Placing immigrant and minority family and community members at the school's centre: The role of community participation

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Abstract

Working alone, schools cannot reverse the high rates of school failure in the poorest communities in Europe; they need the contributions of the entire community. Coordination between families, the larger community, and the school has proven crucial in enhancing student learning and achievement, especially for minority and disadvantaged families. However, families from such backgrounds often participate in their schools only peripherally, because the schools take a "tourist" approach, call parents to inform them about school projects and teachers' programmes, or consult them about decisions to be made by professionals, rather than engaging them deeply in their children's education. In contrast, the INCLUD-ED project has studied schools across Europe whose students are culturally diverse and from low SES backgrounds; here the communities are deeply involved in the schools and the students do well academically. This article focuses on three strategies these successful schools use to engage immigrant and minority community members in more active, decisive, and intellectual ways and thus have greater impact in the school and the students' learning. It also describes some

specific practices of involvement grounded in those strategies, and the improvements they generate. Though the schools studied use different practices, the three strategies have been found to contribute to a transformative result in all schools: moving minority and disadvantaged families from the periphery of school participation to the centre.

Keywords: family and community participation, parental involvement, minority and immigrant families, inclusion

> *The opinion of the community is what moves things forward.*
>
> — Laura, head teacher of a primary school

Introduction

In recent years, poverty has increased within European countries. Today, many Europeans face everyday challenges in multiple areas, including healthcare, education, housing, employment, and social and political participation (European Commission, 2008; European Commission, 2010). In education, the multi-dimensional nature of poverty (Kakwani & Silber, 2007; Sen, 2000) sends a very important message: although schools can be effective in promoting social cohesion (Green et al. 2003), they cannot, in isolation, address the challenge of reducing the poverty immediately around them. Preparing children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to escape from or avoid poverty in a quickly-changing future requires a combined effort that will require many agents in the community to engage with their local schools (Suárez-Orozco & Qin-Hilliard, 2004).

More specifically, the involvement in schools of families and community members from minority and vulnerable groups has already been shown to be crucial in improving academic achievement and other types of learning (Epstein, 2001; García, 2002; Sánchez, 1999). Further, the 2010 European Year for Combating Poverty and

Social Exclusio[1] (European Commission, 2010) focuses on fighting poverty by empowering its victims, making them visible and ambassadors of the need for coordinating efforts to end this problem.

Starting from these premises, in this article we present evidence from INCLUD-ED[2] (2006-2011), the largest European research project on school education, which focuses on how successful schools around Europe are combating poverty and social exclusion through school and community partnerships. First, we provide a theoretical framework focused on family and community participation from a multicultural perspective. We then draw on findings from six case studies conducted for the INCLUD-ED project of successful schools in five EU countries to analyze how successful schools in disadvantaged multicultural contexts are involving diverse family members and other community members. We conclude with some implications of those findings for developing educational practices and policies that can strengthen the roles that schools play in fighting poverty and social exclusion in Europe, and for conducting further research on family and community participation in education.

Moving beyond determinism: Family and community participation to ensure school success

Reproduction theories, grounded in the structuralism of Louis Althusser (1971), have helped scholars analyse poverty and exclusion by seeing how schools mirror the larger inequalities in society (Baudelot & Establet, 1976; Bowles & McGinn, 2008). According to reproduction theories, all individuals inherit a given amount of cultural capital from their families, based on a combination of family background, SES, educational level, and income. That capital predicts their academic performance and later opportunities to enter the labour market and be involved in society (Bourdieu,

1984). When families are at risk or living in poverty, they have little social capital to offer their children. Hence, according to the reproduction model, children in those families have little, if any, chance of doing well in school.

In the last three decades, however, theorists have moved from the reproduction theory to dual approaches that consider individuals, as well as systems, in explaining social phenomena. The dual theories build on the notion that humans can be transformative (Vygotsky, 1978); they emphasize that people are agents, capable of acting upon society's tendencies to reproduce inequalities (Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 1994; Habermas, 1984; Giddens, 1984). Therefore, these dual theories hold that all people, including families living in poverty, can engage in transformative action and improve their context and situation (Aubert & Lalor, forthcoming). These accounts have largely been developed in relation to education and schools (Flecha, 2010; Freire, 2004) and have been tested in multiple case studies around the world (Apple & Beane, 2007; Gandin & Apple, 2002; Flecha, 2000; Sánchez, 1999; Slavin, 1995, Willis, 1977).

Indeed, in an extensive review of research on parent and community involvement in schools, Hidalgo, Epstein and Siu (2002) found much evidence that "family practices and involvement activities are more important for helping students succeed in school than are family structure; socioeconomic status; or characteristics such as race, parent education, family size, and age of child"; they say this is true "regardless of parents' formal education, income level, family culture, language spoken at home, or student ability or grade level" (p. 632).

Additionally, researchers have found that all communities, including those at risk or living in poverty, have crucial strengths that they can draw upon to help their children succeed in school (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Those community qualities, and more specifically the ways

they are used, may more accurately predict and explain the students' school success than demographic or economic characteristics (Hidalgo et al., 2002). Therefore, it is not only families but the entire community that helps students learn more and succeed academically.

The European approach to tackling poverty through coordinated action between agents in various social spheres is congruent with theories that emphasize the importance of school and community partnerships (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Epstein, 2001). Those theories state that learning and development are influenced by multiple contexts—most crucially the home, the community, and the school—and that when the continuity between contexts is improved, they can all have a more positive influence on the children's development.

Efforts to coordinate the work of homes and schools have several clear benefits for schools. Community participation in schools has been noted to improve literacy in the early years of schooling (Faires et al., 2000; Jordon et al, 2000) and promote better performance in mathematics. This improvement is related to children's conceptions of themselves as learners, reflecting their parents' views of them and their capabilities (Frome & Eccles, 1998). Additionally, family and community participation can reduce absenteeism and improve student behaviour at school, also improving attitudes and adjustment. Community participation in the form of parental education, such as family literacy programmes, empowers parents to help their own children and gives them chances to speak out about their children's learning and development (Tett, 2001). Finally, when parents improve their reading skills they have more opportunities to match the culture of the school, allowing them to better support their children (Paratore et al, 1999).

Minority and immigrant community participation in schools: Importance and barriers

If home-school relationships have those overall benefits, it is even more beneficial, and necessary, to involve members of immigrant families and cultural minorities in schools. Many studies have shown that immigrant and cultural minority students, whose families tend to be of low SES and non-academic backgrounds, experience higher rates of school failure, inadequate schools, low academic expectations, and general exclusion from education, compared to students from more advantaged social groups (Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Oakes, 1985; Valenzuela, 1999).

Researchers have explained these results by citing various phenomena, including the distance between the cultures of home and school (Au & Jordan, 1981; Cazden & Leggett, 1981; Irvine, 1990) and power relations between different social and cultural groups (Apple, 2000; Macedo, 1994; Noguera, 2003).

This situation of exclusion and failure emphasizes the importance of developing strong relationships between the family, community, and school for students living in disadvantaged conditions. Thus, in its resolution of 2 April 2009 on educating the children of migrants (2008/2328(INI), the European Parliament (2009) encouraged its Member States to develop a model for partnerships between schools and communities, and to involve immigrant families in schools.

Yet, although home-school relationships are particularly important for helping schools combat the risk of poverty among these disadvantaged students, these students' families are less likely to get involved in schools, for reasons related to both the parents and the schools. First, even though they are interested in their children's education, these parents and community members face multiple barriers to active involvement, including work schedules, feelings of intimidation by educators, and the daily struggle

simply to survive (Grant & Sleeter, 1986). Meanwhile, though most teachers believe that parent involvement is important, they often do not know how to involve parents and their responses to them do not always bear fruit (Epstein & Becker, 1982). School staff often respond inappropriately because they have low expectations for people of low SES and little education, who are of races or ethnicities unlike their own (Grant & Sleeter, 1986).

For example, Epstein and Becker (1982) found that many teachers seriously doubt that parents can be involved in schools if they do not have much formal education. Furthermore, even when schools involve parents, particularly those from vulnerable groups, they often reduce parent involvement to peripheral and symbolic participation and to confirming what school staff members have already decided to do. This is even more likely to happen with families from cultural minority groups, with whom many schools take the "tourist" approach (Derman-Sparks & A.B.C. Task Force, 1989): they invite parents to school festivities to celebrate the holidays or foods of other cultures, rather than engaging them in decisions about crucial issues in the school.

Additionally, researchers have found that traditional structures for parental involvement can burden family and community members who are cultural minorities and have little formal education, since those structures are framed by the discourse of mainstream schools and people who want to participate in them need competence in that discourse. Research has shown that the unique voices of these family and community members disappear into that pre-established structure of power in which the schools set the standards for parental and community involvement (Pérez Carreón, Drake, & Calabrese, 2005). Hence, it has been claimed that schools must change they ways they offer opportunities and resources for parent involvement at school, so they make them available to all parents (Lee & Bowen, 2010). For this to happen, it is necessary for

schools to change their traditional views about such family members in order to include their rich experiences and benefit the school. This necessarily involves revising the different beliefs in our societies regarding what the roles for parents and for schools and their respective responsibilities ought to be (Sliwka & Istance, 2006).

From all this research on families, schools, and communities, one key continuing question focuses on school partnerships: How can educators learn more about, and improve the practices involved in, school partnerships that include families from diverse backgrounds in diverse communities? Hidalgo, Epstein and Siu (2002, p. 633) point out the importance of identifying and studying the strategies schools must implement to reach, inform, and involve diverse families in their children's education. INCLUD-ED is addressing those questions by providing evidence-based strategies to overcome those obstacles and engage family and community members from diverse backgrounds in schools, and doing so in a way that is more central and more likely to improve student learning and achievement.

Methodology

This article reports on results from the research project INCLUD-ED (2006-2011), part of the 6th Framework Programme of the European Union. The project is pursuing its overall research goal through six sub-projects. One of those, which consists of a group of six case studies, has explored communities involved in learning projects that integrate social and educational interventions to help reduce inequalities and marginalisation, and foster social inclusion and empowerment. The case studies are of schools located in Finland, Lithuania, Malta, Spain and the United Kingdom. All six schools were selected according to three criteria: their students are succeeding academically, in comparison to schools with similar characteristics; they are serving

students and families from low SES and minority groups; and they are helping to overcome inequality through strong community participation.

Each year the case studies have had a particular focus, based on the results gained in the larger project. One of those results was a new classification of types of family and community involvement in schools: informative, consultative, decisive, evaluative, and educative. Of those five types, INCLUD-ED (2009) identified the last three as likely to have a greater impact on student achievement. This finding informed subsequent research questions about the six case study schools. In the second round of case studies (2007-2008), the team explored how the decisive, evaluative, and educative types of family and community involvement were taking place in the selected schools. Additionally, a specific question asked about strategies that achieved such influential parental and community involvement: "Which dialogic and democratic strategies are schools employing that facilitate the involvement in the school of family and community members belonging to vulnerable groups?" One of those vulnerable groups was immigrants and cultural minorities. The team then explored the links between those strategies and improvements in various school factors that influence learning and academic achievement. This article focuses on this research question.

The team approached the question through the critical communicative methodology (Gómez, Puigvert & Flecha, forthcoming). In each school, data were collected through 13 open-ended interviews (5 with representatives of the local administration, 5 with representatives of other community organizations, and 3 with teachers from the school); 13 communicative daily life stories (6 with family members and 7 with students); 1 communicative focus group with professionals working in educational centres; and 5 communicative observations in various places including classrooms, teachers' meetings, and the playground. The "communicative" character of

this method emphasizes egalitarian dialogue between researchers and participants throughout data collection and analysis. In the study reported here, continuous dialogue took place between scientific knowledge provided by researchers, and knowledge from life experiences of the teachers, family and community members, students, and other professionals involved in the schools. Such dialogue sought deep understanding of the strategies of family and community involvement, and how they benefit the school and the students. The protocols included questions about how the school involved family and community members, perceptions regarding family and community involvement in the school, and its importance for student achievement and school improvement in general.

The analysis focused on which strategies helped the school achieve strong community involvement of immigrants and cultural minorities that enhanced student learning and achievement and other related educational aspects, and on the concrete practices for enacting these strategies, and their related benefits for student learning and the school.

Findings: Three strategies that help immigrant and minority family and community members move from periphery to centre

Mainstream teachers and professionals often see families from cultural minorities as less able to understand the pedagogy they use or their curriculum decisions, and therefore less able to participate in school learning activities and academic life. These low expectations continue in a cycle, in which families participate in school practices such as cooking typical meals from their cultures, organizing a multicultural festival, or explaining some particular tradition to the children, rather than becoming more deeply involved in the educational work of the school. Meanwhile, the teachers repeat what

they hear other teachers say: they blame these families for failing to attend meetings or not being interested in the school. The research conducted indicated that the case study schools share a range of strategies that they implement in various ways and contribute to move family and community members' participation from the periphery to the centre. In so doing, these schools reposition these families in schools and thus break with the cycle of peripheral participation mentioned before. Below, we describe these three strategies and their main characteristics.

Overcoming intentions, ensuring participation

Most schools in Europe include school councils or boards: official structures through which family members can participate in decision making. The UK case analysed in this project, however, applies a specific approach to ensure that cultural minorities will participate: they make it priority to recruit such individuals to the school council. This affirmative action ensures that voices that have traditionally been ignored in schools will now be represented. Local governments also emphasise diversity in parent governors, another way to ensure that ethnic minorities will participate in governing bodies. An administrator from the local educational authority highlighted how this school in the UK moved beyond mere intentions:

> There's a team leader for school governors…and [the school staff] have made very specific efforts to target ethnic minority communities and to involve them and to encourage them to become governors and appoint members of ethnic minority groups to governing bodies.

The staff at this school saw that their diversity approach to family and community participation had a positive impact on the school life. On the one hand, it helped them reach out to more families who could better understand how the school works, thus

improving home-school coordination; on the other hand, it provided positive role models for the children. A teacher stated that, in general, "it does have a good impact on children's learning to see that parents have a say in how they're taught and are interested in their learning".

The Lithuanian school stressed similar priorities although it used different approaches to ensure representation. It used its Parents' Evening to encourage family members from all cultural groups to participate in the school bodies. In this case, a low-income family member explained the benefits of the Parents' Evenings bringing the cultures of home and schools closer together: "It is good because the school knows more about the needs of parents. School, parents and children better understand each other and it becomes easier to communicate".

Creating informal spaces for dialogue and participation

Some of these six schools developed informal spaces for conversations between culturally diverse families and others in the schools. These made it easier to include the "funds of knowledge" that these families could offer (González et al., 2005) to the dialogues that precede decision making in the schools. One school in Spain developed this procedure through Family Assemblies; a day care centre in Finland created Parents' Evenings that differed slightly from the Lithuanian ones. In both cases, the dynamics of participation are flexible: they meet at times that work best for the families, they use less academic language than do the formal school boards, and they include translators (usually other community members) who ensure that everyone in the meeting can take part in the dialogue.

The Family Assemblies are informal spaces for discussing school issues where all parents are encouraged to participate. An immigrant Colombian mother, involved in one of the Spanish schools, described these assemblies this way:

> First, meetings are held in order to talk and make decisions and then another meeting is held in order to inform people of what was decided. It's not simply a case of being in a meeting and people saying that they want so on and so forth, and that's all... it's not like that.

This mother was referring to a crucial aspect of this process, which is that discussion in these spaces is grounded in argumentation. Communicative observations conducted in family assemblies revealed that the families and community members who were attending contributed their opinions, just as teachers did, and that the dialogues were oriented toward reaching agreements about raising the quality of education and student achievement. What matters is the argument and not the status of the person who shares it.

This same approach was also found in the home-school partnership created in the Finnish case. Professionals working at the day care centre recognised the need to combine their knowledge with the families' arguments and concerns; this is particularly important when they come from diverse backgrounds and worldviews. A teacher highlighted this issue:

> We try to do this together; we might have the professional knowledge and vision of why this kind of action would be reasonable to organize, but we do it together with parents, with all of them. This is one of our significant features, this partnership in education with parents.

It was also found that these informal spaces for dialogue and participation may serve as springboards for members of cultural minority groups, who then become involved with

governing bodies and official structures for participation. That happened for the Colombian mother mentioned before. First, she was encouraged by the head teacher to participate in the family assembly. Some months later, after realizing the influence of her involvement in her child's education, she decided to engage in the Association of Students' Families (ASF), of which she is now president and from where she encourages other immigrant family and community members to participate in the assemblies.

From folkloric to intellectual contributors

A third crucial element in improving diverse family members' participation was the teachers' high expectations for them. For example, an educational administrator pointed out the importance of believing that people can learn and participate, regardless of their cultural background or educational level. He guides teachers in that direction and facilitates strategies through school supervision. He said,

> These families can do it. It is important to change the attitude of "the family cannot do it", because sometimes we hold this [idea]: "they don't know how to speak, [so] they don't know how to write". Certainly they don't know how to speak our language, possibly they don't know how to write it, but that does not mean that they cannot work on reading with their children.

Thus, in one of the schools in Spain, teachers encourage parents to participate as volunteers, offering them opportunities for involvement that break with social and cultural stereotypes:

> After school when they say I am not going to come because I don't know how to do this, [we say] you just come and we will help you and we will give you a volunteer task that you can do easily.

Different activities that draw on high expectations have been identified in these six schools; they all aim to involve family and community members in curricular activities from which they are often excluded. Among these activities we highlight two here: interactive groups (participation in the classroom) and the writing skills program (participation in afterschool education). When family members share classrooms and other learning spaces with the students, it transforms their participation as well as the larger learning environment. A Romaní mother described her experience:

> Now we the mothers have the freedom to go to see our kids, and before we could not. Before it was just from the doorway and from the outside, there were no meetings that I knew about. If there was no school or something, they gave the children letters... so there was no trust between the teachers and us, and now we trust each other…. We have a lot of information.

Researchers have found interactive groups to be quite successful, as they incorporate many of the benefits that accrue when family and community members participate in classroom activities. In the Spanish schools, relatives and neighbours participate as volunteers in the classroom; they do not need a strong academic background as their main role is to promote interaction between the children. In one classroom three of four people can be volunteering, in addition to the teacher: they include immigrants and long-term local residents, retired people, and graduates of the school who are now in high school or university. A primary school teacher said, "I have had… Moroccan graduates teaching in interactive groups with me, and yes they can participate! In fact they were a real help".

In this way, family members and other community volunteers, sometimes people with little formal education, become facilitators of children's learning in the small

groups. In doing so they become "intellectual resources", who can make significant contributions to students' learning. An immigrant mother, explained:

> When their little friend says "look, your mum teaches me so well, or she is so good at reading to me, she's so good at…" above all they value it very much when their friends speak well of you, which does not usually happen.... I enjoy helping our children in this way.

Families also participate in afterschool programmes that focus on academic issues. This is true of the Writing Skills Programme, implemented in the Maltese school that the project studied. Its objective is to bring family members and teachers together so they can share the task of promoting the children's learning. As a result of their participation in this program, both teachers and parents see significant improvements in the children's learning. First, by sharing these activities, parents understand what the writing processes entail and later on can better help them at home:

> The boy did not want to read, so we went to these meetings together, sharing reading.... They teach us how to do it.... For example he does not know how to stop and I explain it to him, or a way that is different from what I had learned at school is to keep on going, whether I understand or not.

Second, teachers highlighted a significant improvement not only in the children's writing skills, but in their overall achievement, and they attributed it to the family involvement in this activity. One noted, "We have improved, yes, even in terms of the average number of students who are passing [the exams] for Junior Lyceum [secondary] schools".

This experience of family members sharing in the children's academic learning activities within the school transformed the perceptions of both children and teachers about parents with little formal education who are cultural minorities. It also helped to

transform the children's learning environments, at both school and home. An illiterate mother from an ethnic minority group explained the importance of her presence in the classroom helping the teacher:

> Before I came in they were making such a racket. It was too much! And then one of the little girls said, "Juan's mum is here", and they sat down. [And I said], "Come on everyone, calm down and you'll see what happens" and all of the kids sat there to do what the teacher said, and everything went well.... And the teacher said, "when are you coming in next, Emilia?"

This relative also explained how she was more valued at home when she was supervising her own children in doing their homework, because her participation in intellectual tasks had a strong impact on the children's learning process. In addition, teachers described increased feelings of trust between teachers and parents about supporting the children's learning:

> From the moment parents enter the school they value the teachers' work more and become helpers. For instance, they see how difficult it is to work with children at different levels, who have various needs and learning styles. They also realize we value their contribution to children's learning a great deal.… [So] we all win: volunteers, parents, children and teachers.

Discussion

One area that researchers have identified as needing further exploration has been the strategies that teachers must implement to involve diverse families and community members in schools. The INCLUD-ED project has addressed that gap. With a focus on identifying successful educational actions, INCLUD-ED studies schools in Europe that strongly involve family and community members from ethnic and cultural minorities in

ways that improve student attainment and other non-academic goals. The six schools studied here have constituted ideal cases for identifying some of those strategies for family and community involvement. In particular, from the analyses conducted have emerged three specific recommendations for schools.

First, schools must move from intending to involve minorities in the school to developing specific structures and criteria that ensure that minority and disadvantaged family and community members will actually become involved. This is important to ensure that equal rights within the education system are not just a principle but a practice in the everyday life of students and their families (Carneiro & Draxler, 2008). Second, schools might well benefit from creating informal spaces for dialogue, to encourage these family and community members to become more deeply engaged in the school. The key here is a more flexible participation structure (Lave & Wenger, 1991) which includes more flexible scheduling and less formal and academic patterns of interaction. Indeed, the interactive procedures used in these informal structures seemed to play a role in increasing involvement. This addresses the need of schools making opportunities and resources for school involvement available to all family and community members (Lee & Bowen, 2010). One key procedure was validating the arguments that community members offered on the basis of whether they would be useful in raising the educational quality in the school, regardless of the status of the person who offered those arguments. Third, these schools are replacing the deficit view of these families and community members, which stresses what they lack, with the appreciation that they are indispensable allies in providing the best education for all students: drawing on their funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005) they can contribute ideas and experiences that are not available to teachers from the mainstream culture.

A noteworthy finding is that these strategies are enacted in the schools in different forms (school councils, family assemblies, or interactive groups), but all three contribute to the same transformative result: within the school, they reposition these family and community members, moving them from participating at the periphery of school life to taking on more central roles. This happens because these involvement strategies lead to systems of activity that are more inclusive, more democratic, and more flexible. In turn, these characteristics influence the type of participation that is possible in the school. This point is crucial because different types of participation—from non-participation, to peripheral participation, to participation with the right to negotiate meanings, etc.—lead people to develop different identities in relation to the school and also lead to different results (Wenger, 1998). In this regard, the strategies of involvement we have presented here provide opportunities for individuals from minority backgrounds to engage productively in the school system, in particular, in decisive and educative ways. The INCLUD-ED Consortium (2009) had already identified the decisive and educative types of family and community participation (and also the evaluative) as likely to have a greater impact on student learning and school improvement, compared to the information and consultation types. Since the strategies presented here encourage decisive and educative participation, they counteract the situations in which minority families are left at the margins, never participating more than peripherally (Epstein & Becker, 1982, Lave & Wenger, 1991, Sleeter & Grant, 1986). Instead, they promote their active and more central participation in schools, in ways that benefit both the schools and the students' learning.

Moreover, the strategies of involvement we have discussed here acted as springboards, allowing these family and community members to engage in trajectories of progressively more central participation even in other spaces beyond the schools.

This process reflects the learning these schools and families undergo as a result of these democratic moves in participation. Some of the family and community members interviewed and observed for this study had been speakers in INCLUD-ED seminars, where from the centre of the academic system they have passionately explained that families, communities, and schools together can make a difference in the fight against poverty[3]. INCLUD-ED has provided us with some tools for those minority voices that are counting at such central spaces to be also listened in all schools in Europe. As a head teacher of one of the schools studied noted: through that inclusion "we all win".

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NOTES

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[1] European Commission. (2010). European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion. More information at http://www.2010againstpoverty.eu/?langid=en

[2] INCLUD-ED. Strategies for Inclusion and Social Cohesion in Europe from Education (2006-2011). Project's Website: http://www.ub.edu/includ-ed/

[3] The INCLUD-ED conference held in Nicosia (Cyprus) on September 2008 was an example of this. Information on this event is available at http://www.ub.edu/includ-ed/new%20nicosia.html