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The Evaluation Of Community Schools: Unearthing Small Impacts On Children And Families

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"A community school aims at ameliorating the broad development of all children and youngsters by supporting and/or creating a broad learning and living environment in which children and youngsters can gain a wide range of learning and living experiences. In order to achieve this goal, a broad network is established between organizations and authorities from the various sectors, that jointly shape and support the learning/living of children and youngsters."(Joos & Ernalsteen, 2010; Joos, Ernalsteen, Lanssens, & Engels, 2006). Community schools invest in a broad living and learning environment in order to maximize opportunities for children and youngsters. The focus is not only what is going on at school, during school hours, but also on connecting different systems (family, neighborhood,...). This is considered critical in reducing and eliminating the achievement gap between children from different social backgrounds and in creating more opportunities for children. In Brussels, 28 community schools are funded by the Flemish Community Commission (Vlaamse Gemeenschapscommissie) and the Government of Flanders (Vlaamse Overheid). These schools are located mainly in deprived neighborhoods. As this policy started in 2012, the question about 'impact' of these community schools is raised by the funding government. In January 2015 this research project started. In this paper we will discuss the methodological options taken. Community schools operate in a complex social field. To analyze the impact, several aspects have to be taken into account. In our research we use theory driven evaluation, that starts from implicit and explicit assumptions of stakeholders about what action is required to ameliorate children's opportunities (Chen, 2005) and a mixed method design. We will discuss the research process and choices with reference to evaluation research on community schools in the Netherlands (Kruiter, Fettelaar, Beekhoven, & e.a., 2013) and the United Kingdom (Cummings et al., 2007; Cummings, Dyson, & Todd, 2011).

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