in public investment in education (OECD, 2016). However, the reports of entrepreneurs for education (FExE, 2018) show that the most vulnerable children have fewer available educational services, worse infrastructures and less support in the Colombian education system. Specifically, vulnerability in the Colombian rural context has increased. According to PISA (2018), the gap between official urban and rural schools has increased twelve points between 2006 and 2015. Data from the Large Integrated Household Survey (GEIH) (DANE, 2015) show that the net enrolment rate in primary education in rural areas is slightly lower than that in urban areas, but this is not a remarkable fact. On the other hand, the differences are highlighted when examining the enrolment in secondary education, which reaches 68% in rural areas compared to 84% in urban areas.

The OECD (2016) notes that the low quality of education is a determining factor in this progressive withdrawal. Specifically, 24% of young people between 17 and 24 years of age in rural areas neither work nor are looking for employment (Ministry of National Education, 2014). Moreover, the DANE (2018) shows that the urban illiteracy rate recorded in 2017 was 5.24%, while in the rural population, the rate rose to 12.6%. In relation, the report of the Field Transformation Mission (DNP, 2014) shows that in Colombia, there is a lack of opportunities for rural inhabitants and a growing gap in terms of poverty with respect to urban areas and the system of cities in particular (Herrera, Buitrago, Lorenzo, and Badae, 2015). In addition to the challenges posed by the low educational quality that leads to greater educational and social exclusion, the high rates of violence in educational spaces also increase the difficulties faced by the Colombian education system. Peer violence is a priority challenge to be addressed in Colombia since 63% of elementary students report being victims of some type of bullying or peer abuse (ECLAC, 2018). The same report from the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC, 2018) details that in many cases, violence is directly linked to discrimination, including ethnic, economic, social, political and cultural discrimination; that is, violence is accentuated in the most vulnerable groups.

Faced with this alarming situation of inequality, the government has developed various educational programmes to respond to the challenges posed by rural education. Among them, the most referenced programmes include the Rural Educational Project and the New School and Indigenous School programmes. Since 1999, Colombia has promoted the Rural Education Project (PER), with the objective of mitigating the problems that affect coverage and educational quality in rural areas and ultimately contributing to overcoming the gap between rural and urban education (Mineducación, 2013; 2019). The implementation was carried out in two phases. The first phase focused on improving access and educational coverage among the rural population between 5 and 17 years of age; at the same time, educational programmes suitable to the geographical and social conditions of rural areas were proposed. Therefore, the need to “ruralize” not only educational programmes but also public policy (Martínez-Restrepo, Pertuz & Ramírez, 2016) is a current issue being discussed. A later phase focused on consolidating the programme, and although this approach has led to progress towards the development of public policies in Colombian rural education—overcoming the educational inequalities from which they suffer—it is still a pending challenge that can be addressed from effective educational projects that involve the entire community.

1.2 Schools as Learning Communities: a community-based school project across countries

Schools as learning communities are based on the dialogic conception of learning, which is in line with the social conceptions of cognition and development that demonstrate the concept's benefits for education (Villardón-Gallego, García-Carrión, Yáñez-Marquina, Estévez, 2018; Molina, Shubert, & Vidu, 2017). Particularly, this model is grounded on Flecha's dialogic learning and in its seven underlying principles that are built on classic social theories, including those of Habermas (1984), Freire (1970), Mead (1934) and Vygotsky (1978). Flecha (2000) explains the relationships between these foundational theories and maintains that learners reach deep understandings of subject knowledge and engage in

processes of personal and social transformation through interactions that are based on (1) *egalitarian dialogue*, build on each person's (2) *cultural intelligence*, seek (3) *transformation*, (4) enhance the knowledge and basic competences; (5) are based on the value of *solidarity*, act as sources of (6) *creation of meaning*, and promote (7) *equality of differences*. Accordingly, teachers, students, families and community members engage in interactions guided by those principles. Hence, the LCs have transformed the classroom, the school and the community, creating new learning spaces (Garcia Yeste, Morlà, & Ionescu, 2018; Girbés-Peco, Renta, De Botton & Álvarez, 2018). As a result of its impact, different institutions of the European Union, the European Commission, the European Parliament and the European Council, among others, have recommended the LC as a model to prevent school dropout (European Council, 2011).

With the aim of guaranteeing the right to education for each boy and girl and making accessible to all the best scientific evidence available thus far, several Latin American institutions have decided to introduce that evidence to their schools and communities. Specifically, in the Latin American context, the first schools as learning communities began in 2013, and there are currently approximately 411 schools (Natura, 2019). In Colombia, learning communities were implemented starting in 2014 through the Entrepreneurs for Education Foundation (FExE) and Natura Cosméticos and in coordination with CREA and the Natura Institute. Throughout Colombia, there are currently 105 schools (60 rural and 45 urban) involved in LCs in Antioquia, Atlántico, Cundinamarca, Caquetá, Putumayo, Santander and Valle del Cauca. In 2014, it was decided to pilot the project in Colombia, and it was implemented in four areas in conjunction with the involvement of the educational institutions in those areas (the Itagüí Secretariat of Education, the Cali Mayor's Office - María Perlaza Corporation, and the Caicedo González Rio Paila Castilla Foundation). Due to the good results of the schools participating in the pilot program in subsequent years, it was decided to expand the project progressively among others schools under study. The Monteloro school started the transformation process into a LC in October 2015 with the implementation of certain actions.

Schools as learning communities follow a five-phase process to implement the project. First, all teachers take part in intensive training where the basic outlines of the project are explained, as well as scientific research contributions that demonstrate successful implementations. This phase is called the (1) awareness phase. The next phase is the (2) decision-making process, in which the entire educational community decides whether to transform the educational centre into a LC. In the municipality of San Luis and its different venues, 100% of the participants agreed to begin the process of transformation into a LC. Then, the schools organize the next phase (3) and invite the entire community to "dream". This is a process to involve everyone in the school and in the community for developing a common objective and a collective purpose for the school development. Building on the principle of "egalitarian dialogue" the dream is a pathway to include all the voices, desires and aspirations in transforming the school. Next, (4) small groups of teachers, students and families together organize those desires to establish their priorities for each school. For example, a dream can be "a computer for each child", "improving maths" or "a friendly school without conflicts", the community look for successful strategies to address those challenges. Finally, they propose a plan for action (5) to move ahead with the transformation.

1.3 Methodology

This article studies the educational impact of the implementation of a LC in a rural context in Colombia. To respond to the stated objective, a longitudinal case study was carried out. The data were collected in 2016, one year after the implementation of the LC in the school, and again in 2017. This case study was carried out in the Rural Educational Institution (IER) of Altavista, which is composed of different schools; however, this particular study is focused on the Monteloro school. Due to the particularity of this case, we decided to carry out a qualitative exploratory case study with the purpose of conducting a concrete (Flick, 2004) and in-depth (Smith, 2018) description of the reality studied.

2 CASE STUDY: SAN LUIS (ANTIOQUIA)

San Luis is located in the eastern part of the Department of Antioquia, 124 kilometres from Medellín; it has a population of 10,923, 57% of which live in rural areas, and it has a density of 24.15 inhabitants / km². Mainly between 1984 and 1989, the area's strategic location made it a necessary route for the armed conflict actors, and it experienced the simultaneous presence of guerrillas and paramilitaries, which severely affected it. By 2017, despite being a very small municipality, San Luis reported 15,905 victims of all kinds, including disappearance, murder, antipersonnel mines and displacement, among others (Unit for Victims, 2017). Its educational community was also particularly affected by the dropping out of students due to the migration of their families, as well as their involvement in the conflict. Although it was previously a municipality with an agricultural vocation, only 7.25% of the current production is developed in this area (DANE, 2015). However, various school families are dedicated to working in the field, while most are workers at the two companies in the area dedicated to lime and stone. If we look at the data on educational success in the Altavista region, we see that the results are very low; 30% of the population has a completed primary education, while 63% does not. In addition, if we observe non-compulsory education, the data clearly decrease in relation to that pertaining to high school; only 2% of the population has a completed non-compulsory education (IER Altavista, 2013).

Specifically, no school within this educational institution, including the Monteloro school, has easy access to public transport or has a school route, which makes it difficult for children to move about. This has led to the isolation that many rural schools face in Colombia in which only teacher-student interactions occur inside the schools, whereas the community remain outside dealing with complex problems caused by situation of extreme poverty and lack of rural development. The school operates under the modality of single-teacher organization in a multi-grade classroom with age heterogeneity. Specifically, the school was composed of a population of 36 students in 2016 and 30 in 2017. In 2014, the school started implementing some SEAs, and in October 2015, the headquarters of Antioquia was developed as a LC. In the same year, the school organized a day so that the whole community could show their dreams related to the school over the next years; these dreams included improving academic performance, organizing the school, community participation, and opening the school as a community centre, among others. All dreams outlined in this period have been fulfilled; therefore, in August 2019, the community plans to return to specify new priorities for the school.

2.1 Data collection

The data reported in this article include quantitative data pertaining to school academic results obtained from standardized tests (SABER) and the results of internal evaluations and tests from the educational Institution. Eight interviews were conducted with family members, students and the teacher. The school has been informed since the beginning of this study and has actively participated in the entire process. The instruments used are detailed below:

2.2 Report of the Secretary of Education

This report shows the official data concerning the registration, quality and financial information of the school. The data collected with this technique facilitates the information needed to contextualize the school.

2.3 Report of the school

This report provides data particularly on the involvement of teachers, students and family members in the center. Likewise, it analyses certain learning practices, such as the number of student meetings held to recognize and discuss artistic and musical works, face-to-face activities for strengthening learning and academic results. Aspects related to family participation are also counted, such as the number of family members or people in the community who participate in the training activities offered by the educational headquarters.

2.4 SABER Tests in 5th grade

The SABER [Knowledge] test is a national test that aims to monitor the development of basic skills such as language and mathematics to contribute to the improvement of the quality of Colombian education by monitoring educational results. The test has a maximum duration of 5 hours and consists of 155 questions, which are divided into 55 questions for the language test, 55 for the math test and 45 questions related to the school context. The results of these evaluations and the analysis of the factors that affect them have not allowed us to identify the knowledge, skills and values that students develop. The test was completed by 7 fifth-grade students in 2017 and 5 fifth-grade students in 2016 (i.e., students between 10-11 years old in their last year of primary school).

2.5 Surveys

A questionnaire consisting of closed-ended questions was designed for family members and students. In the case of the family members, the questionnaire consists of three blocks of questions: (1) the participation of the family in school activities, (2) conflict resolution and (3) recognition of identity. In 2016, 6 families from the educational institution answered the questionnaire, and in 2017, 10 families answered the questionnaire. In the case of the students, the questionnaire consists of 10 questions related to the coexistence of the educational community and the motivation for learning. A total of 9 students participated in completing the questionnaire in 2016, and 8 participated in 2017.

2.6 Interviews

Eight interviews were conducted (Table 1) to collect data related to student learning. In particular, the interviews explored the students' opinion regarding the implementation of the LC. All interviews were held in the same school. The names specified in the manuscript are pseudonymous to guarantee the anonymity of the participants.

Table 1: Characteristics of the participants in the interviews:

	Pseudonym	Characteristics
Family relatives	Nuri	Mother of a son in the 4th grade
	Leydi	Mother of a son in the 1st grade, and another son in secondary school. In the afternoon she goes to school to help the director of the school and the younger brother.
	Vanesa	Mother of a son in the 3 rd grade
Pupils	Joaquin	Boy in the 4th grade
	Grey	Girl in the 4th grade
	Rachel	Girl in the 5th grade
	Mateo	Boy in the 5th grade
Teacher	Lucía	Teacher of all the grades

3 DATA ANALYSIS

In this article, the analysis was carried out at two levels. First, at the descriptive level, the analysis was based on the evidence provided by the quantitative indicators of the institutional tests. Second, an interpretative analysis of the data was conducted based on the questionnaires and interviews. The information obtained through official sources was systematized by the researchers together with teams of professional trainers from the Entrepreneurs for Education Foundation and was discussed with the educational community, with whom a fluent dialogue has been maintained. The codification and analysis of the data were carried out in a communicative way; that is, the inequalities / educational difficulties

were analysed, and the transformative elements were commented on to contribute to analysing those educational strategies that contribute to social cohesion and to overcoming educational inequalities, all of which were obtained through dialogue with the participants in the study (Mertens and Sordé, 2014).

3.2 Results

According to the analysis of the collected data, the results can be structured into three main blocks, a) the participation of families and community has transformed the teaching and learning in the school b) school climate and coexistence has improved c) academic achievement as reported in standardised tests has also improved.

3.3 Participation of the families in teaching and learning interactions and decision making processes

In the case of the Monteloro school, community-school collaboration is woven through participation in decision-making, as well as involvement in educational tasks, including actively participating in the teaching and learning process within the school. On the one hand, the process of transformation into a learning community has allowed family members to participate in the management and organization of the school by becoming creating a democratic organization through "mixed committees". Teachers, parents and students formed these committees in which all members of the school are protagonists in making decisions about the school life. In the Monteloro school, four mixed committees were formed to address: a) academic issues, (b) cultural activities, (c) social cohesion and coexistence and (d) infrastructure and materials. This new organizational structure contributes to address the needs of the school as these committees are also responsible for operationalize the dreams contributed by the community; additionally, they have the autonomy to plan, implement and evaluate all of the priorities decided on by consensus. Accordingly, in this dialogic environment cultural intelligence and validity arguments prevail, family members or people from the community participate in mixed committees and feel involved in the decisions. In this way, the LCs operationalize the dialogic learning principles such as cultural intelligence and egalitarian dialogue among the participants.

Through the reports of the institution, the relevance of the educational participation of the community is specified. According to the indicators on family participation in the school in 2017, there were a total of 27 families in the school, 25 of which participated in decision making processes as members of the "mixed committees" and in the classrooms as volunteers in Interactive Groups. Their role as volunteers is to facilitate dialogic interactions among the children who are organised in small heterogeneous groups solving different curricular tasks in literacy and maths lessons. Each group carries out a task for about 15 minutes, and then the children move to the next task with a different volunteer. The teacher can observe, listen and support those children who need it the most. In sharing their knowledge in the group, the children externalize their thinking, modelling and developing higher order thinking skills and reinforcing understanding. Through this participation in the learning process families play an essential role and children develop positive attitudes towards the school, which create positive school-home synergies and relationships. Regarding this change, Nuri also highlights the commitment acquired by the families as follows:

What strikes me the most, what I like the most, is the commitment that the parents and children have acquired. Because before, the children finished studying and began to play like crazy and said nothing; right now, they go out and know what they are doing - they do their homework and then they can play. And it is the same with the parents because we have this commitment with the children.

The interviewed mothers show how the children themselves now explain the task they have and perform them together at home. Leidi, a mother, emphasizes as follows: "In fact, they learn first, and then they teach us". This participation in Interactive Groups has fostered the quantity and quality of interactions between families and students enhancing a process of mutual learning that has gone beyond the school walls. The participation of older brothers such as Oscar is also important; in the

afternoon, Oscar has no class since he is in high school. Therefore, he takes advantage of his free afternoons to support the teacher at his younger brother's elementary school. The teacher explains this commitment in a recently experienced situation:

As an example, to give just one, sometimes there is no class because there is a training or because I am attending a conference. For example, I went to a Latin American congress in Medellín, and it was for three days. The idea is that children do not lose so much class time. The third-grade group met at the house of Maximiliano and fulfilled their academic days; even when I arrived, they explained to me that they stayed there to sleep, and that they had studied more. Since then, the parents have offered themselves more to these things, and this is happening since the learning communities were implemented.

The involvement of families in Interactive Groups has increased the commitment of the families with all the children, fostering the sense of connectedness and belonging to the community. They have assumed the African proverb "It takes a village to raise a child" and looking after the learning process of other peoples' children, as stated by the director:

The impact (of the learning communities) has been very wide, but one thing that has impacted me is that parents are not only interested in the process of their children but also in the process of all the children.

3.4 Dialogic approaches for social cohesion and school climate

Dialogic learning as a principle of schools as learning communities has enhanced the production of egalitarian dialogues, in which the cultural intelligence of all people has been recognized in different interactions. The school also implemented Dialogic Literary Gatherings, a cultural activity in which children read and debate classic literature. Before taking part in the gatherings, children read a section as agreed with the whole class, with help from family at home, if necessary. While reading the children choose an idea from the text which they wish to share with the class, and they note the reason for their choice. Then, at the weekly DLG they come ready to share their choices and reasoning. The interviews show how this dialogic space allows the students to share thoughts and reflections from the book that are connected to their own lives. This activity has resulted in a better school climate and social cohesion in the class, since it has facilitated a respectful environment where everybody participates and all contributions are valued. This reality demonstrates an increase in the quality of coexistence, as well as a greater acceptance of their partners. For example, Vanesa comments as follows:

The education we have at the headquarters in Monteloro is excellent. Maximiliano is doing great with his readings, as he already understands; in academic aspects, as in all aspects, including social aspects, he is a very respectful child. We are all very close, and even the community has a principle of very strong unity.

Since the implementation of Interactive Groups, Dialogic Literary Gatherings and mixed committees, the number of conflicts has diminished, and the coexistence of the centre has improved. The reports made by the school itself show that in 2016, with a total of 30 families making up the school, there were 20 sanctioning notices, while in 2017, there were 4 notices sent out for 27 families. That is, there were 16 fewer notices filed in 2017 than in 2016, and there were no citations or expulsions. Although these improvements cannot be attributed only to the Learning Communities project, all the participants in the study relate these improvements to the changes introduced in the school as part of the project. This is consistent with previous research in other schools as LCs that has experienced similar processes (Garcia Yeste, Morlà, & Ionescu, 2018); in our case study this relation is established by the headteacher who reports the positive impact of engaging the school in a common goal in the relationships between students and also between the families:

Before starting learning communities in the institution, there were not only problems among students but also between parents; now, despite still having differences, they put

them aside for the institution to work towards a common good that is defined as the educational success of their children.

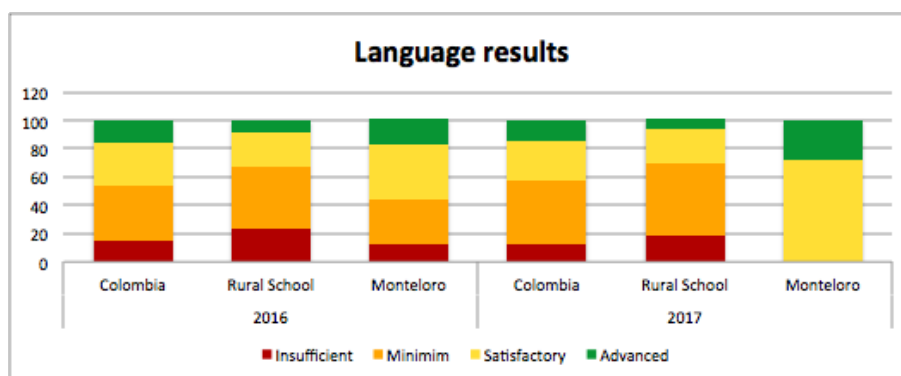
The decrease in violence is related to the perception that families and students have when they feel as though they are a part of the learning processes and the decision-making. This perception is motivated by the transformation to a LC and of the family becoming another active agent of the school. We observe how this perception has increased significantly. The report of the educational institution shows that families feel listened to and recognize that they feel trust and committed. In fact, the questionnaire shows that the percentage of families that consider themselves as recognized and valued for their differences improved by 67% (33% in 2016 compared to 100% in 2017). Likewise, from the egalitarian dialogue, 80% of families in 2017 considered that the relationships in their families had been strengthened, which demonstrates an improvement of 30% compared to the previous year. The LC goes beyond the walls of the school, and the transformation is possible through the involvement of all agents. Transformation has a clear impact on the agents' lives. The director herself acknowledges the following:

Something else to note that the community changes, is that my communities have also transformed me. This project has also made me change my way of being; before, I came to class just as it was, but with communities, I now have more affection with the students. And surely, if I give affection, the children will be much more responsible.

3.5 Improvement of learning

The analysis of students' academic attainment since the implementation of the LC resulted in improvements for all children in language and mathematics performing above the national average. If we compare the results of the school through the SABER tests, we see a marked improvement between the first round of tests carried after becoming a LC (tests carried out in 2016) and the second round of tests after the transformation (test carried out in 2017). While the scores obtained by 5th grade students at the national level in the language test did not show considerable changes between 2016-2017, the results of the students from the Monteloro school (see graph 1) show an improvement above the national average. In 2016, 39% of the students scored in the satisfactory level range, while in 2017, after another year of LC project implementation, this student body percentage increased to 72%. Thus, as seen in graph 1, in the Monteloro school, 28% of the students scored at the advanced level, which is relevant data since other rural schools with similar characteristics reach only 7% for advanced-level students.

Graph 1: Comparison between the results of the SABER test in the 5th grade



(Authors' own creation. Information extracted from ICFES, 2018 and the results of the SABER tests provided by the school)

The graph also shows that the pupils improved their abilities for reading and language. Participants in the study relate these improvements to the fact that students have participate in the Dialogic literary

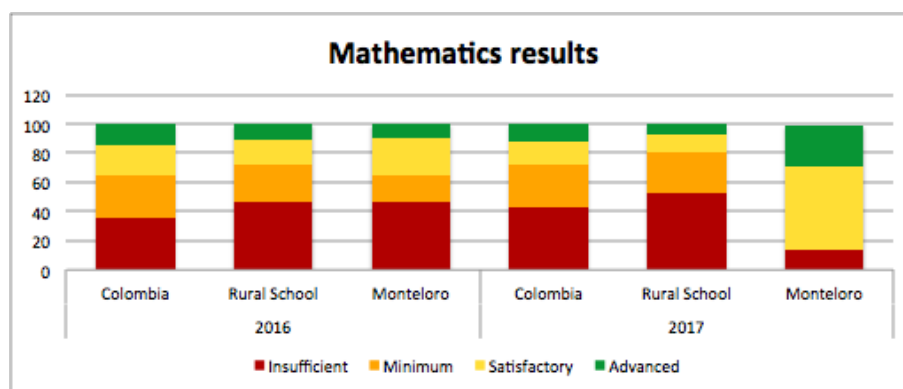
gatherings who took place weekly in the classrooms. Children read and discussed some of the greatest literary works and linked profound themes of the humankind with their own lives. Research has shown the benefits of this activity for improving academic skills of elementary children in vulnerable contexts (Lopez de Aguilera, 2019). In our study, the children's passion for reading fostered by this activity is one of the important aspects that emerged, as Vanesa (mother) states:

I think that this new thing of the dialogic literary gatherings has helped them a lot, since the children look more forward to reading. For example, Maximiliano [her third-grade son] now goes to the library in our house and looks for books to read without me having to tell him. This is very new, and one knows that this is helping them a lot.

Additionally, there has been an increase in the average number of books the students read and the number of visits to libraries or reading rooms. Specifically, according to the report from the educational institution, fifth grade students have increased the number of books they read, for example. Before starting the dialogic literary gatherings, the students reported reading one book per year; since 2016 and 2017, the students have indicated that they have read 4 books of universal classical literature. Likewise, as the report from the educational institution shows, the number of visits to the library or reading rooms increased in 2017, amounting to over 120 visits by this same student body.

On the other hand, in graph 2, we can observe the results of mathematics scores as measured by the standard SABER tests. In 2016, 47% of the students of the Monteloro school scored in the insufficient range, that is, not passing the less complex questions on the test. However, in just one year, 47% of the students scored in the satisfactory range, in addition to 28% who scored in the advanced level. Both in Colombia and in rural schools, there is a negative trend in mathematics outcomes; in both cases, the number of students in the upper levels (satisfactory and advances) decreases and those in the lower levels (minimum and insufficient) increase. In contrast, in the studied school, the improvement is notable; compared to 10% of the students who scored in the advanced interval in 2016, 28% of the students scored in the advanced interval in 2017.

Graph 2: Comparison between the results of the SABER tests in mathematics 5th grade



(Authors' own creation. Information extracted from ICFES, 2018 and the results of the SABER tests provided by the school)

The reports from the educational institution show that between 2016 and 2017, the results in the natural sciences and social sciences also showed a slight improvement. In the case of the natural sciences, the average performance in 2016 was 64.2% compared to 71.1% in 2017. In the case of the social sciences, the average performance was 69.8% and increased to 72% in 2017. That is, both the SABER tests and the internal tests of the school confirm that the Monteloro school students score higher than both the average levels for Colombia as a nation and those for rural schools. After the transformation of the school to a LC, students identify that the activities they perform are not easy but they all manage to perform them. At the same time, high expectations motivate the students to continue studying; for example, Joaquin, a fourth-grade student who spent a few months in another school due to family reasons, said: "In this school there is more focus on school performance, and I learn more". This

statement shows how students make a positive assessment. At the same time, students now show their interest in going to university; for example, two students interviewed dream of continuing with higher education, i.e., Gray wants to study chemistry and/or robotics, and Rachel wants to study medicine.

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The case analysed in this article is in line with previous evidence (Garcia-Carrion, Gómez, Molina & Ionescu, 2017; Flecha, 2015; Diez, Gatt, & Racionero, 2011), which shows that schools as learning communities achieve an improvement in learning and living together. Similarly, the evidence from the Monteloro school shows that when the community and the school dream together, educational opportunities are born that transform reality and generate new learning opportunities for everyone, even in the context of the Colombian rural schools.

Although the low quality of education in Colombia (OECD, 2016) is a challenge, especially for rural schools, the Monteloro school case questions the educational determinism and negative stereotypes suffered by rural schools and communities in various parts of the world (Hargreaves, 2017). Specifically, a community-based school model such as the one presented in this case facilitates the empowerment of families and teachers who work together towards one objective (Flecha & Soler, 2013). In this way, the case analysed herein shows the impact of the transformation of the school into a learning community in a period of 2 years, specifically that the school achieves educational results that are above the average of the country's rural schools and even the national average of Colombia in standardized tests. These results offer a possibility for reducing the inequality from which the country's rural schools still suffer (ECLAC, 2018).

On the other hand, as developed in the results, there was also an increase in the quality of coexistence in the studied school. The evidence shows an 80% reduction in conflict notices. According to the members of the community, this reduction can be widely justified by the responsibility that all members of the community acquire in a climate of trust and respect. These data are especially relevant in the context investigated since, as ECLAC (2018) shows, more than half of Latin American students acknowledge having suffered from some type of school violence. The creation of violence-free contexts from an early age in the school context is key to promoting learning (Rios-Gonzalez, Puigvert, Sanvicen, & Aubert, 2019). In addition, as observed in the results, the improvement of coexistence levels in schools coincides with the improvement of learning. Both the SABER tests and those of the educational institution are consistent in presenting an improvement in learning resulting from the consolidation of the learning community. This significant change comes when the school incorporates and achieves quality and frequency in the implementation of the project; it is when the transformation is consolidated and verified from dialogic learning that an equitable and cooperative distribution between agents is enhanced (Ten, Gatt & Racionero, 2011; Valls & Kyriakides, 2013).

Although the results cannot be generalized due to the nature of the case study, they do allow certain considerations to be made. It can be affirmed that the Monteloro school, which is a single-teacher, multi-grade and age-heterogeneous school, has improved by implementing a dialogic approach to teaching and learning through the involvement of the families, particularly, involving families in mixed committees and Interactive Groups, and implementing Dialogic Literary Gatherings. Although these improvements have not been tested under an experimental study to establish a correlational link to the Learning Communities project, there is a consistent internal triangulation of the views of children, parents and teachers on social and cognitive outcomes, as reflected in their comments. They have reflected on how family participation as volunteers in educational activities helps promote positive interactions among student-parents and motivates children to ask for help or offer help to their classmates. The school that has developed as a result from the participation of the families in classrooms and decision making processes may contribute to offer better educational opportunities.

Through an egalitarian dialogue, the school has fulfilled all of its dreams selected for the period between 2015 and 2019. Now, a new stage of challenges with new dreams to be undertaken is proposed. In short, the results presented herein point to a positive trend in the quality of learning, as well as the creation of a context in which an alternative to the lack of accessibility to rural education in

Colombia is proposed. Therefore, given the transformation of the studied school and the success achieved at it, it will be interesting to continue to follow the trajectory of the Monteloro school students and analyse if they manage to overcome early drop-out, successfully finish high school and break the vicious circle of inequality education in the rural context. It can be argued that, against all the odds, this case has challenged the educational determinism that leaves many children in rural communities excluded from the human right to education.

Acknowledgements

We want to thank the people responsible for the implementation of the project, namely, Fundación Empresarios por la Educación, Instituto Natura, and Natura Colombia for their fundamental contribution to the knowledge reported in this article, in addition to their commitment to improve Colombian education. Particularly, we acknowledge the collaboration of Oscar Mauricio Suárez Mantilla, who supported the Monteloro School throughout the transformation process. To the teacher, families and students of the Monteloro School, the evidence of improvements in their education and in their lives is the real motivation and meaning of our work.

REFERENCES

- Alvaredo, F., Chancel, L., Piketty, T., Saez, E., & Zucman, G. (coord.) (2018). *World Inequality Report 2018*. Retrieved from: <https://wir2018.wid.world/files/download/wir2018-full-report-english.pdf>
- Aubert, A., Molina, S., Shubert, T., & Vidu, A. (2017). Learning and inclusivity via Interactive Groups in early childhood education and care in the Hope school, Spain. *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction*, 13, 90-103. doi: 10.1016/j.lcsi.2017.03.002
- Cazden, C. (1988). *Classroom Discourse: The Language of Teaching and Learning*. Porthmouth, NH: Heinemann
- Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (CEPAL) (2018). *La ineficiencia de la desigualdad. Síntesis*. Santiago: Naciones Unidas. Retrieved from: https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/43566/4/S1800302_es.pdf
- DANE (2015). *COLOMBIA - Gran Encuesta Integrada de Hogares - GEIH - 2015*. Retrieved from: <http://microdatos.dane.gov.co/index.php/catalog/356>
- DANE (2018, Noviembre). Censo Nacional de Población y vivienda 2018. Retrieved from: <https://sitios.dane.gov.co/cnpv-presentacion/src/#donde00>
- Departamento Nacional de Planeación (DNP), Dirección de Desarrollo Rural Sostenible (2014). Misión para la transformación del campo. Definición de Categorías de ruralidad. Retrieved from: <https://colaboracion.dnp.gov.co/CDT/Estudios%20Economicos/2015ago6%20Documento%20de%20Ruralidad%20-%20ODDRS-MTC.pdf>
- Díez, J., Gatt, S., & Racionero, S. (2011). Placing Immigrant and Minority Family and Community Members at the School's Centre: The role of community participation. *European Journal of Education Research. Development and policy*, 46(2), 184-196. doi.org/10.1111/j.1465-3435.2011.01474.x
- European Council (2011). *Tacking Early School Leaving: A key contribution to the Europe 2020 Agenda*. Brussels: European Commission.
- Ferguson, H., Bovaird, S., & Mueller, M. (2007). The Impact of Poverty on Educational Outcomes for Children. *Paediatrics Child Health*, 12(8), 701-706.
- Flecha, R. (2000). *Sharing Words: Theory and Practice of Dialogic Learning*. Lanham, M.D: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Flecha, R. (2015). *Successful Educational Actions for Inclusion and Social Cohesion in Europe*. Berlin: Springer Publishing Company.

- Flecha, R. & Soler, M. (2013). Turning difficulties into possibilities: engaging Roma families and students in school through dialogic learning. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 43(4), 451–465. doi: 10.1080/0305764X.2013.819068
- Flick, U. (2004). Design and process in qualitative research. In U. Flick, E. von Kardorff, & I. Steinke (Eds.). *A companion to qualitative research* (pp. 146–152). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. London: Penguin.
- Fundación Empresarios por la Educación (FExE) (2018). *Reflexiones innegociables en educación básica y media para 2018-2022. Manifiesto Fundación Empresarios por la Educación*. Bogotá D.C.: FExE. Retrieved from: http://fundacionexe.org.co/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Resumen_Manifiesto_Educacio%CC%81n_Mi_Eleccio%CC%81n_V01.pdf
- García, R., Mircea, T., & Duque, E. (2010). Socio-cultural transformation and the promotion of learning. *Revista de psicodidáctica*, 15(2), 207-222.
- García-Carrión, R. (2016). Schools as Learning Communities: Making Possible the “Untested Feasibility”. *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 9(2), 152-164.
- García- Carrion, R., Gomez, A., Molina, S., & Ionescu, V. (2017). Teacher Education in Schools as Learning Communities: Transforming High-Poverty Schools through Dialogic Learning. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 42(4). doi: 10.14221/ajte.2017v42n4.4
- García Yeste, C., Morlà, T., & Ionescu, V. (2018). Dreams of Higher Education in the Mediterrani School Through Family Education. *Frontiers in Education*, 3(79). doi: 10.3389/feduc.2018.00079
- García, C., Ruiz, L., Comas, M.A. (2019). Formación de Familiares y Voluntariado. Los Beneficios de la Solidaridad en la Escuela. *Multidisciplinary Journal of Educational Research*, 9(2), 144-168. doi: 10.17583/remie.2019.4188
- Girbés-Peco, S., Renta, A.I., De Botton, L., & Álvarez, P. (2018). The Montserrat's neighbourhood dream: involving Moroccan residents in a school-based community development process in urban Spain. *Social & Cultural Geography*, (Published online). doi:10.1080/14649365.2018.1509112
- Habermas, J. (1984). *Theory of Communicative Action, Volume Two: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*. Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press.
- Habitat for humanity (2019). *Housing Poverty in Colombia*. Retrieved from: <https://www.habitatforhumanity.org.uk/country/colombia/>
- Herrera, L., Buitrago, R.E., Lorenzo, O., y Badea, M. (2015). Socio-Emotional Intelligence in Colombian Children of Primary Education. An Analysis in Rural and Urban Settings. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 203, 4-10. doi: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.08.251
- ICFES (2018). *Resultados Nacionales, Saber 3°, 5° y 9°, 2012-2017*. Retrieved from: <https://www2.icfes.gov.co/documents/20143/1627438/Resultado%20nacionales%20saber%20359%20-%202012%20al%202017%20-%202018.pdf>
- Instituto Natura (2019). Comunidades de Aprendizaje. Retrieved from: <https://www.comunidaddeaprendizaje.com.es/quien-participa>
- Lampert, J., Ball, A., Garcia-Carrion, R., & Burnett, B. (2019). Poverty and schooling: three cases from Australia, the United States, and Spain. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 1-19. doi.org/10.1080/1359866X.2019.1602863
- Lopez de Aguilera, G. (2019). Developing School- relevant Language and Literacy Skills through Dialogic Literary Gatherings, *International Journal of Educational Psychology*. 8(1),51-71. doi: dx.doi.org/10.17583/ijep.2019.4028
- Martínez-Restrepo, S., Pertuz, M., y Ramírez, J. (2016). La situación de la educación rural en Colombia, los desafíos del posconflicto y la transformación del campo. Retrieved from: <https://www.compartirpalabramestra.org/publicaciones-e-investigaciones/otras-investigaciones/la-situacion-de-la-educacion-rural-en-colombia-los-desafios-del-posconflicto-y-la-transformacion-del>
- Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, self and society* (Vol. 111). University of Chicago Press: Chicago.

- Mineducación (2013). *La educación es de todos*. Retrieved from: https://www.mineducacion.gov.co/1759/w3-article-329722.html?_noredirect=1
- Mineducación (2019). *Reporte a los sistemas de información. La educación es de todos*. Mineducación. Retrieved from: https://www.mineducacion.gov.co/1759/w3-article-369048.html?_noredirect=1
- Ministerio de Educación Nacional (MEN). (2014), *Informe de gestión y rendición de cuentas 2013*. Bogotá: Ministerio de Educación Nacional.
- MEN (2015). *OECD-Colombia education and skills accession policy review: Country background report*. Ministerio de Educación Nacional, Bogotá.
- OECD (2016). Education in Colombia. Retrieved from: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-in-colombia_9789264250604-en
- PISA (2018). PISA 2015 key findings for Colombia. Retrieved from: <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisa-2015-colombia.htm>
- Reynolds, T. (2019). Like a conductor-whole-class discussion in English classrooms. *English Teaching-Practice and Critique*, 18(4), 478-491. doi: 10.1108/ETPC-04-2019-0053
- Rhoades, B. L., Warren, H.K., Domitrovich, C.E., & Greenberg, M.T. (2011). Examining the link between preschool social- emotional competence and first grade academic achievement: The role of attention skills. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 26, 182-191. doi: 10.1016/j.ecresq.2010.07.003
- Ríos-Gonzalez, O., Puigvert, L., Sanvicen, P., Aubert, A. (2019). Promoting zero violence from early childhood: a case study on the prevention of aggressive behavior in Cappont Nursery, *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, doi: 10.1080/1350293X.2019.1579544
- Serrano Guzmán, M., Guzmán, M., Ríos, M., Rivera, M. (2015). Impact of child labor on the academic performance of adolescents from rural areas: A case study. *Revista Lasallista de Investigacion*, 12, 147-153.
- Smith, P. R. (2018). Collecting sufficient evidence when conducting a case study. *The Qualitative Report*, 23(5), 1054-1048. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol23/iss5/2>
- UN (2019). *Sustainable Development Goals*. Retrieved from: <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education/>
- UNESCO institute of Statistics (2018). *One in Five Children, Adolescents and Youth is Out of School*. Retrieved from: <http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/fs48-one-five-children-adolescents-youth-out-school-2018-en.pdf>
- Valls, R., & Kyriakides, L. (2013). The power of interactive groups: how diversity of adults volunteering in classroom groups can promote inclusion and success for children of vulnerable minority ethnic populations. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 43(1), 17-33. doi: 10.1080/0305764X.2012.749213
- Villardón-Gallego, L., García-Carrión, R., Yáñez-Marquina, L., & Estévez, A. (2018). Impact of the Interactive Learning Environments in Children's Prosocial Behavior. *Sustainability*, 10(2138). doi:10.3390/su10072138
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.