7th International Conference on Intercultural Education "Education, Health and ICT for a Transcultural World", EDUHEM 2016, 15-17 June 2016, Almeria, Spain

Workshop Experience: A means of fostering ties with the neighborhood in a school in the region of Murcia

Josefina Lozano Martínez*, Mari Carmen Cerezo Máiquez & Irina Sherezade Castillo Reche

University of Murcia, Faculty of Education, Campus Espinardo, Murcia -30100, Spain

Abstract

This study, part of a national research project, describes an educational experience undertaken in a school in the region of Murcia (Spain). The aim of the project was to establish links between the school and the senior citizens' social center in the neighborhood through narratives of senior citizens' life experiences as told to the pupils. Information was gathered through interviews with the participants. This information was then analyzed according to certain categories. Results indicate that linking the school with the local community has had favorable consequences for all participants in both institutions.

1. Introduction

At the present time of political and social uncertainty and continuing legislative and governmental changes, the major challenges facing the world cannot be excluded from schools, and nor can schools be excluded from the concerns of the knowledge society (Mingorance & Estebaranz, 2009). Specifically, Europe needs to identify strategies that will help in designing new policies to achieve the Strategy of Europe 2020 objectives, such as "lifting at least 20 million people out of the risk of poverty and social exclusion" by 2020 and reducing the percentage of early school leavers from 15% to below 10% (CREADE, 2011).

————————

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +34-868884027
  E-mail address: lozanoma@um.es

From these positions, we consider that much of the endeavor to improve the educational institution lies in strategies of citizen participation in the community. The school must therefore extend its fields of action to the village, town or city as a way of facing these new social challenges. As Bolívar (2006, p.120) states:

> *The school is not the only context of education; neither are its teachers its only agents. The family and the media also play an important educational role. Given these new forms of socialization and power acquired by other agents in shaping children's education, educational action must re-establish its role in forming students, and bring new meaning to its action in new ways, among which collaboration with families and community integration are essential.*

The idea of participation already appears in the original concept of the school as an *educational community* made up of teachers, pupils, parents and members of the community involved in a process of human perfection (Parra, 2004). And therefore, an intercultural and inclusive school must be a school embedded in its territory, in other words, an institution that is a critical player in social change. In this vein, various studies and educational experiences have considered profound transformations through cooperation between the school and the environment by promoting educational improvement and social emancipation (Ainscow, 2001; Alonso, 2010; Echeita, 2008; Essomba, 2008; García & Villar, 2011; García, 2012; Lozano, Cerezo & Alcaraz, 2015; Sales, 2012; Traver, Sales & Moliner, 2009, 2010).

According to Pérez and Mendez (2012, p.6) "In this process everyone (teachers, relatives, neighbors...) learns and transforms. We have discovered the value of equalitarian dialogue to put this into practice". In the above-mentioned studies, while the family has been involved in schools' educational projects on the one hand, the reverse has also been demonstrated: schools have become involved in social and cultural activities in their localities, encouraging student and family participation to promote community development, so that teachers' knowledge and the school's resources are at the service of the training and welfare of the community.

Therefore, as Dryfoos (2005) has explored through the study of students' needs, particularly in disadvantaged contexts, on many occasions public schools – in conjunction with other organizations in their communities – provide pupils and families with missing services. This first level of integration with the community involves opening school premises outside school hours to provide general support to families, adult education, cultural activities, etc.

Another level of increased participation entails a more inclusive relationship where all community members are considered as agents of change, and wherever schools meet the community, both are always enhanced. The Universitat Jaume I's MEICRI (Educational Improvement and Critical Citizenship) Research Group (Sales, 2012; Traver, Sales & Moliner, 2009, 2010,) falls within this second line of participation. This group advises schools on how to use policies of equality to transform and enrich the educational context, from the potential offered by inclusion, intercultural and community participation. According to Sales (2012, p.55),

> *Our involvement as external consultants in the process of in-school training began with the experience of participatory democracy in schools. We aim to involve different community agents, build new spaces and understandings in which everyone is necessary to make the desired changes. Expand the territory, open up the school or rethink it from a community perspective.*

Sales refers to the participation of families and the community in the school. This aim connects with the idea that change must be led by the school itself and the focus must be on school culture to achieve change with greater involvement of families and other social agents and by linking with the local area. According to Pérez and Méndez (2012, p.5), "We have even gone one step further. Parents go from being 'only informed' to 'taking decisions' by participating in joint committees".

An analysis of the scientific literature on participatory processes based on an intercultural and inclusive educational approach therefore reveals that a collaborative culture is key to increasing the autonomy of the educational community to manage change towards the idea of the effective school for all (Bolívar, 2006).

2. Objectives

The main aim of this study is to assess the improvements achieved by building a link between the school and the neighborhood through an activity in the school involving the participation and collaboration of people from the local senior citizens' social centre. The specific objectives of this experience are:

- To assess whether the participation of older people in school is a key way of generating support and collaboration networks.
- To encourage local participants' sense of recognition and appreciation for cooperating with the school.

3. Method

3.1. Research Design

The research consisted of a single case study, understood by Yin (2009) as a method of empirical research involving the exhaustive analysis of a phenomenon in a real context. In the socio-educational field, Sabariego, Massot and Dorio (2012) define this type of research as a way of deeply and systematically analyzing a reality, a single entity. The case study, therefore, gives us the opportunity to understand the dynamics present in unique contexts. Our case analyzes an educational experience in a public school in the region of Murcia, with the participation of a social entity (neighborhood senior citizens' center) and the impact that this initiative has for all those involved. The collaboration between the school, the teachers and the local associations is evidenced in the activity, which takes the form of workshops; the preparations and development of the activity is based on cooperation and active participation of teachers, senior citizens from the neighborhood and pupils.

The activity essentially consists of setting up joint projects between the school and the neighborhood, thus encouraging a sense of recognition and appreciation among the local participants for cooperating with the school. The workshop also gives pupils the opportunity to enjoy listening to the seniors recounting the experiences and stories of their youth, games from those days, and professions and trades that the pupils are unfamiliar with.

3.2. Context and Participants

The infant and primary school is located in a neighborhood near the commercial center of Murcia. The neighborhood has an average socio-economic level but with a significant unemployment rate, and has all the regular health, education, cultural, sports and recreational services. The school currently has 430 pupils divided into 19 classes; 30% of the pupils come from immigrant families. This figure is significant because of the multicultural implications it has for the school. The six infant classes have a total of 148 pupils, 8 of whom have specific educational support needs. There are twelve primary level groups with 276 students, of whom 20 have specific educational support needs. Of these 28 students with special needs, 20 are integrated into ordinary groups. Each classroom has an average of 4–5 students receiving regular educational reinforcement. Seven children with pervasive developmental disorder or autism spectrum disorder are taught in the open classroom.

The study sample consisted of 30 5th-grade primary level pupils; the tutors of the two 5th grade courses and the section coordinator who participated in a supportive role; the school principal and four senior citizens from the community senior citizens' center.

3.3. Procedure, information gathering tool and analysis.

Information about the experience was gathered during the workshops attended by the senior citizens and the 5th grade pupils. Semi-structured group interviews were then held, and school principal was interviewed separately. Interviews were used since they are designed to gather enhanced knowledge through conversational face-to-face interaction (Wengraf, 2012). The interviews focused on the key concepts of links with the territory, sense of belonging, social transformation and support networks. A relaxed and friendly atmosphere was established in which teachers, senior citizens and pupils were able to contribute a great deal of relevant information.

The codes used are as follows: I = interview; P = pupil; SC = senior citizen; T = teacher; D = director.

The interviews were then transcribed and used as the basis for analyzing the above-mentioned key concepts. The participants' discourses were then analyzed to identify the relevant ideas that emerged inductively around these initial categories.

4. Results

We present the results of this study according to the theoretical categories used in the analysis.

4.1. Link with the territory

The school's link with the territory is reflected in the way sustainable relationships and mutual support have developed, through which a sense of acceptance, appreciation and mutual involvement between the school community and its environment is perceived. This effect is reflected in the comments of the main participants in the activity, pupils and senior citizens:

> *"I learn a lot from them and they are usually great fun and the best thing is learning from them"* (I, P1)
> *"You learn new things, you meet new people. They tell you about their experiences and you enjoy yourself."* (I, P2)
> *"It's very satisfying to convey what you've done ... that's a shared experience that makes them really happy, and in those moments I feel satisfied and grateful and at the same time I feel they admire me because, of course, they ask you questions, sometimes difficult ones."* (I, SC2)
> *"The satisfaction we get from this is tremendous, priceless, so when someone does something so lovely for you and something so fulfilling, that's what it's for, to see the joy, the children's faces when you're telling them something and when you've finished they clap as though you were on stage and all these things, well, they fulfill you... that shared experience that we have now with the children; well, there is a great satisfaction in seeing how we help, even help people, to think"* (I, SC1).

The teachers, at the same time, explain that the initiative is firmly grounded in the environment, the neighborhood, and they think the constant contact with the neighborhood contributes to the success of the workshops. They consider that activities like the workshop experience are necessary and appropriate to bring the neighborhood to the school and vice versa, as reflected in the following comment:

> *"The school must be open to the neighborhood, that is fundamental. The school has to be a part of the neighborhood, and any activity of this type or any other type of activity, even going bowling, is important, because there is always a benefit to the neighborhood and the school."* (I, T2).

4.2. Sense of belonging

Awareness of the emotional, historical and cultural links with the school community and the neighboring area is reflected in the participants' sense of belonging, understood as a positive acknowledgment of the links generated by the school and the feeling that the experience at the school leaves a personal impact that is shared by other members to build a collective identity.

> *"I find it makes sense, and because its meaningful, well I do feel proud and think what I'm doing is interesting, and above all I have always thought it's a way to collaborate and give something to others [...].* "(SC3, I).
> *"I like it a lot, it's fun and you learn a lot from them.*" (P1, I).
> *"I love it, they always prepare some activity; sometimes it has to do with our culture, or about respecting others, not just sticking with people of the same race as us, that we should always be looking for different opinions, different races, different cultures."* (P2, I).

4.3. Social transformation

This process of involving the community to enhance the school institution vis-à-vis its surroundings seeks to ensure that participation is grounded in the needs and proposals for action arising within the educational community, and ultimately, achieve social transformation in the neighborhood. The impact of the workshops on the environment is evidenced in the participants' comments, but as the informants highlight, this impact is limited to the more immediate context, and does not spread into the whole neighborhood:

> *"We've had grandmothers who have come to thank us for running this activity, this workshop, because since they started their grandchildren have seen them from a different point of view. And they come and they say, "Grandpa, tell me, tell me about what it was like when you went to school, tell me." They have discovered that their grandparents are for them a potential source of history"* (T1, I).

> *"What we talk about here doesn't go out to the rest of the community, there is no repercussion unless some of the parents come and attend and listen and then, well they talk about it".* (SC4, I).

> *"One day, I met him in the San Antón neighborhood. He was with a young man who's a good friend of mine, but we were unaware of the relationships. I started speaking to my friend and the man said, <do you know my son?> and I replied, <of course I know him> and he said, <Well, tell him, tell him, tell him! Tell him what it was like. Tell him, tell him, tell him!> And so of course I summed up what had happened. If you could have seen the father's face when he was saying <did you see?> His face full of excitement, explaining to his son when I told him what the pupils had said, their comments; that they had loved it, that the activity had gone off really well, it was all explained well. That day he said: <I am so happy with all this ... I'm very happy and contented>."* (T1, I)

> *"Perhaps they find out about the usual things they are used to seeing every day, things they don't appreciate, for example the cathedral. But they don't stop. And this, the education they've had, makes them stop suddenly that day and say, <Hey mum, let's go in and see this.> So they have a lot of new interests. Often people from outside the school are really surprised by the fact that they are so young. They say <Listen, I've come across people from your school who are doing this or that>. But it is thanks to all that background work that, thank God, it's all bearing fruit and producing good results."* (T2, I).

However, we should consider that the environment is not transformed only by the impact of the workshop experience within the school buildings, but also through different activities being run in other places in the neighborhood:

> *"We have been involved with the craft museum that's right by here, with the chocolate workshops [...], the city museum [...]."* (I, D)

> *"I took part in events organized by the school because they are usually fun, we are in the neighborhood we know and we enjoy ourselves."* (P2, I).

4.4. Support Networks

Also of note are the support networks that are created through the workshops, understood as a set of meaningful relationships that the educational community establishes with the local community. They may be formal or informal relationships but they constitute a dynamic of mutual support.

> *"They have renewed enthusiasm, they are with friends of the same age, and they once again have a new project in common".* (T2, I)

> *"The head of studies has a lot of contact with them. She speaks to them, and tells them ..., because she fills them with life. Remember that we get the message across to them that what they have come to talk to us about was useful, it is not something that has been done and then forgotten."* (T1, I)

5. Discussion and conclusions

This educational initiative has fostered mutual support among agents in the educational and social communities by generating joint projects between them that benefit both of them, as also reported in previous research (Echeita, 2008;

Essomba, 2008; García & Villar, 2011). In addition, the participation of older people in an educational environment creates a sense of belonging to their environment among students, teachers and the senior citizens, which in turn establishes a series of values, interest and shared beliefs between the two groups (Sales, 2012; Traver, Sales & Moliner, 2010). At the same time, the initiative is highly effective in terms of the benefits it brings to the entire educational community, according to feedback from the teachers, who believe the workshops strengthen relationships with the neighborhood and open up opportunities to harness the enormous social potential of these senior citizens who enjoy discussing their life experiences.

In conclusion, this initiative does more than simply pass on knowledge about old customs, games, professions and so on; the school pupils' view of their grandparents is modified, and they are now seen as books full of stories to tell their grandchildren. In addition, the people who come into the school from its neighboring associations, in this case the senior citizens' social centre, are now regarded as representatives of the community's culture. This vision helps immigrant pupils and their families to get to know the neighborhood, while the activity becomes a vehicle to demonstrate the valuable experience and knowledge that the senior citizens have acquired throughout their lives. This activity fosters respect for the elderly among the pupils and develops their emotional skills, thereby consolidating the way to a more democratic, tolerant, intercultural and inclusive society (García, 2012; Lozano, Cerezo & Alcaraz, 2015).

Although the experience has been very enriching, greater levels of connection still remain to be achieved, since in many cases the impact it has had on the environment is restricted to the comments of the participants, and is therefore limited to the more immediate context rather than the whole neighborhood.

Acknowledgements

References

Ainscow, M. (2006). Prólogo. In Echeita, G., *Educación para la inclusión o Educación sin exclusiones* (pp. 11-15). Madrid: Narcea.
Alonso, C. (2010). Cases study: cultural diversity and school improvement. Good school practices. En P. Mata (Coord.) *Intercultural Education as a Project for Social Transformation. Linking theory and practice towards Equity and Social Justice* , pp.174.-182 Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 Spain License. ISBN-13: 978-84-614-2326-2
Bolivar, A. (2006). Familia y escuela: dos mundos llamados a trabajar en común. *Revista de Educación,* 339, 119-146.
Dryfoos, J. (2005): «Full-service community schools: A strategy – not a program», in *New Directions for Youth Development,* 107 (Fall), pp. 7-14.
Lozano, Cerezo & Alcaráz (2015). *Plan de atención a la diversidad.* Madrid: Alianza Editorial
CREADE (2011). *Actuaciones de éxito en las escuelas europeas*. MEC: Colección Estudios CREADE n.º 9..
Echeíta, G. (2008). Inclusión y Exclusión Educativa. "Voz y Quebranto". *REICE, Revista Electrónica Iberoamericana sobre Eficacia y Cambio en Educación*, 6(2), 9-18. Obtained from http://www.rinace.net/arts/vol6num2/art1.pdf.
Essomba, M. A. (2008). *La gestión de la diversidad cultural en la escuela: 10 ideas clave:* Barcelona: Graó.
García, J. (2012). Transformación del entorno. *Comunidades de Aprendizaje. Escuela,* 8, 1-8.
García, J. & Villar, C. (2011). La aportación del proyecto de comunidades de aprendizaje a la transformación social y educativa de un barrio. La experiencia de La Estrella y La Milagrosa en Albacete. *Tendencias Pedagógicas,* 18, 207-232
Parra, J. M. (2004). La participación de los padres y de la sociedad circundante en las instituciones educativas. *Tendencias educativas,* 9, 765-786.
Pérez, J. & Méndez, Q.(2012). Una nueva relación entre entorno y escuela. *Comunidades de Aprendizaje. Escuela,* 8, 1-8.
Sabariego, M., Massot, I. & Dorio, I. (2012). Métodos de investigación cualitativa. En Bisquerra, R. (2012). Metodología de la investigación educativa (pp. 293-328), (3a.ed.). Madrid: La Muralla, S.A.
Sales, A. (2012). Creando redes para una Ciudadanía Crítica desde la escuela intercultural inclusiva. *Revista de Educación Inclusiva*, 5(1), 51-68.
Traver, J.; Sales, A. & Moliner, O. (2009). Ampliando el territorio: Algunas claves sobre la participación de la comunidad educativa. Revista Electrónica Iberoamericana sobre Calidad, Eficacia y Cambio en Educación, 3 (8), 97-119.
Traver, J.; Sales, A. & Moliner, O. (2010) Ampliando el territorio: algunas claves sobre la participación de la comunidad educativa. *Revista Iberoamericana sobre Calidad, Eficacia y Cambio en Educación*, 8 (3), 97-119.
Wengraf, T. (2012).*Qualitative Research Interviewing*. London: SAGE.
Yin, R. (2009). Case Study Research. Design and methods (4a.ed.). U.S.A.: Sage publications.