The Advantages of Successful School-community Relationships: Findings from the Includ-ED project

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Introduction

In today's knowledge society, education can act as a powerful resource to achieve the European goal of social cohesion. However, at present, most school systems are failing as is demonstrated by the fact that many individuals, and their communities, are being excluded, both educationally and socially, from benefits that should be available to all.

Education was defined as a "basic right" by the UN over sixty years ago (in 1948). *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* in article 26 officially stated that "Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages." (United Nations 1948, art. 26). Yet, numerous reports on this merit argue that this right is still not widely put into practice, or rather, the quality of education provided is still insufficient, causing as a result exclusion and threatening community life. Recently published EFA Global Monitoring Report (2011) confirmed that worldwide schooling is not securing the quality education available to all. "While national and regional patterns vary, progress towards improved learning outcomes has lagged behind progress in improving access to school." (EFA 2011, p.83). Although activities undertaken by UNESCO are often targeted at developing world the quality of education is a challenging issue in many European countries.

The contemporary schools are being confronted with a variety of current social challenges strictly related to access to school, high dropout rates, social defragmentation and the increasing role played by the media. The school is not considered as an institution which mission is limited to literacy or numeracy anymore. Rather, expectations of the postmodern societies are much higher. Facing the 'liquid modernity' (Elliott 2009) school is hoped to become a place where children are learnt how to deal with dynamically reconfigured reality, and also as an institution which support social cohesion by empowering the individuals and the local communities. In order to meet these requirements the schools attempt to redefine their mission, methods, organization and a place in a local community. This article tells a successful story of a school which evolved into a community hub by empowerment of the parents, community members and pupils themselves.

The Includ-ED study is an integrated project, involving six European countries, which aimed to analyse educational actions that contribute to inclusion and social cohesion. It does so within the context of the European knowledge based society, and provides key elements and lines of action to improve educational and social policy. The project concentrates on describing the elements that can influence school success and their relationship with other areas of the community.

The context

The UK project focused on the study of schools involved in learning projects with communities, developing the integration of social and educational interventions that, in turn,

foster social inclusion and empowerment. The research has spanned a period of 4 years and, in each year, a case study has been carried out in a school selected on the following criteria:

i)   the schools had to demonstrate a contribution to academic success (as defined by children's educational attainment) in relation to their specific social context. By this, it signifies that students in the school selected obtained higher levels of educational attainment in comparison to students in schools located in similar socio-cultural and socio-economic contexts;

ii)   the schools had to fulfil a number of social characteristics, including low socio-economic status and students with a minority background; and

iii)   the schools had to demonstrate a strong attempt to overcome inequalities through having strong links with community and a record of positive community involvement in the school.

Issues of family and community involvement in schools relate to the Every Child Matters initiative (Cheminais 2009), an agenda that focused on integrating a whole range of services in order to develop plans and policies that focus on improving outcomes for children. Every Child Matters emphasized the benefits of community cohesion and the role of education for the broader goals of social inclusion as central components. To this end, the case study school opened itself to the community as part of the extended schools agenda, offering a range of initiatives directly related to family and community involvement in schools, such as adult education courses geared specifically to families and community members.

The issue of social inclusion (Charles et al. 2008) and community cohesion was further supported by the 2006 Education and Inspections Act. This Act stated that all state maintained schools in England must promote community cohesion through teaching and learning, equity and excellence, and engagement and ethos. The aim was for this to be achieved not only through activities in school, but also via partnerships with other schools, with parents, as well as the local and wider community.

The school
Lakeside Avenue School is divided into two separate school buildings: the Infant School (ages 4-7) which also houses a nursery school (taking children aged 3-4), and the Junior School (ages 7-11). They are both state maintained foundation schools[1] and each school has its own head teacher. The schools remain less than 1 mile apart, located in the same neighbourhood and catchment[2] area. A large majority of students who attend the Infant School go on to attend the Junior school, and there are many parents who have children attending both schools. Although located in two separate buildings, there is a tight, community-driven relationship between the Lakeside Avenue Schools and teachers and administration work closely together. For the purposes of this study, we examine both schools together as one cohesive school system.

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[1] A foundation school is a state school that is run by the local authority. It is publicly funded and does not charge families any fees. However, unlike a community school, a foundation school has a higher degree of freedom, including the management of school admissions.

[2] Catchment area refers to guidelines for admission into a school based upon residing in an area around the school. Children who live in the established surrounding area of the school are given priority for admittance.

According to the latest Ofsted report[3], the schools are each larger than the average-size. The number of students on roll in 2008 at the Infant/Nursery site was 284 and at the Junior site, the number on roll was 311. At both sites, there are an above average number of students who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities, but who are without Special Educational Needs (SEN) statements[4] (Ofsted). As a consequence, the schools have established close working relationships with the local government support services.

Social and Economic Characteristics
The Lakeside Avenue schools are very diverse, inner city schools in the Midlands region of the UK. The schools are located in the neighbourhood of 'Callaton'[5], with a population of just over 40,000 according to the 2001 census. Callaton is a socially and economically deprived neighbourhood, which has suffered for many years from long-term disadvantage. As a result of economic shifts away from manufacturing, the neighbourhood has experienced long-term unemployment and faced challenges of overcoming social disadvantage, poor housing, poverty, drug abuse, crime, health issues, learning difficulties and exclusion. According to the Office for National Statistics (2007), the deprivation indices for individual neighbourhoods ranks Callaton as one of the most deprived areas of England. A total of 26% of pupils at Lakeside Avenue Junior School and 29% of those at Lakeside Infant School were eligible for free school meals which is higher than the national average (17%).

The community of Callaton is a socially and ethnically diverse neighbourhood, with a majority of British-born residents of Pakistani, Indian and African-Caribbean origin and the school intake reflects that with a higher proportion of students from minority ethnic backgrounds than the national average. In 2008-2009, the percentage of students of ethnic minority backgrounds at the Infant School was 88%, and the percentage of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students at the Junior School was 82%. At both schools, the largest represented minority ethnic group is made up of students of Asian heritage.

School Success, Achievements and Standards
This is a successful school; the Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 contextual value-added (CVA[6]) measure is 100.8, signifying that the school is performing better than similar schools across the UK. In the Infant School, data for Key Stage 1 shows that all pupils are performing significantly higher than expected and improving relative to schools nationally in English, mathematics and science. These data also show that minority ethnic students (particularly of Asian-Pakistani origin), students who are known to be eligible for free school meals, and students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) are all performing significantly higher than expected and improving, relative to schools nationally. For the junior school, data show that

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[3] Ofsted, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, is charged with the inspection and evaluation of schools in England. We have refrained from using the year of the Ofsted report to maintain confidentiality and anonymity. For more information, see http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/

[4] Special Educational Needs (SEN) statements are provided to pupils that have any learning difficulty in order to indicate the equipment and additional help that the child requires. In England, around 3% of children have SEN statements. Schools also have pupils registered, who have learning difficulties but are without statements. This signifies that the pupil is registered as having SEN, but the school is able to meet these needs.

[5] A pseudonym is used to protect the anonymity of the school.

[6] The school's CVA is a statistical means of assessment of how effective a school is, by measuring pupils' progress using their test and examination results. The most recent Annual Performance Review report for the Junior school shows a CVA score of over 101, signifying that the school is in the top 5% of all similar schools across England. Using CVA criteria, the most recent SATs results showed major gains in Level 4+ attainment across English, Mathematics and Science content areas.

children aged 7-11 are achieving scores in excess of the national average for English, maths and science.

Methods and sources of data

Data collection was oriented towards the understanding of how parental and community involvement in education contributes to strengthen connections between education and diverse areas of society, and how these mixed interventions contribute to social cohesion. The central research question has been: how does community participation in schools help to promote social cohesion, to overcome inequalities and to improve the learning process and academic results? To address this question, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. However, this paper focuses on the findings from the qualitative case study data.

The project gained ethical approval by the University of Nottingham, School of Education. The head teachers were also provided with information on the ethical procedures of the project, including copies of consent forms. Each participant in the study was provided with a written description of the project and, if they agreed to participate, was asked to sign a consent form. All interviews were audio-recorded.

Data collection

The design of the case study followed a semi-structured format for interviews, that is, there was an established pattern of questions for each interview to follow, with optional follow-up prompts and questions. In addition to interviews, daily life stories were conducted with pupils and family members. The questions were largely open-ended and reflective, allowing for a semi-standardised and communicative approach to a standardised interview.

For all interviews, participants were selected according to a maximum validation sampling strategy, which allowed for the widest variety of individuals to be represented in the project, by gender, ethnicity, and religion, and in the case of pupils, age and ability. In addition to the interviews and daily life stories, five communicative observations were carried out across the Junior and Infant sites and detailed field notes were taken during each of the observations. Table 1 shows the types of data that were collected and the participant groups involved.

Table 1: *Qualitative Data Sources*

Method of data collection	Participants
Interviews	Representatives of community organizations Representatives of local government Professionals in school staff
Daily life stories	Pupils Family members
Communicative observations	Spaces of community/family engagement
Collected school documents	Mission statements, Ofsted reports, Headteacher reports to Governors, School profile, Catchment Area analysis, Free School Meals analysis, School improvement plan, school prospectus, new revised version of Home School Agreement

The data generated through the above qualitative sources were first transcribed verbatim. To maintain anonymity and confidentiality of participants, all identifying characteristics were removed and names were removed and/or replaced by pseudonyms.

Findings

The section below reports the findings from the qualitative data sources in order to identify and understand the connections between the involvement of the community and learning improvement. The main findings are presented which focus on the impact which the process of educational improvement in the school has had on the neighbourhood, as well as on the lives of the participants.

Advantages for parents and families

Accessible information

Both the Infant and Junior schools have employed members of staff who act as Parent Liaison Officers (PLOs). These staff members support parents in all aspects of welfare, including housing, and both speak Punjabi (the language of the most numerous ethnic minority in school). When speaking about one of the PLOs, the headteacher reported:

> *…she advises about housing, and she actually goes to the housing department with people, if they have problems, helps them fill in forms, she's always helping them with that you know (Headteacher).*

In addition, the role involves helping parents to access the housing benefit they are entitled to or to move house to improved accommodation. She gives advice, but also takes people to the housing office if they are unable to get there by themselves due to lack of transport or need assistance with communication.

> *So we're often the first port of call, especially if people speak Urdu and haven't got very much English, she, because you know she can translate for them (Deputy Head).*

Family and community education

Family and community education helps community cohesion, as well as assists the integration of ethnic minority or recent immigrant communities with other communities. The Junior School Headteacher feels very strongly about bringing the community together and is seriously concerned about spatial segregation within the area. He explained his concerns:

> *I do worry sometimes about areas becoming not ghettos, but there are certain areas of certain cities whereby you've got to be a certain ethnic group to live in that part of the city, my home town for instance, if you were an African Caribbean or Asian you lived over the bridge in a different part of town. I hope it doesn't become that, we're a multicultural society, we need to bridge those gaps and support each other (Headteacher).*

A Governor of the Junior School echoes this as someone who lives in the local community:

> *I actually live in the local area and I know that Callaton has got a very good reputation as being a welcoming school, so the communities around the area are, when they do join in or whatever, they feel welcome. We have a lot of interaction with the mosque or places of worship, there's the Vine, a Vine next to the church not too far from here, children can go and visit that (Governor).*

Facing numerous immigration of the third-country-nationals the schools attempt to become a sort of 'community hub'. The activities undertaken by the staff are focused on gathering people who live nearby to create an opportunity for cooperation and, at the same time, to foster social cohesion. The Headteacher and Deputy Head of the Junior School are keen to develop the school's interaction with the community further and build on work already undertaken in terms of providing families with experiences they may not have had opportunity to participate in previously. This area of work revolves around aspirations for children and their families.

> *We want the families to take that on with us and work alongside us, it's not just about the school setting those aspirations, we've got to work hand in hand, but we've got to bridge that gap between home and school and paper over those cracks that are caused by society's problems. It's a fine balance all the time isn't it? (Deputy Head).*

Employment opportunities
As unemployment is one of the most serious threats to general well-being of the individuals, family structure and overall condition of the neighbourhoods, the schools' activities were particularly focused on this issue. Through participating in family education courses at the school, many of the participants feel that their employment opportunities have improved or been advanced, which has:

> *…also given them a sense of purpose in their lives that…challenges them and takes them to another stage (Headteacher).*

Many of the parents who have enrolled in courses have gone on to be teaching assistants and midday supervisors at the school:

> *…in some respects the school sometimes performs another useful function in terms of actually employing members of the community, and I've got several people who work in this building who are either present or past parents of children here. (Deputy Head).*

This is a change that has been approved by the pupils:

> *It's nice that I see my mom in the school sometimes and I like to work with the parents who come into our class too (Pupil).*
> *I like them coming in. I would like my mom to do it, but she has a job and so she is working when I'm at school (Pupil).*

Some of the parents decide to work towards a qualification such as a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ). If there is a vacancy in the school and they do well in the interview, they stand a chance of being employed as a member of staff. An example of this happening in the Junior school was given:

> *OK, so they've got a teaching assistant who's got an older child who left last year, so she's in year 7, she's got another daughter who's in year 3, but she is now employed as a teaching assistant... she had qualified at another local school in terms of her NVQ, she's done really well (Parent Liaison Office).*

The PLO went on to explain that, at the last meeting of the School Governors, she suggested that a temporary contract for a year was offered. This suggestion was taken up and there is a hope that it will be extended to a permanent contract. The Junior School Headteacher commented:

> *People who do voluntary work usually go on and get work, ...we give them a reference if they've done a good job, and I do one at the moment who did voluntary work and said she'd like to do some voluntary work, did a bit and then we gave her a temporary teaching assistant post (Headteacher).*

The Parent Liaison Officers in the schools offer parents assistance in completing qualifications and in applying for subsequent employment.

> *I think a lot of our parents like school work, and because they're coming into schools and that, we have a lot of parents now who are doing their NVQs, because it's working around the children, it's school hours, they get the school holidays off...I've got many parents there to enrol [on courses], get them started, and they start from a beginner's classroom assistant course, a ten week course, to a full blown NVQ, level 2, you know fifteen hours a week and training or whatever (Parent Liaison Officer).*

Other jobs that parents have gone on to do include computer-related work, including one parent who was successful in getting a post in the tax office because of a certificate she had completed in computing.

> *So obviously she had other skills, but because she didn't have any computer knowledge, she came here, did her course and that really helped her gain employment (Parent Liaison Officer).*

Social opportunities / outlets

Through the family education courses, the school also provides a social outlet for parents, helping to provide parents with social contact with other parents from different ethnic backgrounds, thus building community cohesion. Creating a space where social networks are being developed is especially important to the recently arrived immigrants whose social contacts are limited to their own family or ethnic group. Through participating in family and community education courses, parents are often able to meet other members of the community and other families. School as a neutral space where the natives and the newcomers can meet is of great value to let people know each other and, subsequently, to the social cohesion. One parent stated:

> *...you get to meet people and then the same sort of people will come again (Parent).*

For parents of young children, the Peers Early Education Partnerships sessions (PEEPS) have allowed for community-building and friendships to form:

> *We have parents that go out for dinner and meet up because they've met in PEEPS (Parent).*

The senior management team of the Infant and Junior Schools support this notion:

> *…schools these days aren't just about education, they are very much to do with social care. The in-school coordinator coordinates all the support for families that the school can access for them and that includes helping them to participate in social activities where possible (Headteacher).*

This stance was particularly welcomed by some of the Asian parents, who stated that it was sometimes very difficult to socialise by going to courses based in further education colleges where they did not know anyone. For some of them, the contact with the school was their only reason to leave the house, when dropping the children off.

> *I don't get out of the house really, at all, and so just bringing my son to school is an outing! It sounds silly, but I spend most of the day in the house and then look forward to coming to pick him up again (Parent).*

To these parents, the school is a safe environment and there are many other Asian parents with whom they feel comfortable.

> *It's a nice social for me, the room we can meet in is completely separate from the children, and some of us have strict clothing we wear that cover our bodies and heads, and once we're in that room, nobody can enter, so we can take some of it off (Parent).*

Advantages for the school and pupils
Study support and curriculum enrichment
There is a commitment by the members of staff in the school to enrich the curriculum in such a way as to support children's learning. This was supported by members of the focus group as well as seen through observations of some of these activities.
The Infant School Headteacher said that:

> *I think the staff are all on board in terms of enriching the curriculum, we're all into the creative curriculum, they changed their planning, they changed the way they cooperate in terms of planning together, assessing together, looking for solutions rather than talking about why the children can't, there's this kind of 'can do' approach (Headteacher).*

This approach has involved teachers changing the way that they work together, plan the lessons, implement the lessons and organise their classrooms, but the staff are determined to ensure that every child reaches his/her full potential. The structures within the school help in that the year group teams work together, so planning, preparation and assessment time (PPA time) is spent together in order to maximize on the collaborative approach.

The school is also aware that many pupils do not have many enriching experiences outside of the school which may have a positive impact upon their studies. Therefore, alongside the curriculum enrichment is a strategy to increase the experiences of pupils.

> *…we realised that unless we try and compensate for the lack of experiences, there is no way that we are going to make a difference in their lives…which is when we decided that every term, every child should go on a visit (Parent Liaison Officer).*

The initiation of this strategy came in after the school had been given funding from the Education Action Zone (EAZ) policy which amounted to approximately £8000 a year initially. Each school within the EAZ agreed that this money should be spent on enriching the lives of pupils by subsidising visits. This meant that, instead of organising one visit for the children per year, the school was able to increase this to two.

Eventually the EAZ policy drew to a close and the Education Improvement Partnership (EiP) was created in its place. The funding was reduced, however, there was still some funds (approx £3,000 per year) which was used for curriculum enrichment of a different kind.

> *It meant we could invite artists in, I've now got a member of staff who is a*
> *forest ranger trained teacher and also who is a creative artist working with*
> *Creative Partnership (Headteacher).*

This focus, not only extended the work of the outdoor classroom but also gave pupils a chance to see how feelings and thoughts can be expressed through art.

In addition, the school has involved pupils in experiences outside of the school, including courses that support the work that is being done in the classroom.

> *Some of my kids, fourteen of them have just finished a course at the Galleries*
> *of Justice, where we take children out of the school environment, this is an*
> *after school activity, it's called study support, but it shows them that there are*
> *different ways of learning, it's not just about sitting at a desk and doing your*
> *maths and your English, it's far wider than that (Headteacher).*

These innovative approaches to involvement of children in the curriculum had had a positive impact on aspects of pupil learning such as concentration, enthusiasm, motivation, and ownership.

Involvement in the school
There are also a number of examples of mothers of children who, through the family education courses, have become more comfortable with the school and have participated more in school events, trips, and fairs and view the school as a more open, less threatening space. Since taking ESOL and confidence-building courses, one of the pupils reported that his mother felt more comfortable attending school functions and volunteering to attend school trips:

> *Because she's coming to school every day, she's bringing me here…she has*
> *become more familiar with certain faces, more familiar with the building,*
> *more familiar with the teachers (Pupil).*

Another child stated,

> *Since my mum has done the course, she's helped out more at school with*
> *groups, when we've had the school disco or the school Christmas fair (Pupil).*

The Headteacher of the Junior School agreed that confidence and empowerment could grow from school encouragement:

…and it's getting the confidence to come into school and doing these things, opens up opportunities and people see how they are with the children as well. For example, we had one parent who was really proactive, new child in year 3, and this mum came and took a leading role in organising our Christmas Fair. And she'd been selling raffle tickets and coming up with ideas on the committee and so on, and it gave her the confidence, she'd been out of work for some time, just being around and people saying you're doing a fantastic job, gave her the confidence to apply for a job, and she's now got a job, we don't see her anymore! (Headteacher).

As mentioned in the previous section, volunteer work is prolific in the school and, in addition to providing new skills, this type of activity has also been successful in building confidence in the individual taking part. One example of this can be seen through the individual sessions taken by two volunteers from the community who work with individual children with their reading. As one volunteer stated:

I have been working here for quite a few years now and I love it. It gives me something to focus on apart from all the boring stuff in life and it makes me realise that I have something to offer (Community volunteer).

From the student and parent perspectives, this kind of community participation in school has had a positive impact:

It's good to have someone else in the class who can help you sometimes (Pupil).

She is really nice and very good at helping them with their reading. I wish she was there all the time (Pupil).

The children at Lakeside Avenue benefit a great deal from the interaction they experience with a variety of adults participating in school activities. The Headteacher of the Infant School recalls one particular example:

OK, there's a lad who is now a year 2, when he first came, parents were splitting up,... he couldn't express himself, when he spoke you couldn't understand what he was saying. Although he was a bit shaky to start with at talking to the adults, gradually he became more confident, and he started to write and he started to enjoy writing. And over the last eighteen months, he's made such a lot, I mean a huge amount of progress and is way above what we would have expected of him, but above national expectations (Headteacher).

Overall, the sense of empowerment that has been gleaned from the family and community participation in the school has had a big impact on parents and pupils alike.

Advantages for the wider community
Healthy living
The school has promoted health within the community is through various schemes that have been funded by the Government.

> *Yeah, I think the fact that the school is now part of the Education Improvement Partnership is important because we have an integrated service, ...trying to get health, education and welfare, social care, all of those people working together for the families (Deputy Head).*

Specific programmes that have been implemented in the school have included the Healthy Heart project aimed at parents over forty years of age, and involved a health professional coming into the school to run workshops with parents. The Headteacher thinks that these projects, although short-term in nature, do have a positive impact on families:

> *I think the messages do get out, because things like the tuck shop, you know, we only sell fruit and cereal bars, but it always used to be you know chocolate and things, but that doesn't happen anymore. And parents know that, that the children aren't allowed to bring sweets to school and they're not allowed to eat them on the playground, and they're not supposed to have them in their lunch boxes (Headteacher).*

ESOL courses

The school is aware of the number of adults in their community who need and want education, especially those with English as a second language (ESOL), and the staff develop and run courses on to support them in that. Being involved with their children's learning is very important to some parents at Lakeside Avenue. Some of them even put their children in additional private tuition classes because they do not feel they have enough understanding of the work themselves. However, the ESOL family education courses have been significant in helping parents feel confident to support their children's literacy and English skills. As one parent stated:

> *Before I started this course everything was difficult. I came here and I can't speak English, I learned everything here (Parent).*

She is now able to help her children with their homework in IT, literacy and numeracy. Many of the other parents who have also participated in family and community education courses now have a greater interest in helping children with their studies at home and engaging more in learning activities with their children:

> *I feel like I can sit down with my son now and talk to him about his work (Parent).*
> *I am now more involved in what is going on with my son when he is at school and know more about what he is doing and interested in (Parent).*

The success of the courses has spread within the community and, as a result, several parents who had previously enrolled their children in the local Islamic school (which is fee-paying) have decided to re-enter the state system, involving themselves in the school activities and courses which have helped them support their children's learning at home.

Social opportunities for specific cultures

However, the school is aware that there are already some support networks available for certain groups of people in the community, but that more focused approach needs to be taken with regards to other minority groups.

> *I suppose I'd say that [the Asian] network of people is very much supported by the mosques in the area, but you've got to look at other more minority groups and how they are supported, for instance I mentioned Malaysians earlier, most of our Malaysian pupils have come, in fact all of them, their parents are at the university, they're studying, so they tend to live in a certain part of the area and the school supports them by signposting, as I said earlier, them to other families that are already here (Headteacher).*

The Headteachers of both schools report that the school is aware that some parents who are new to the area can become isolated and that they have a duty to identify outlets for them to become more involved in the community.

> *I had a family who came from, let's think about this, Mauritius, so they were very isolated to some extent, but I found another family down the road who were Mauritian, so I put them in contact, and so they now network with each other (Headteacher).*

She goes on to say:

> *Over the last few years a lot of Polish families have arrived, and many of those, they want to be educated in Catholic schools, but the Catholic schools are full, so we have some Polish children here. But again we put on all sorts of events, after school sometimes for them, not just Polish people, but we have family learning opportunities, and it's amazing how the Polish families are often the ones that come. That can be art, it can dancing, it can be all sorts of different things...they want to join in and get involved (Headteacher).*

The Parent Liaison Officer for the Junior School was also instrumental in organizing an event for the Bangladeshi community in the area:

> *...we have a Bangladeshi school on a Saturday, and there's quite a high percentage of Bangladeshi's in Callaton, but they've chosen this school to run their school in. So they know it's a school that's welcoming, they can approach the head you know with their ideas. And I think the head teacher's got an excellent reputation in the area, and obviously community people learn that, and that they talk to each other don't they (Parent Liaison Officer).*

It is also seen as important to hold special events at specific times of year. One example of this was described:

> *I mean when we do social events like Christmas Fair for example, there's a lot of community involvement, a lot of people. If it wasn't for events like that, I don't think some of the community would actually come into school (Parent Liaison Officer).*

The school has made significant efforts to make the parents feel comfortable about coming into the school, especially for those families that are hard to reach, who do not speak a lot of English at home, and who have not had the chance to complete an education. It is these parents who have benefitted most from the social participation in the school.

Discussion and conclusions

Contemporary schools face complex challenges related to the social setting which make their situation peculiar. On the one hand, the schools are often a space of the first contact with the culture and language of the host country to all newcomers. As an institution the school is also deeply rooted in a local and national context playing important role in cultural transmission. Serious social transformations, like shift from being part of a minority ethnic group to becoming a majority, have questioned the established school routine and put the schools in a challenging situation.

The age of postmodernism had clashed school with the new reality, which is characterized by uncertainty, unpredictability and ambivalence. It is argued that postmodernism "creates radical new patterns of power and inequality, from which fresh opportunities and risks arise for everyone." (Elliott 2009, p.253). The school as an important institution needs to meet these new demands.

The schools explored in this research constructed their activities, and plan for further development on the assumption that for a successful education, an inclusive partnership is crucial. Education is considered as a process having its source in a variety of a human life spheres, including family, social and cultural setting, and many others. For the learning process to be successful, it needs not only a proper didactics but also a positive attitude towards school, family, parental involvement in classrooms, good parenting skills, effective partnership with the local community and sensitivity towards cultural and linguistic issues.

As the participant school shows, learning is not limited to the formal classroom situation. Through engagement of the parents and volunteers expansion of the learning process was pursued. It is an interesting example of crossing barriers and bringing education to the new dimension. Success of the school activities is anchored in a holistic approach to the learning process and is based on the effective usage of social roles. In other words: people of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds were gathered and treated through their social role of a parent. The common activities resulted in a sense of community and responsibility for education of their children but also for the local community.

The main findings demonstrate that there is a strong connection between participation of the school in the community, and a number of area related to transforming the neighbourhood. Key issues identified were:

- gaining accessible housing information
- availability of support for parents and families
- healthy eating, living and health provision
- employment opportunities
- supportive environment
- social opportunities / outlets
- social opportunities for specific cultures
- parental views and opinions.

The case study data also indicate that there are relationships between school participation in the community and transformation in the lives of individuals in relation to lifelong learning, empowerment, and social cohesion. Illustrations of these transformations have been given:

- participating in family education courses
- achieving qualifications e.g. ESOL, NVQ
- parents studying at the local university
- confidence building
- community participation and independence
- voluntary involvement in school activities
- support for specific groups of parents
- socio-economic and cultural divisions.

For example, participation in family education courses has been shown to increase parents' confidence, especially those from particular cultural backgrounds. This has, in some cases, led to further participation in external courses supported by the school which can provide opportunities for accreditation. Ultimately, this increase in educational levels has seen an impact on employment opportunities in the community. Another example was in the school's commitment to 'bridging the gaps' in some parents' education, knowledge, skills, as well as the experiences they were able to provide for their children. These in turn have been seen to improve the overall educational experiences of the pupils.

Involvement of the school in, and with, the community has promoted and reinforced a series of other transformations. The first is an increased sense of co-existence in the community which, in Callaton, has a different focus to the more general social cohesion. Being such a diverse, multi-ethnic society, Lakeside Avenue schools have worked hard to harness these cultural differences in order to increase the understanding and knowledge of parents, pupils and teachers. This has resulted in a far more harmonious, committed and tolerant neighbourhood which benefits all who live there.

The remaining transformations evidenced in the data have also had far-reaching implications for individual pupils and their families. Many of the parents and pupils stated that being involved in school activities had increased confidence in dealing with staff and school-related issues. This has also had an impact on the number of parents willing to attend school-based clubs (e.g. gardening) and school trips in order to support and enrich the curriculum.

Community involvement with the school is strong which has doubtless been a driving factor in the improvement of relationships between the school and the neighbourhood. The improvements in health resulting from family education have been highlighted, with these interactions allowing for the acquisition of improved knowledge to prevent established negative behaviours. Likewise, training developed in the school has responded to the needs of the community and has improved employment opportunities. Participants, especially women, have expressed the positive impact of these courses in their lives and those of their children. The school has provided resources to support family and community education courses, and this has resulted, in some cases, to the recruitment of appropriate parents and community members onto the school staff as teaching assistants and midday supervisors.

Participation has had a large impact on improved communication processes, not only through the activities which are organised, but also due to the interaction which is generated by this. Thus, the school has become a meeting place where information is exchanged, bonding members of the community together. The school also offers a range of significant opportunities for families and the community to engage in the schools, such as the informal coffee sessions. Opening up the school as a resource to the community in this way has had

significant positive effects on the parent's confidence. There are also other ways that families and the community have engaged in Lakeside Avenue Schools, through attendance on trips, involvement in specific curriculum units and after school clubs, and in the Gardening Club, which have each had a positive impact on the children, teaching and school management staff, parents and the wider community.

Lakeside resides in a culturally and linguistically diverse neighbourhood, with families practicing varying religions, and there also continues to be newly arriving immigrants into the community. However, it is evident from reflections from participants that the surrounding school communities are engaged with the school, and children are progressing in their education and responding sensitively to the need for continued coexistence. This approach aids understanding and cooperation between children, families and the community. Participation in neighbourhood activities and in the school promotes knowledge of other cultures and traditions, as well as helping to overcome existing prejudices.

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