

The role of the Community in enhancing learning

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The education process of children has over time become the domain of educators, having taken more and more the responsibility off families and more so off the community. However, as society becomes more diverse and social cohesion essential to a knowledge base society, education professionals recognise that educating children has become such a complex process that it cannot be catered for by just one group of professionals as before. One way to best tackle this new challenge by schools is through the involvement of the families and the community collaborating together for the benefit of the children's education. This paper describes research conducted as part of the FP6 project INCLUD-ED of a successful school in Malta which is working with the community and families and registering significant improvement in the children's educational achievement. This study provides examples of successful practices from which other schools across Europe can obtain ideas and inspiration to bring about change in the communities where they operate.

Keywords

Educational Achievement

community involvement

Successful practices

Introduction: New challenges, new roles for schools

The world has in recent years experienced significant and dramatic changes as a result of globalisation. The world is becoming smaller and consistently more diverse at a very fast rate. Consequently, schools are faced with very complex situations, having to cater for diverse cultures, backgrounds, socioeconomic status and religious beliefs. Schools thus find themselves in a situation where they have to face the challenge of preparing diverse groups of children for a fast-changing future which no single field of expertise can tackle on its own (Suarez-Orozco & Qin-Hiliard, 2004). They find themselves needing to re-design themselves as places where both adults and young people learn (Elmore, 2000) in order to live up to these challenges. There is need for more professional knowledge on areas like child development, learning and social integration as educating children becomes a harder and more demanding task.

Educating children can no longer be considered the sole responsibility of schools, and families and communities need to work together for the benefit of children (Epstein, 1995). Education needs to become a shared responsibility involving the whole community working with different types of professionals, teachers and educators for the best of the community's future citizens. Managing to face these challenges requires whole-school action through both a theory of learning as well as a theory of action (Berends *et al.*, 2002). As education is given so much importance it has gained attention as a particularly effective tool in promoting social cohesion (Green *et al.*, 2003).

This paper describes one particular school in Malta which, in working with families and the local community, has obtained significant academic achievement as well as better tolerance by its students. The research conducted in this school was part of a longitudinal study within the FP6 project INCLUD-ED – *Strategies for inclusion and social cohesion in Europe from Education*.

The INCLUD-ED project and Research on community involvement in schools

INCLUD-ED is an integrated project funded under priority 7 "Citizens and governance in the knowledge-based society" of the Sixth Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development (FP6). It is the most significant research within FP6 focused on compulsory education, special education and vocational training. The project's main objective is to analyse educational strategies to identify strategies which contribute to social cohesion and which lead to social exclusion within the context of a European knowledge based society. The project thus provides key elements and lines of action which can provide guidance in how to improve educational and social policy. As an integrated project INCLUD-ED considers a wide range of educational perspectives. In this paper, only part of one of the 7 sub-projects will be discussed. Project 6: *Local projects for social cohesion*, focuses on how successful schools work with the community for the academic success of the children (INCLUD-ED, 2006). The main

focus of this project is to analyse processes which prevent inequalities and foster social inclusion and empowerment led by communities involved in learning projects.

Project 6 includes researching learning programmes within 6 primary schools in five different countries as case studies of successful practices in bringing about a significant improvement in children's school performance through the involvement of the community. For the purpose of this investigation, a primary school in Malta was selected for the research. The research results for this primary school will be used to illustrate dimensions of how a community can work to the benefit of children's success.

Theoretical Background: The role of the community in learning

Schooling may be a major agent in children's education, but it is surely not the only influence on children's abilities and educational achievement. There are other factors such as the family, one's cultural and socio-economic background, one's financial situation and, most importantly, the community in which one lives, which play a role in children's development and educational performance (Collins *et al.*, 2000; Elliot *et al.*, 1999; Rainey & Murova, 2004). Schools experience difficulty to deal with this myriad of permutations of diversity and some seek strategic partnerships within the community to achieve better results.

One can find different types of communities: within a locality; a group; a school; and more. The term 'community' was considered by the German sociologist and philosopher Ferdinand Tonnies to have two forms: *Gesellschaft* which is an association between people based on members' pursuit as self-interest; and *gemeinschaft* where the association is based on shared purposes, personal loyalties and sentiments (Watkins, 2007). Communities, of whatever type, have a sense of agency, can act, promote a sense of belonging to their members, support cohesion through commitment, and at the same time embrace diversity (Watkins, 2007). Different processes can be used within a community. Communities help their members to act through collective action; bridge members of the community through connections; promote collaboration; and allow dialogue, discussion and debate for the exchange of ideas and opinions. A community is the sum of a number of dependent aspects such as: strong democracy; education; health and wellbeing; economic equity, opportunity and sustainability; information and communication; and conviviality and culture (Schuler, 1996).

Family engagement and participation in the children's education promotes success from 'cradle to career' (Westmoreland *et al.*, 2009). Various studies have focused on schools practising parental involvement (Foot *et al.*, 2002; Tett, 2001) and whether this has an impact on students' achievement and general well-being at school (Senechal & LeFevre, 2002; Edwards & Warin, 1999; Baker *et al.*, 1997). Contemporary forms of parental involvement translates in empowering parents democratically and politically through providing an active role and

democratic decision-making powers over their children's education in terms of educational content, method and everyday life at the school.

Community involvement goes beyond involving parents. School, family, and community partnerships are a better way of placing school actions within the community all stakeholders share responsibility for students' learning and development (Epstein & Sheldon, 2006). Community involvement is a multidimensional and complex concept involving different agents acting at different levels and in different ways and requires strong leadership. A significant body of research has focused on the benefits of community involvement in schools (Sanchez, 1999; Espstien, 2001a, Delga Do-Gaitan, 2001; Garcia 2002). For instance, educators can transform their schools and classrooms into communities of inquirers (Wells ,1999). In this process community involvement becomes important not only for the school but also for the transformation of that very community.

Community involvement has been shown to lead to better pupil performance at school (Epstein, 1983; Grolnick *et al*, 1999; Harvard, 2007). It promotes children's academic improvement in literacy (Faires *et al.*, 2000; Jordon *et al*, 2000) in the early years of schooling. Progress in reading was also observed with older students at primary level (Epstein, 1991, 2001). Improvements in mathematics were also documented, particularly related to the students' self-concept as learners (Frome & Eccles, 1998). In science, parents' attitude toward the subject was found to play an important role on the children's interest and achievement in the subject (George and Kaplan, 1998). Community involvement was also found to reduce absenteeism; promote better student behaviour at school as well as students' attitude and adjustment (Saunders and Sheldon, 2009). In Spain, it has helped fight gender violence through the participation of different groups of women (Soler, 2009). Community involvement has also supported school and curricular reform to take place and be sustained (Arriaza, 2004).

Community involvement also supports learning of the community members. Improving parents reading skills allows greater opportunity for low income parents to match the school culture (Paratore *et al*, 1999), strengthening the argument for equity in the distribution of literacy programmes (Ponzetti & Dulin, 1997). Volunteers become crucial as they help the development of the reading skills of primary level students (Fitzgerald, 2001). Family literacy programmes help parents learn how to support their own children as well as empowering them to be heard in the learning and development of their own children (Tett, 2001). Schools thus reduce the gaps in social norms between the school and the home (Gradstein & Justman,2002).

Collaboration does not only provide a greater range of professional expertise, but it also enables one to tackle issues from different perspectives and in a more holistic way. It is through working towards a common goal that schools choose the target of reaching out to those who need help most; promoting transformative practices which

would enable all children to achieve their potential notwithstanding the circumstances of their background, culture, socioeconomic status etc. Schools and community organisations strive to empower children and families to succeed in education, promoting social capital (Green & Preston, 2001) and reducing marginalisation of disadvantaged groups in society as an outcome of provision of quality education (Putman, 2004).

Research methodology – short overview of the four years

The critical communicative methodology (Gomez et al, 2006) developed as a research methodology by Gomez (Flecha, 2008) is used in this research. This methodology highlights the importance of including all the voices of all of the agents involved in the research, irrespective of status, gender or any other agent. It also considers research as an egalitarian dialogue and involves the construction of knowledge based on inter-subjectivity and reflection. Critical Communicative Methodology stems from diverse and interdisciplinary theoretical foundations, including: Habermas' (1984) theory of communicative action who argues that there is no hierarchy between the interpretations of the researcher and the subject, and their relation should be based on the arguments they provide and not on their social or academic position. The relevance of the subjects' interpretations is considered in that it gives importance to the role of typification in building ideal types (Schutz & Luckmann, 1974). Critical Communicative Methodology also draws from Mead's symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934) which stresses that interactions make people's interpretations change, and therefore do not only depend on the individual subject. Finally, there is also influence from Garfinkel's ethnomethodological framework (Garfinkel, 1967) in obtaining a better understanding of the subject's insights in their contexts. (INCLUD-ED, Annex 1).

Critical Communicative Methodology provides the possibility to integrate and incorporate different disciplines and orientations, distinct methods and techniques to collect and analyse data. In this case, it was also recognised that in order to obtain both an overall view of the context as well as an in-depth understanding of it, it was also important to use mixed methodology: using quantitative, qualitative and communicative research tools. The quantitative data included two questionnaires: one for families and one for students; while the qualitative tools involved interviews with key stakeholders, daily life stories with both students and families, as well as a focus group interview. The interviews with different key players included interviews with school administrators; school teachers; parents on the school council; professionals from other educational institutions; as well as members from organisations within the local community and who have been working with the schools. Every year these tools were changed and adapted to the research question as it changed and evolved over the four years.

The school in Malta

The school to be selected for the case study in this longitudinal study had to fulfil a number of specific criteria. The schools chosen for research in Project 6 needed to have: demonstrated to contribute to school success in relation to their context; have students of low Socio-economic status and students with minority background; and have strong community involvement that is contributing to overcome inequalities.

The school chosen is a primary school in the south eastern side of Malta with a school population of 275 students in the age range of 7-12, catering for the last three years of primary education. The school has these recent years registered a consistent improvement in student academic performance, this being shown mainly, but not only, from the number of passes in the 11+ examination results shown here below.

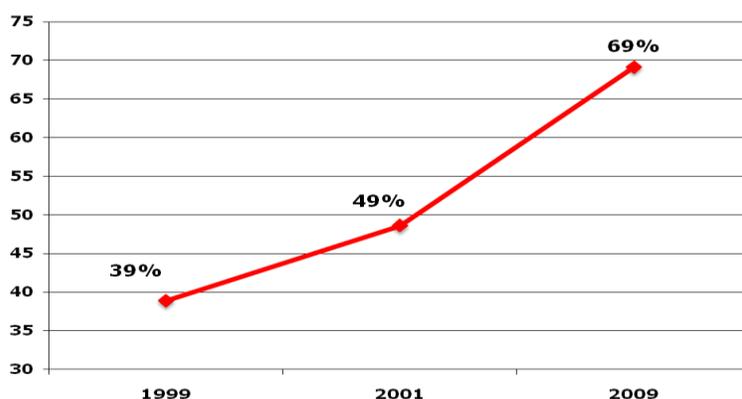


Figure 1: School Success Rate in National Junior Lyceum Examination

The school is in a locality with social problems such as high rates of unemployment, a substantial amount of single parent households and illiteracy (Cauchi & Zammit 2001). A significant number of breadwinners in the community also worked in the Maltese dockyard industry that was closed this year. Adults, in particular males in the locality are also more prone to gambling (Tracy, 2008) despite facing unstable or lack of employment, financial hardships and poor living conditions. The locality chosen has so far not seen a great influx of different cultures even if this phenomenon is being felt in most of the localities across Malta.

The school practises transformative community involvement in various ways. First of all, since 2005, it has an established school council that operates on the basis of principles of democracy and inclusion. The school also has a student council with seven student representatives elected by the students themselves. The school is also located in a community that boasts a long tradition of community participation at local council (municipality) level. Community active participation is also found in the locality at the level of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as: the

Parish Church; the local literacy institute that has by now become a one-stop-shop for many social needs, the local Scout Group; the local early years primary school (Primary School A); the local junior lyceum (secondary education institution for students of higher ability; residential Home for disabled people who are homeless or cannot live with their families; residential home for mentally disabled children; two band clubs; and the local football club. At the start of the project, the school at the time of the research was also participating in the '*writing programme*' with the support of a professional organisation which runs the programme and which involves parents writing with their own children. The school thus fitted quite well the research requirements of successful local schools with community involvement.

Results:

The four years of research allowed the group of researchers to identify the following: indicators of successful practices in the school; the dimensions of community involvement, the improvement registered and the strategies used; and the links between community involvement and learning outcomes. The insights obtained from the school researched in Malta will be taken in context to highlight what has been identified as a result of this research.

Successful practices

The first year focused on identifying successful practices. With respect to academic performance students improved in various ways: their spelling got better; they learnt how to structure better their piece of written work; as well as obtained better performance in their formal school assessment. Children reported having learnt how to develop learning strategies and control over their learning process. Students participating in the writing programme also became more aware of their own learning. They developed better attitude and greater motivation to learning; grew in self-esteem as learners and as individuals were not afraid to express themselves. Children enjoyed learning both at school and at home.

The Head of school as well as the teaching staff were considered strong assets in the whole process. Through their teaching skills and genuine care for the welfare of the children, they provided a positive and effective holistic education. This led to both the children's educational development as well as the teachers' professional growth. There was great collaboration among the school staff as well as between the school and members of the community. Parents were active participants in their children's learning process and worked hand in hand with the school staff. Both parents and teachers have been empowered to have enough self confidence to express their own opinion without any fear. The school promoted peer learning where children ask for each others' opinion and take action on it. There was overall a great sense of solidarity within the school. This helped to improve the school's image within the community.

The school worked to promote tolerance, acceptance and social inclusion across gender, ethnicity, and religious background. The school worked for the development of ALL children and promoted the inclusion and tolerance of all groups in its everyday practices. Democratic values of tolerance in diversity within a democratic environment formed part of all school activities, from whole school projects to classroom practice. In one example, the school involved students in a democratic process of election and representation. A positive relationship exists between the Local Council in the community and the primary school. There was a relatively good level of involvement of community organisations in school activities. Extra-curricular activities promoted awareness of and appreciation of their own community and its culture. The school council was considered as a means to empower parents as active participants in the school. The school website is considered as a good means for disseminating information about the school.

None the less, the school is still facing challenges. Unfortunately, some children still demonstrate behaviour reflecting prejudice based on race and religious belief. Teachers feel that they lack enough training to deal with such situations of intolerance manifested by children and parents in facing prejudice that exists within the community. The school also encountered problems in dealing with students with disabilities as well as establishing healthy working relationships between teachers and facilitators. There were instances where some of the educational staff were not entirely convinced that some students with learning disabilities should be included in mainstream education.

Overall, the school worked in favour of inclusion as part of the whole school ethos which endorses diversity as an integral part of the educational process, then reflected in the classroom practice as well as in extracurricular activities. The school's strong collaboration with community entities, such as parents and local organisations (namely the school council, the local council, the parish church, and NGOs such as the village's literacy institute) were the main asset through which inclusion was achieved.

Strategies used by the school

The second year of research focused on identifying the strategies for community involvement used by the school and the improvements which were registered. A number of existent forms of family and community education were identified. The school embraced an open door policy where parents, families and community organisations were welcome to talk, share and collaborate. Examples of practice included organizing various informational meetings for parents. One such meeting is usually held at the beginning of the year and parents have the opportunity to express their needs and concerns, and provide the school administration with an insight to what they want and need. The school then responds to such requests by organizing events for families through the School's Council with the collaboration of family and community members. There were also activities including family education in the school's educational process, specifically in cases where parents were encouraged to attend the writing programme activities such as a yearly writing parent-student session and the weekly after-school hours club. The parent-student writing

session included the parents and children involved in a writing activity together with the aim of helping parents understand what the writing process involves. The 'After-school Hours Club' was set up following a request by some parents. In this club, parents and children stay on together at school after hours with a professional educator. Activities in this club included doing homework as well as other activities which provide opportunities for creative writing. The setting is more informal from normal school but in which parents and children learn with the help of a professional.

Community involvement also meant hearing the parents' voice with respect to curricular and educational matters. This reflected a more collaborative approach between parents and professional staff at the school. There were sessions specifically for parents on how to understand and help their children, talks on bullying which involve training on how to deal with issues rather than telling them about issues. There were also meetings asking the children to express their dreams and fears within the school. Parents were also found to be increasingly involved as a human resource in the school. The school has made attempts to increase participation, particularly of families, by organising events after school hours. This was not an easy task considering the bureaucratic difficulties that the school administration encounter when they want to use the school after school hours. There is also a problem with a lack of human resources. Nevertheless, the extra effort paid off as there were increased participation rates.

Family participation in the classroom involved mainly the yearly session held during the Writing Programme. There were other forms of participation, particularly of community members. This was evident mainly in the participation of one Local Council committee member who took the school children on cultural walks of the locality, describing the main buildings in the village and explaining their local history.

Links of learning

The richness of qualitative data in the third year of the research testifies the connection between family and community education and academic success. Family involvement in education was found to serve as a support aid for the student in his/her studies. As parents themselves learn academic skills and subjects themselves, this does not only serve promote their personal development, but also gives them the knowledge to follow their children's academic work at school. When parents are called in to work with their children, the majority of them consider this as a positive initiative and participate actively. As parents are also learners, they transmit a positive view of learning to children as well as help build their self-esteem. It also helps bridge the school to the community culture. Parents in the school council also often act as mediators between parents and school staff.

Networking with entities within and outside the community clearly shows how social capital yields to successful results. Examples of entities were the parish church (once again reflecting the catholic national context) and the

Sports Promotion Unit (reflecting the orientation towards holistic education). So although not directly teaching families any specific subjects, entities have provided that type of support which still results in better performance by children at school. Community organisations also provided training to parents to be better-informed guardians, e.g. on how their children are using the internet; nutrition; illnesses etc. As parents become empowered in helping their children with their academic work, training in parenting skills help families improve their relationship with the children. One particular case identified is related to the use of the computer where training empowered parents not only in the use of the computer, but also in how to check what their children were doing and accessing when surfing the internet.

The school council prominently features as one of the assets of the school to give way to community participation in academic issues. The Head of school is very confident of the school council's potential and consults it on a regular basis both formally (monthly meetings) and informally (school council members are at the school regularly, some of them almost daily). The school council has thus evolved a system for dialogic dialogue between the school, parents and the community.

Discussion: community schools – schools of the future?

OECD (2001) asked a number of world level academics to contribute ideas and postulate possible scenarios for schools of the future. The exercise resulted in the identification of three main possible developments: maintaining status quo; a re-schooling scenario where schools have rethink the way they work; and de-schooling which tries to deconstruct the existing system for educating children. Interestingly, one type of school within the re-schooling scenario conceived schools as 'core social centres'. Such schools are considered to become the main agent against social fragmentation and exclusion as they promote and give a greater role to families and the community. The school being researched in Malta may very well become the model for schools of the future.

The contribution of community involvement in schooling is already acknowledged in official policy documents with '*The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) ACT*' in 2002 in the U.S. It encourages schools to create policies valuing family and community involvement in decision and policy-making processes, to provide information to parents about academic content and standards, and to invest in school-home initiatives. Community involvement is also promoted in other policy documents (Sanders & Sheldon, 2009). These policies are the result of a number of studies which have shown consistently that schools in areas of low socio-economic status achieve better academic achievement as a result of work which they do with families within the community (Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000).

Schools are responsible for putting policy into practice. Success stories at grassroots as that highlighted in the school described in this research are to act as inspiration to other schools searching for new approaches and new ways of working. All the schools researched in the five countries within INCLUD-ED highlight how one can find similarities

within different contexts, and provide a strong enough argument to promote community involvement in schooling at policy level also across Europe.

Conclusion:

This paper has shown how one school has managed to register significant improvements in academic achievement as well as promote social cohesion within a community by working directly with the agents within the same community. Partnerships have the advantage of making things impossible to achieve by one single entity become within the reach of a collaborating group. In view of the recession which the world is experiencing, and the resulting reduced financial resources which schools are bound to experience, schools will all be asked to turn to available own resources. The community can share the burden and challenges with its own local primary school and dream dreams which not even all the money in the world would make possible to achieve. Social cohesion goes beyond financial perspectives, and the values of solidarity and genuine collaboration on which community involvement in schools is based, are priceless.

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