

The Community as a Resource to Educate Primary School Children

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Abstract

The global financial crisis, increase in migration from troubled zones and the resulting more diverse multicultural and multilingual social settings across Europe have led to greater societal demands. As countries combat financial deficits and cut public spending, support to those in need decreases. Social inclusion has become one of governments' crucial societal challenges. Those hit hardest by the current crisis are the most vulnerable, particularly children and youths, who experience an increase in unemployment and decrease in general well-being and emotional health across all ages [1]. Schools, together with the community, can work together to help tackle this challenge without additional financial burden. This paper presents research results from the transnational study INCLUD-ED funded within the FP6 programme of the European Commission. This project focuses on how educational practices involving the community can promote social cohesion without additional costs. Six schools in five European countries with a successful track record of transforming children's academic performance were researched through a longitudinal study over a period of four years. A number of positive transformative approaches leading to better academic performance, positive attitudes and tolerance amongst schoolchildren have been identified. Different dimensions of community involvement: family education; participation in decision-making; participation in school and curriculum and evaluation; as well as participation in the classroom have all had a significant educational impact. The research has also shown that community involvement led to benefits beyond the school walls with impact on improved housing, employment, health, social and political participation within the neighbouring communities.

1. Introduction

Educating children in an uncertain economy where everybody's livelihood is being threatened is becoming a great challenge. As unemployment is rising across all Europe, such as the UK, Latvia, Ireland, Sweden, Spain, Slovenia and Slovakia [2], existent inequality in family income is increasing [3].

The social impact of the economic crisis is on the most vulnerable people, particularly young children and youths [4].

Key players in education find themselves operating with depleting funding due to continual financial cuts [5]. Yet there is still demand for educational success, in terms of decrease in dropout rates, the completion of upper secondary education, and participation in tertiary education [6]. Finding ways of becoming more effective and promoting better academic achievement as a result of education under these conditions is a challenge which schools need to face. Educating future generations while at the same time promoting equity in such circumstances requires the input and effort of all key players. At the same time, it is to be acknowledged that professional knowledge about educational and social issues has grown significantly, and can be applied to tackle effectively issues such as social, educational and psychological development of both the student and the family [7]. Professional support based on this professional knowledge often centres on three main aspects: improving services, directing outcomes and prevention, all aimed at improving academic achievement [8]. Schools cannot be anymore the single agents responsible to cater for all the children's education, but schools, families and communities have to work together for the benefit of children [9].

There is the need for wider involvement and sharing of responsibility in educating children with all the other agents in children's lives: families; friends; and other adults from the community within which they live. The community can provide human resources which often come for free. Furthermore, communities have the ability to bring to existence a sense of agency by tapping into their ability to take action, both proactively and reactively. Communities have the ability to give their members a sense of belonging and thus enhance cohesion through commitment and diversity [10]. Success in education coupled with family involvement promotes social capital [11]. Any government aiming to increase social capital and social inclusion, thus must also focus on the quality of provision of education [12].

This paper describes how six primary schools in five different European countries were successful in improving students' academic achievement through

community involvement. These schools have worked with wider key players in education than parents. They have involved professionals from other organisations within the community, community leaders, as well as other members willing to contribute through volunteering within the school. As the schools opened up and allowed the influx of other agents in education provision, decision-making and evaluation, schools were transformed, transforming those who participated (both children and adults) and having an impact both within and outside the school walls. This whole process was based on a dialogic approach which allowed space for egalitarian dialogue between all those involved.

2. Schools as Learning Communities

In 2001, OECD [13] identified three main approaches which schools may take in the future and which would best serve the development of future generations. One option identified was that of maintaining the present system and the status quo. This is becoming increasingly untenable as the numbers of school drop outs and the number of students emerging from compulsory education with low skills remains significant. The problem on unemployment among the low skilled cannot be solved through this option. It is to be acknowledged that the traditional system which was developed in the 20th century was designed to educate the elite few. This same system cannot cater efficiently and effectively for the mass, and the challenge which such target brings [14]. However much those in education may be reluctant to change the traditional modes of schooling, the time has come for a complete rethinking of how young children are to be prepared in a much wider range of knowledge, skills and competences than ever.

The second scenario identified by the OECD study [13] was that promoting a re-schooling scenario where the existing schools have to rethink the way they work. This approach means that the overall framework for schooling may be kept, but practices and ways of doing things need to be overhauled. The agents involved need to be diverse, as are the pedagogical practices which educators engage students in. Within this scenario, OECD identifies the possibility of schools becoming communities of learning, both in working with the community as well as in creating communities of learning within the classrooms themselves [13].

The third and last option referred to the de-schooling approach which tries to deconstruct the existing system for educating children. Schools as learning communities discussed by OECD (the second scenario) is very close to the successful models reported in our research, and can provide both evidence and inspiration to many other schools

across Europe in finding ways of helping those who are suffering most in these bad financial times [13].

The contribution of community involvement to improve educational achievement as well as tackle the issue of school drop outs has been widely acknowledged. One also finds that the European Commission has published a communication in 2011 [15] promoting the involvement of the community in combating early school leaving. An argument is put forward on how schools as 'learning communities' work towards a common vision. This increases the commitment of pupils, teachers, parents and other stakeholders and supports school quality and development, creating favourable conditions for academic success.

There is also political acknowledgement of the value of community involvement in the U.S. This is reflected in the *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) ACT of 2002 [16] in aiming to raise the achievement of students, identifies among other things, increased parental involvement as one of the mechanisms to be utilised by educators. The inclusion of community agents becomes a necessity as factors such as cultural background, socio-economic status, and residential locality are consistently being shown to affect students' educational achievement. In recognising that schools do not have the necessary finances to cater for such a myriad of demands, it becomes a necessity to search for strategic partners with the community such as community leaders, municipalities, non-governmental organisations, volunteers and professionals, who have similar aims and intentions, to tackle such problems for the benefit of future generations within the community. In working with these other agents towards a common goal schools can be able to reach out more effectively to those who need the most help. Schools can act as catalysts, promoting transformative practices, assuring better equity in education provision within the school and the community. Networking with actors outside school enables schools to support pupils better and tackle a range of problems that put children in difficulty. Furthermore, in this way, schools can enable all children to achieve their potential notwithstanding the circumstances of their background, culture, socioeconomic status and other exclusionary factors hence, providing a more holistic form of assistance through educational services.

Family engagement and participation in the children's education leads to their success from 'cradle to career' [17]. Parents are always usually interested and involved in their children's education, but less so in the schooling process and in school policies. New approaches are oriented towards schools considering parents more as partners rather than as clients/recipients of education. Furthermore, parental involvement and the up-skilling of parents' education through school or community initiatives

have proved successful in having better equipped parents to follow their children's academic improvement beyond the school walls. School, family, and community partnerships are a better way of placing school actions within the community rather than parental involvement because they recognize that parents, educators, and other members in the community share responsibility for students' learning and development [17]. Community involvement is a multidimensional and complex concept, involving different agents acting at different levels and in different ways, and requires strong leadership.

Research has documented that community involvement and learning communities in schools result in academic improvement in children. Improvement has been noted in literacy [18] in the early years of schooling whilst improving parents reading skills allows greater opportunity for low income parents to match the school culture [19] hence the importance to ensure equity in the distribution of literacy programmes. The use of community volunteers was also found to promote and help the development and progress of the reading skills of primary level students and also older students.

Improvements in mathematics were also found. This was related to children's self-concept as learners in mathematics reflecting their parents' views of them and their capabilities in mathematics [19]. In the case of science, parents' attitude toward the subject was found to play an important role on the children's interest and achievement in the subject.

Effects on non-academic aspects were also identified. The impact of community involvement can be observed through reduced absenteeism; better student behaviour at school; as well as students' attitude and adjustment. It has also been argued that for school and curricular reform to take place and be sustained there needs to be community involvement [9]. This is because family literacy programmes empowers parents in how to help their own children as well as in enabling their voices to be heard in the learning and development of their own children [19].

3. The INCLUD-ED project

INCLUD-ED – Strategies for inclusion and social cohesion in Europe from Education, is an FP6 funded project addressing the objective 'educational strategies for inclusion and social cohesion and their relation to other policies'. The project is coordinated by CREA (Centre of Research in Theories and Practices that overcome Inequalities) University of Barcelona, Spain and has 15 partners across Europe.

INCLUD-ED analyses educational strategies that contribute to overcome inequalities and promote social cohesion, and educational strategies that

generate social exclusion, particularly focusing on vulnerable and marginalised groups. The overall aim is that once these have been identified, they are used by policy makers, education managers, teachers, students and families.

Project 6 within INCLUD-ED focused on local communities and studied how through community involvement, a number of schools across Europe have registered significant improvements within a short time in both academic performance e.g. in mathematics and mother tongue, as well as in non academic aspects such as greater tolerance towards others with learning difficulties, disabilities, of different ethnic origin and of different religious beliefs.

The INCLUD-ED project is based on international contributions) and argues that in the context of the European knowledge based society, educational success is key to overcome social exclusion and unemployment. It is this premise, that the research reported here considers social cohesion from a wide perspective. The research results reported here refer to the sub-project 6, focusing on learning communities through community involvement.

4. Methodology

The main objective of the research was to identify whether family and community involvement within the educational setting resulted in higher educational achievement. It also intended to see how community involvement in school empowers participants and promotes social cohesion in the neighbourhood. More specifically, the research question being asked was; 'In what ways, if any, have family and community participation within the school walls and beyond reinforced the academic success of the students in the school?'

The main methodological framework of the study was based on the critical communicative methodology approach. The Critical Communicative Methodology is based on a number of premises as articulated and elaborated by [20]. These premises include:

- **Universality of language and action:** where everyone has linguistic communicative competencies and it is through dialogue that real understanding can be developed;
- **People as transformative social agents:** based on the belief that through dialogue, everyone is able to transform his or her context;
- **Common sense:** putting emphasis on the key importance of obtaining understanding within the context in which interactions occur and in which knowledge has been created;

- **Communicative rationality** recognises that not only researchers, but also individuals and societies, have the capacity to interpret the social world, given that social reality is constructed through personal interpretations and social interactions;
- **Disappearance of the interpretative hierarchy** where the “researched” can understand as much as the members of the research team, these latter need not take on the role of the “scientific interpreters”;
- **Dialogic knowledge:** takes into account that knowledge is constructed through active interaction with one’s surroundings and thus is not neutral;
- **Equal epistemological level:** does away with the epistemological gap in social research, with the researcher being on egalitarian terms with the researched in both the research process as well as in the interpretation of the data.

Concrete examples of research tools which can be applied within the critical communicative methodology include: communicative techniques where the researcher and the researched argue and develop a shared meaning of observations, contexts and situations; communicative discussion groups which allow exchanges to take place between groups where the group being researched, together with the researcher, build common understanding of issues, contexts and situations; and daily life-stories where the researcher listens to and shares everyday stories of the researched from which they together build common understanding.

In addition, this methodology allows all the research findings to be categorised into two main perspectives: those which can be considered as transformative as they promote social cohesion; and those which are exclusionary, bringing about greater social exclusion.

The study was carried out in six schools across 5 countries: the United Kingdom; Spain, Lithuania; Finland and Malta. These schools were considered as successful schools and had to fulfil three criteria which included: (a) educational centres that have demonstrated to contribute to school success (as reflected by children’s or adolescents’ educational attainment) in relation to their context; (b) educational centres that respond to the same social characteristics: low SES and students with minority background; and (c) educational centres with strong community involvement that are contributing to overcome inequalities. All the schools, one from Malta, UK, Lithuania and two from Spain were primary schools whereas that in Finland was a pre-school. The research was a longitudinal study over a period of four years.

A mixed methodology, using qualitative and quantitative approaches within the critical communicative methodology was used.

4.1. Quantitative tools

The quantitative tools consisted of two sets of questionnaires, one addressed to students and another for guardians. Both questionnaires were designed specifically to obtain the impressions, opinions and perceived impact of the selected schools’ success from the point of view of the end-users, and from a longitudinal perspective.

Both questionnaires were based on eight identified indicators which are; (1) Socio-demographic data; (2) Level of satisfaction with the project; (3) Perceived impact of the project on the community; (4) Perceived impact on educational outcomes; (5) Future academic expectations of the end-users; (6) Types of community participation; (7) Ways of accessing other areas of society (social services, health, employment etc) provided by the project; and (8) Areas of the project that need improvement. The questionnaires were administered in each of the four years and varied according to the nature of the specific research questions as the research evolved.

4.2. Qualitative tools

The qualitative tools included different techniques within the critical communicative methodology such as open-ended interviews; communicative life-stories, communicative focus groups; and communicative observations. Every year, open-ended interviews were conducted with five representatives of the local administration; five representatives of other local community organisations; three interviews with professionals working in the local project. Thirteen daily life-stories of end-users, five communicative observations and one communicative focus group were also conducted. The qualitative data was considered as providing rich insights into community involvement, providing, over the four years, as the research questions were elaborated with every data collection cycle, evidence on the types of community involvement practices, the strategies used by schools and achievements obtained, the links between community involvement and learning, as well as the impact of community involvement in school on the community outside the school walls.

5. Data Gathering

Each country carried out the data collection by adapting it to each school. All the partners had to distribute the questionnaires among all the children

and families in the schools researched and to carry out the data collection of the qualitative data as indicated in the previous sections. Qualitative data was audio-taped.

5.1. Analysis of Data

The quantitative data was inputted in SPSS version 16.0 and used to run the analysis of the responses given in the two questionnaires.

The qualitative data was transcribed. They were then analysed using the analytic grid to identify transformative and exclusionary practices for the different forms of community involvement.

6. Results

The amount of evidence on the benefit of community involvement is abundant and it is difficult to document everything in such short space. The results being presented here are thus just a flavour of the positive transformative dimensions identified. Results obtained documented actual improvement in both performance and expectations. The most effective forms of community involvement were also identified. In the last year, the spill over effect within the community itself was also identified and mapped. These aspects will be each tackled in turn.

Results from the questionnaires over the found years indicated that children were overall happy with the service provided by the school they attended. In the last data collection round in 2010, 70% of students across the 6 schools believed they had made substantial academic improvement. The great majority of students in both Spain and the United Kingdom expected that they would do much better in the coming academic year. This implies that community involvement within the education system has led to significant increases both in students' academic performance as well as expectations. Students in Spain reported the highest levels of mathematical improvement at 83.8%, followed by Lithuania 70%, Malta 69.9%, United Kingdom 68.1% and Finland, 60%. Improvement in language was the highest for Spain 82.5%, followed by Finland 80%, Lithuania 69.8%, United Kingdom 67.6% and Malta 66.2%. It was also noted that students expected to do much better in the following academic years with 68.5% in Lithuania, 74.8% in Malta, 88.9% in Spain and 88.1% in the United Kingdom expecting to do much better overall.

Parents reported similar trends, having improvement throughout. The highest percentages were obtained in Finland, with an improvement of 60% and Spain with 55.3%. In language, parents reported the highest improvement in Lithuania 49.3% and United Kingdom 43.8%. In Malta 54.2% of parents also reported a substantial degree of

improvement had taken place. Overall parents had high expectation for the children's performance.

The two schools from the United Kingdom and Spain reported in the last year, the highest presence of different types of actors on the school premises. Percentages obtained from children in terms of felt participation of professional teachers were; Finland 80%, Lithuania 66.7%, Malta 27.7%, Spain 39.3% and United Kingdom 67.3%. The school in Spain considered the impact of community involvement in a particularly strong way with 89.8% of guardians indicating that community involvement promotes academic achievement. This was less in the United Kingdom at 42.5% and Malta at 59.7%.

The questionnaires showed that absenteeism has also been greatly reduced with some countries as Spain reporting an improvement from a great problem to a nil percentage of absenteeism. The quantitative data shows that there is a strong element of community involvement in all the six. In 2009, families in Malta reported the highest percentage of participation as a result of the Malta Writing Programme which involved parents writing with their children. In fact, results from Malta and Spain reflected the highest belief that community involvement promoted students' academic success. The data from the last year also showed a belief that community involvement also had an impact on different social aspects such as housing, health, employment, social and political participation.

Community involvement identified had four dimensions and included: family education; participation in decision-making; participation in curriculum development and evaluation; and participation in classroom and learning spaces.

There were various forms of family education common to the schools researched. These were grouped to include: lessons in various subject areas for parents and other adults in the community; talks on areas of interest to parents; lessons in the country language; after-school clubs and the provision of Career Guidance for adults. The improvements (transformative dimension) noted included: increased educational level of parents; their enhanced professional and educational aspirations; further participation of families in the school; increased school attendance by pupils; closer ties between the school and home environment; facilitation of participation of women in the community and schools transforming and becoming a community resource. The schools were found to be: responsive to family needs; allowed learners to decide the design of the activities; and organising courses at times when participants are available.

There was also decision-making with respect to different educational and administrative aspects within the school. Characteristics identified included: the presence of general assemblies run for and by families; the school presenting to the community

arguments and reasons for initiatives taken by school and seeking approval; and the school allowing forms of informal methods of consulting parents as well as having a school council or similar structure with representatives of the community. Improvements (transformative) identified included: better behaviour by the students; greater role by parents taken within the school; as well as whole community-neighbourhood improvements.

Curriculum refers to the selection of the content taught to the children as well as the way it is interpreted and developed within the school. Evaluation refers mainly to the evaluation of the school's work and initiative. One particular feature which emerged across all the schools researched was that the curriculum was still considered to be the main domain and responsibility of the educators. None the less community participation was identified and included a number of different practices such as: learning plans made with parents; input by parents in classroom organisation; parental input in extra-curricular activities organised; teachers willing to share curricular initiatives with parents; as well as participation in the school's annual evaluation. The improvements (transformative dimension) resulting were identified to be: the existence of more consultation with parents; teachers giving more value to informing parents about the reasons behind curricular approaches; as well as the participation of parents in dialogic evaluation.

The research also focused on the different types and forms of participation of family members and community members in classrooms as well as in other learning spaces within the school. Characteristics identified included: family members entering and participating in classrooms; volunteers helping in the schools; using interactive groups for learning; participation of parents on school trips; and parents being resources, in themselves, to the school. The improvements (transformative dimension) which resulted were identified to be: overcoming gender stereotypes; improved-coexistence; increased motivation and attention to learning; and children enjoying their parents' presence at school.

Community involvement practised in the six schools researched has shown to provide support and help to families in difficult times. This is significant as families tend to be reluctant to seek help and support from the official government entities due to barriers from the stigma that is perceived to be associated with those using social services or specialist services. The schools have taken on part of this responsibility and are having an impact to different degrees in transforming the neighbourhood and the community.

The schools were also found to take on part of the responsibility of helping to overcome language barriers. Tools identified involved actions such as the inclusion of a parent liaison officer as in the United

Kingdom, local council and NGOs' input in Malta, as well as groups of parents organized to help other parents in Finland.

Research findings have also linked the practice of community involvement to benefits related to employment through family education. Although originally intended to help parents with their children's education, family education enabled parents to help their children with school work as well as opened up new opportunities for employment. Participants attained better education, higher numeracy and literacy levels, knowledge of the local language and established networks amongst parents and community members which served to provide and relay employment opportunities. This is a particularly significant achievement since many of the participants were from low educational levels who would usually have less opportunities to work and are at risk of having lower working conditions. The schools have also supported networking among families and other members of the community, one mechanism which increased opportunities to find work.

Community participation was also found to increase health awareness through educating families as well as students and by involving other social organizations within the community. Direct interventions encouraged parents to be engaged in health related activities. The Spanish schools emphasised that all children attending must be vaccinated. The schools became effective health promoting establishments which achieved the maximum impact on children, young people and families and on the local community through collaboration with their local council as well as through initiatives aimed at families rather than just children. Education has thus been shown to be one tool for reducing inequalities by fostering cognitive, social and emotional skills and promoting among other things healthy lifestyles.

The schools were also found to increase social and political participation in the neighbourhood as a result of participation. In turn, this social and political participation served to overcome social isolation and discrimination. As families learnt the country's language they also learnt that in participating at school they could also be actively involved in the decision-making process. Achievements within the school encouraged similar participation in the neighbourhood. They used their gained skills to exert active citizenship also within the community.

Lifelong learning was a dimension which emerged over and over again and was found to be one tool for bringing about transformations in the community with respect to housing, health, employment, as well as social and political participation. Education has thus become one of the

strongest tools with potential to promote social cohesion.

Community involvement is a promising strategy to address barriers to learning, enhance healthy development, and strengthen families and neighbourhoods [11]. The schools researched have helped individual families and other members of the community to overcome these barriers through empowerment. All these transformations have also helped children develop educational resilience which enables them to succeed academically despite social and psychological factors acting against them. It has been a process which has to different degrees promoted social cohesion beyond the walls of the school. Schools provide potential for transforming communities if they take on a wider remit and work with other entities within the community which have the wellbeing of citizens and achieving social cohesion as their main aim.

7. Discussion of Results

It has been shown that educating children through community involvement can be a promising strategy to address barriers to learning and enhance healthy development for both schoolchildren and their families. Empowering families and students has been shown to result in increased academic performance and expectations by both children and parents. Children have also developed education resilience enabling them to succeed academically despite social and psychological factors that may hinder their progress. Children improved both in academic and non-academic fields. Interviews with both students and parents in all countries and particularly in Spain identified how gender stereotypes and gender roles were being slowly changed as not only were women being empowered, but students began to see their parents and other community members of different backgrounds integrate and cooperate together and hence felt it was 'safe' to follow that example. Through the joint effort of learning communities and participation in the school activities parents and other family members became better equipped to help children extend their academic growth beyond the school walls.

The good reputation built by the schools operating as learning communities and the transformations which they were bringing about have had a ripple effect on the communities which also grew in image, preventing the region from becoming ghettos. This has resulted in increased numbers of students attending school. This change was particularly documented in Lithuania, Spain and the United Kingdom. This was felt most strongly in the two schools in Spain. The change in image has also helped families in Lithuania to understand better the work of educational staff.

Furthermore, education is shown as one tool for reducing inequalities by fostering cognitive, social and emotional skills and promoting, among other things, healthy lifestyles. The schools, through improving opportunities for employment are working to overcome income inequality, promoting greater social cohesiveness and better population health.

8. Conclusion

This research has shown how schools practising community involvement may really be the schools of the future, becoming a central point of reference to communities and particularly to those groups who need most help to integrate in society. In an increasingly multicultural society across all Europe, schools can capitalize on their historic central role within the community by working with the community in order to help families face the challenges both in view of the financial crisis but also in their search for identity which is becoming more and more blurred with increased migration of different ethnic, cultural and religious groups.

Further research may look at the degree of potential which schools have in taking on a greater role towards the whole community, one that goes beyond that of educating children for the future. Many times governments tend to invest in initiatives and support structures which are separate entities and extraneous to the community. Schools are already embedded within the community with their established networks, and it would be worth to explore whether investment in promoting integration and social cohesion can be more cost effective and successful should programmes and initiatives be directly injected into schools instead.

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