

Training in Learning Communities

UNIT 8



EDUCATIONAL PARTICIPATION OF THE COMMUNITY

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UNIT 8

EDUCATIONAL PARTICIPATION OF THE COMMUNITY

Learning is affected by all interactions which take place inside and outside the classroom. In today's information society, the number and diversity of learning agents with whom students interact has grown. We cannot achieve high-level learning in class if student families and the wider community are not included and if students' backgrounds are not brought into the learning process. The importance of family and community participation in cooperation with education centres is clear from the evidence-based research that is available to us.

This unit outlines the various forms of educational community participation and the potential impact each can have on children's education. The unit also focuses on one approach which has shown the best outcomes which is that of promoting the educational participation of everyone in the students' community: families, neighbourhood residents, members of local and cultural groups and associations, non-teaching staff, volunteers and so on. In the second part, three ways of carrying out Successful Educational Actions involving the community are explained in detail: dialogic reading, expansion of the learning period and Mixed Committees.

8.1. Participation of the community

For decades, much international research has proven the benefits of family and community participation in the educational process (Epstein, 1983; García, 2002; Grolnick, Kurowski, & Gurland, 1999; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hill & Taylor, 2004; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001; Pomerantz, Grolnick & Price, 2005; Weiss, 2005). The INCLUD-ED Project reviewed current research and concludes that participation of the community in education centres improves the performance of the student body (INCLUD-ED, 2009, p.45). Cooperation with families contributes to transforming connections with school centres into equal relationships and also to overcoming inequalities in academic results. Furthermore, this participation is particularly beneficial for vulnerable groups of students including those at a higher risk of social and educational exclusion, those from minority backgrounds and students with disabilities (INCLUD-ED, 2009, p. 49).

'Community participation in schools also plays a significant role in helping overcome gender inequalities in education, especially by involving female relatives and other women from the community.' (INCLUD-ED, 2009, p. 51)

However, the overall impact of this participation in the education community depends on both how and the degree to which it is created and implemented. The INCLUD-ED Project has identified five forms of educational community participation: informative participation, consultative, decisive, evaluative and educational (INCLUD-ED, 2009). Of these types of participation, the latter three demonstrate most impact on schooling success. The characteristics of each model are summarised below:

8.1.1. *Families' participation types in the educational centres*

Informative participation	Parents are informed about school activities, school functioning, and decisions which have already been made.	Fewer opportunities for achieving school success and the participation of families.
	Parents do not take part in the above school decisions.	
	Parents' meetings consist of informing families about these decisions.	
Consultative participation	Parents have a limited impact on decision making.	
	Participation is based on consultation with families.	
	Parents participate through the school's statutory bodies.	
Decision-making participation	Community members participate in decision-making processes by becoming representatives in decision-making bodies.	Greater opportunities for achieving school success and the participation of families
	Family and community members monitor the school's accountability in relation to its educational results.	
Evaluative participation	Family and community members participate in students' learning processes through helping evaluate children's school progress.	
	Family and community members participate in general school evaluation.	
Educational participation	Family and community members participate in students' learning activities both during normal school hours and after school.	
	Family and community members participate in educational programmes which respond to their needs.	

Source: (INCLUD-ED, 2009, p. 54)

Informative participation and consultative participation

Both informative participation and consultative participation are the most common forms of participation found in school centres: families are called for informative meetings (informative participation) or to main meetings for consultation (consultative participation).

Strictly informative participation does not imply that parents take any role at all in decision-making; they simply receive information and decisions that the staff has decided it will take in relation to their children's education. Consultative participation is normally conducted through school management groups such as the School Council in which families are represented. On many occasions their role in these organs is restricted to only expressing their opinion or to approving or rejecting proposals from the staff. The available places for family representatives within official processes may be limited and also school management is sometimes not obliged to request their input. Some research suggests that this is an inaccessible model for some parents and often representative roles are filled primarily by individuals with a certain level of education.

These two forms of participation in themselves have little chance of positively influencing the success of students. On the other hand, the other forms of participation detailed in this unit open decision-making to the whole community and show a more significant impact on academic results, emotional and social development and also social cohesion.

Decisive participation

Decisive participation involves family and community participation in the decision-making process regarding issues linked to the education centre. Such issues are not external processes, but internal decisions on matters such as centre priorities, school rules, extra-curricular activities and so on.

New spaces appear with this kind of participation in which families and other people in the community feel free to talk, express their opinions, debate and reach a consensus with others including the staff in relation to the education they want for their children. Furthermore, when this form of participation is implemented, families and the education community also participate in the formation and supervision of educational activities at the school and their resulting outcomes. Egalitarian dialogue is fundamental to decisive participation. What counts are the arguments expressed not the position or status the people who express them have in the community. Thus, there are processes of deliberation in which the dialogue is orientated towards ultimately agreeing on the best possible options for the education of the children.

Student relatives assemblies are an example of this participation in the decision-making process: a democratic organisation which encourages everybody in the community to make decisions on relevant questions regarding the running of their centre.

Further information on examples of relatives' assemblies:

Asamblea del Colegio Andalucía (Sevilla): http://aecgit.pangea.org/pdf/27_jornadas/CEIP_ANDALUCIA%20_Sevilla.pdf
(checked on April 2016)

Evaluative participation

This form of participation involves families and other members of the community in the assessment process of both the educational processes of the student body, including issues of the curriculum and learning, and of the centre as a whole. Their participation means that multiple viewpoints about both the development of each student and results achieved by the school are considered. These collaborative assessments lead to the day-to-day improvement of activities in the classroom and in the wider centre.

Laakavuori children's education centre, Helsinki, Finland

'The Laakavuori children's educational centre is located in Helsinki, Finland. A total of 52% of their 67 children are immigrants. The centre works jointly with the primary school. The educators believe that communication is crucial for understanding and their motto is, 'Negotiation, negotiation and negotiation'. In this sense, one of the many responsibilities that families have at the centre is the compilation of individualised plans for pre-school students in collaboration with the educators. Besides this, the school and families are also part of a complete assessment process for learning and other related issues in the running of the centre.' (Lastikka & García Carrión, 2012)

Lastikka, A.L., & García Carrión, R. (2012). Participación de las familias en el curriculum y la evaluación. Cuadernos de Pedagogía, 429, 62-63.

Educational participation

In the Learning Communities, families and other community members actively participate in children's learning processes, for example in the classroom during school time, in activities outside of school time and in their own training (in courses or training courses which respond to their needs and interests).

This type of participation means the availability of further human resources which support the learning processes of children, triggering inclusive actions

and behaviours which then contribute to improvements in performance and school coexistence. It also strengthens the interest and efforts of the whole community in learning, fostering improved learning for everyone as detailed below.

The impact of decisive, evaluative and educational participation

Decisive, evaluative and educational participation has a significant impact on core issues of school life thereby potentially making a significant impact on all learning processes and their results. Firstly, since people learn in diverse spaces and through several interactions, the pupils have far more chances to learn, since they can resort to several interactions and discourses. This also provides participating adult models to identify with rather than, as often happens in, for example, the case of students from ethnic minority groups, having no tangible sense that participation in centre management is ever possible.

Furthermore, the participation of the community makes coordination of discussion easier between families, the school and other educational agents in the neighbourhood. They together make decisions with an identical goal to improve educational performance and help students to realise they can be successful in education and achieve excellent results. The participation of families and the community in the organisation of the centre and in education processes as such improves relationships between relatives, the school and the neighbourhood. Relationships of solidarity, collaboration and friendship are strengthened, thus benefitting the student body, their families and the community as a whole. This allows for more efficient prevention and resolution of conflict since students, their families, the faculty and other members of the community, have more human resources available to them to create dialogue which responds to problems in coexistence or social cohesion.

Another beneficial outcome of these forms of participation is increased egalitarian relationships between families and community agents which serve to contribute to overcoming inequalities and fostering alternative gender models. With the participation of the community, such inequalities can be detected and overcome, ultimately enabling the prevention of or effective action against situations of conflict and aggression.

The transformation of interactions at school is a source of motivation for students because they make school more meaningful for children. This is even more the case for vulnerable and minority groups. Such benefits have a positive effect on academic output, social inclusion and social cohesion.

An example of egalitarian relationships:

'The change in perspective is so huge that relationships with teachers change completely. When you see they treat you like a peer, you feel good and valued. There is no tension when speaking to them, you feel useful. We see how teachers work and we learn to appreciate their effort.'

Hernández, Y., Fernández, P., Aguilera, M.E., Vidal, S., Vicente, J. y Canal, J.M. (2013). Creación de sentido gracias a los grupos interactivos. *Suplemento Escuela, 6, 6-7.*

How to facilitate participation

Everyone wishing to improve the children's education can participate in the school. Therefore, the school has to be flexible with the needs of members of the community regarding timetabling, areas, interests and so on.

Particular attention must be paid to incorporating the voice of families who traditionally have not participated in such areas of school life before, including those from minority groups or those with no formal education. When there is a participative link between what happens at home in these families and the school, the school can respond to the real needs of the children and the community and, at the same time, contribute to overcoming the prejudice and stereotyping so often experienced by them.

The above is particularly salient when considering the fact that traditionally participation is often only engaged in by people with a particular background who communicate in the same language as the centre and who can talk confidently about academic skills and so on. In many cases families or people in the community with other backgrounds either culturally or educationally do not participate. Besides the fact they perhaps are not invited to do so or their views are unthinkingly disregarded, they may lack confidence in their ability to contribute or feel they must meet with certain traditional expectations. The only option for overcoming such barriers is by encouraging all families to participate in the school and recognising that any differences they bring are in fact essential for the educational success of students. In short, the participation of those who have never taken part before must be enabled and encouraged by creating a climate of high expectations thus fostering an egalitarian and democratic engagement.

In order to overcome any obstacles which may arise in the participation of families and community, the following is necessary:

- Adjusting timetables to accommodate people in the community.

- Including the community when making decisions. This means asking them to attend discussion and decision meetings and asking them to collaborate in decision-making. Offer the opportunity of participation to those people whose voices are not usually taken into account. Decisions will be taken according to the validity of reason regardless of the power, position or status of the people giving their opinions. What really matter are the arguments.
- Creating an atmosphere of confidence and dialogue by using non-discriminatory language, where conversations are conducted on horizontal and egalitarian planes instead of the vertical planes often established at schools where the staff are considered the experts.
- Fostering the participation of everyone in meetings and assemblies as well as establishing an egalitarian dialogue which moves away from specialist language. Providing translation services for those attending who have no command of the common language is also an option. As participation increases, people new to the centre naturally become familiar with technical terms related to the centre and its curriculum. However, every dialogue should be consciously conducted without making language and vocabulary a barrier.
- Meetings must be productive and no-one must feel that they are wasting their time so instrumental decision-making must be maximised.
- Maximum diversity of communication channels should be utilised in order to ensure the widest possible dissemination of information in the community. Examples of such communication channels include talking to families at the school gates and using local groups and associations to help communicate in ways other than traditional channels such as sending letters to families or calling them by phone.
- Existing levels of participation have to be assessed so that mistakes which elicit complaints of limited participation or 'disqualifying' those who do not participate do not occur since these actions discourage rather than encourage people to participate.
- When calling families, we must emphasise the positive opportunities for their children's education in order that responses which solely focus on problems or negativity either regarding the individual child or the centre are avoided.
- Maintaining high expectations regarding the capacity of families to decide to become part of the school. Their participation is essential for improving the quality of what is offered by the school.

8.2. Successful practices in the educational participation of the community

The educational participation of the community has been described showing how it is focussed on the involvement of families, volunteers, professionals and others in training spaces and in decision-making regarding aspects which have a direct effect on the learning of students. This is not simply a case of more consultation with the groups in which parents are represented. Neither is it a simply a case of families helping with preparing parties or carnival costumes, for example. The educational participation of the community requires transforming any lack of confidence in the interest and capacity of families towards school management into high expectations of such and concrete evaluation. This is especially so in the case of those who have, for whatever reason, participated less frequently. There is no educational participation if dialogue with the faculty is not egalitarian and based on the validity of arguments. Educational participation does occur when everybody cooperates towards a common objective: the best possible learning and educational experience for their children.

Next, three practices identified as being successful for increasing effective educational participation in the community are described: **dialogic reading, expansion of the learning period and Mixed Committees.**

8.2.1. *Dialogic reading*

Valls, Soler and Flecha (2008) define dialogic reading as: *'the intersubjective process of reading and understanding a text into which people go deep in their interpretations, they critically think about it and its context, and intensify their reading comprehension through interaction with other agents, opening new transformation possibilities as a reading person and as a person in the real world.'* (Flecha, Soler, & Valls, 2008, p. 73)

Dialogic reading goes beyond learning about how best to read creations and perceptions fixed in a text which are accessed only through the limited relationship between the reader and text. Such a reading approach fosters an individual's development of analytical and cognitive processes. Dialogic reading on the other hand works in accordance with a framework of learning psychology theories which emphasise interaction and incorporate relationships between the reader and staff and others in the space in addition to the lone reader relationship.

In this sense, dialogic reading adds a social dimension to reading comprehension as it becomes a shared, intersubjective process which includes other people and contexts present in the lives of the children both inside and outside school. Therefore, the core feature of dialogic reading tasks is that of interaction and emerging dialogue between readers of text. This enables deeper reading comprehension which incorporates literary interpretation and critical reflections on life and society. At the same time, it creates opportunities for personal and social transformation.

**An example of increasing interactions,
available areas and reading times:**

'I do not understand what the sentence 'is gradually fading away' means', Nihad says ...

Jesica helps her thanks to the reading she has done with her father. 'I did not understand it either but my father has read it with me and he said that what it means is that he is tired and losing his strength'.

*Thus, with the aim of helping Nihad, Jesica presents in the gatherings the dialogues she had with her father while reading *El Quixote* at home.'*

Ortega, S (2011). *Leyendo juntos. Suplemento Escuela, 2, 7-8*

The dialogic reading model means further reading and writing spaces with increased available time and numbers of people.

The practice of dialogic reading is diversified, organised and shared between the education centre, students' families and the educational community in general. In the classroom it takes the form of Interactive Groups with shared reading. In the wider centre it takes place in Tutored Library, study classrooms and tutored digitalised classrooms and, in the community, it occurs for example during family education and reading at home.

Dialogic reading becomes a priority from birth to the age of 18 and so increased opportunities for its practise are created for students and their families outside of school hours, at weekends and in the holidays. Implementing an increase in interactions, spaces and reading times has a crucial effect on the development of communication skills which, in turn, has positive consequences on the learning of other areas of the curriculum.

In short, dialogic reading represents the transition from an individual experience to an intersubjective experience as a result of interactions with others in the group or wider community. Increasing available spaces for dialogic reading , creates a further diversified and rewarding learning environment.

Some forms of increasing dialogic reading spaces include using:

- Interactive Groups with reading,
- Interactive activities, reading in the classroom between students in the same year, different years or with volunteers, for example,

- Activities in the Tutored Library, monitored study classrooms and monitored digitalised classrooms both during school hours and out of school hours with people in the community,
- Fostering activities for students to read at home with their families.

An example of dialogic reading as reinforcement:

'This activity of reinforcing reading is carried out during school hours with volunteers that attend the school one hour per week (minimum) in a particular class ... Diana in this case is a mother, volunteer ... is at the table prepared beforehand ... so that three people can join, sit and read ... First of all they read silently, and then each one reads out loud in turns. Diana reviews that the words are correct ... When they finish reading the article, between them, they go over those topics they were more interested in to discuss what the meaning is of that specific reading, how they link it with their daily life, with things happening nowadays in the world, etc. Eventually they carry out a self-assessment ... Finally, a shared assessment of all pupils takes place by the students and the volunteer. When it is done, Diana shows her satisfaction for the effort made and the improvement achieved by the children that read with her on a weekly basis. She advises them to carry on reading at home.'

Ymbert, M. & Rodríguez, J. (2011). La lectura dialógica en la Comunidad de Aprendizaje Amistat. Suplemento Escuela, 2, 3-4.

Dialogic reading responds to one part of the wider theoretical framework which is dialogic learning. As stated in previous units, key authors in the learning sciences such as Vygotsky, Wells, Rogoff or Bruner, among others, emphasise the roles of interaction and dialogue throughout the learning process, including reading.

On the other hand, contributions by Noam Chomsky (1977) in his *Universal Grammar Theory*, justify a universal conception of the language according to which every child when born, enjoys the same linguistic possibilities (*universal grammar*). *'Children of families from varying cultural backgrounds share the same capacity for understanding the meaning of every sentence and therefore respond to and participate in any dialogue of any area of knowledge. Since the ability to develop and learn language is fixed in the brains of every child, there is no linguistic restriction to understanding language'* (Aubert, Flecha, García, Flecha, & Racionero, 2008, p. 96).

Along similar lines, contributions by philosopher Jürgen Habermas are crucial. In his *Theory of Communicative Action* (Habermas, 1981), he outlines how everybody has a capacity for language and action regardless of their training or

academic level and so on. Therefore they can establish communication interactions with others and contribute with arguments to dialogue in order to reach an understanding or an agreement.

Another key theoretical contribution is made by Mihjail Bakhtin (1984). He proposes that a dialogue in progress has been partially constructed by every other dialogue which someone has engaged in. This therefore creates a chain of dialogues. This concept of a chain reminds us that students go to class with dialogues they have engaged with previously. When reading, people create dialogue based on the dialogues of their previous interactions; we create meanings in this dialogic experience about a text. Reading and meaning are enhanced for all the individuals who connect to the overall interpretation.

Besides the above references, there are numerous other studies of the relevance of the relationships a school has with its student families and the community on the process of learning to read. For example, since 1983 the Harvard Family Research Project¹ has been underway at Harvard University which focusses on analysing the benefits family and community participation has on the academic success of the student body, especially in the case of children in more vulnerable environments. Through the essay *Home School Study of Language and Literacy Development*, it has been proven that family support both inside and outside school has a greater influence on the development of early communicational skills than socioeconomic level or cultural background.

This is key. From the reductionist perspective, the capacity of education to transform and overcome situations of inequality was considered impossible. In fact, it was believed that education did nothing but reinforce inequality. The results of studies which have been compiled by the University of Harvard demonstrate the opposite in that the participation and cooperation of a school with its families and community in terms of reading progress can utilise diversity and improve educational levels and learning pace.

In short, top-level global research has proven that fostering cultural activities which increase interactions between both students and their families as well as staff and other community members has a crucial effect on increasing the pace of learning and on the acquisition and development of communicative capacity in children.

¹ Please see website of the Harvard Family Research Project: <http://www.hfrp.org>

Further information regarding dialogic reading:

Llopis, A., Villarejo, B., Soler, M., & Álvarez, P. (2016). (Im)Politeness and interactions in Dialogic Literary Gatherings. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 94, 1-11

Racionero, S. & Padrós, M. (2010) The Dialogic Turn in Educational Psychology. *Journal of Psychodidactics*, 15 (2), 143-162.

Soler, M. (2001). Dialogic reading. A new understanding of the reading event. Unpublished PhD Thesis, Harvard University.

8.2.2. Expansion of learning time

The expansion of learning time is a Successful Educational Action for educational inclusion (Flecha, 2015). Some previous research such as that conducted by Creemers and Reezigt (1996) show a positive relationship between increasing learning time and academic results, especially in terms of time allowed for instrumental learning such as mathematics, language and science. The research by Creemers and Reezigt (1996) in particular which is still relevant twenty years on demonstrates that the most efficient schools are those which offer the most expansive opportunity for learning in terms of time.

In Learning Communities, learning time outside normal school hours is considered as well. This allows for extra opportunities for specific student training opportunities in terms of Successful Educational Actions including Dialogic Gatherings and, for example, Tutored Library where students do their school work and they resolve queries they may have regarding its content. This assists in increasing the pace of learning for all students and at the same time allows for extra support for students with difficulties or disadvantages. Adults (staff and volunteers) participate in these spaces in order to increase the number and quality of interactions. It contributes decisively to reducing educational inequalities as it responds to learning difficulties and provides additional support so that students can perform the activities in non-school hours.

In the case of Tutored Libraries which are open outside school hours, for example in the evenings or at the weekend, children and their families are offered a learning space which is accessible and also free of charge. Even though Tutored Libraries can take several forms, their core feature is that of providing an open community space where everyone, especially children, can find resources and help (from volunteers) to support their work in instrumental subjects.

If, for instance, a centre which becomes a Learning Community dreams of having a space in which students can do their homework, the educational community may agree by consensus that it is a priority due to the fact that there is no existing provision in the area. Consequently, opening the centre library to the neighbourhood outside school hours may be a way of guaranteeing that the school places their resources to provide for both the children and their families. Here, either families can accompany their children to the library and support them whilst they do their homework or volunteers who open the Tutored Library can provide assistance to those who need it.

Opening hours and activities vary considerably between Tutored Libraries. Some Tutored Libraries open over the weekends, others during the afternoons or the holidays. Example activities include reading from a book, doing homework or resolving study questions, learning a language or playing chess and so on.

Examples of improvement in learning

'María, a pupil suffering emotional problems, managed with the complementary activities that she carries out in the Tutored Library, to achieve reading-writing capabilities that she could not have achieved in the classroom.'

'Jesús, a pupil with poor behaviour, through shared readings of traditional Andalusian stories with a teacher, normalised his reading fluency. He also worked in several sessions with his mother who attended the Tutored Library to improve her reading skills.'

Molina, A. & Barrera, E. (2011). La biblioteca Fantasía como espacio transformador de desigualdad. *Suplemento Escuela 2*, 6-7.

The more instrumental learning activities are implemented at the centre, the longer the time is that the students are able to devote to learning thus obtaining better results and educational success.

Example of the Library Fantasía at CEIP Andalusia:

An example of Tutored Library exists at CEIP Andalusia. In this particular centre it was decided that one of the actions they wanted to launch once they became a Learning Community was that of increasing available learning time. To this end purpose, they decided to convert the library of the centre into an open space for the community. They chose the *Tutored Library approach* to do this. The core principle was to organise activities around available resources via the library as follows:

- The school library would be used as a resource centre for teaching and learning purposes.
- The Tutored Library would include information literacy and research skills development.
- The Tutored Library would promote and foster reading and writing.
- The Tutored Library would provide support and advice regarding the curriculum.
- The library would be a space to level out inequalities and act as a centre for revitalising education and culture in the Learning Community.
- The Tutored Library would require organisation and management by volunteers.

Molina, A. & Barrera, E. (2011). La biblioteca Fantasía como espacio transformador de desigualdad. *Suplemento Escuela*, 2, 6-7.

8.2.3. Mixed Working Committees

As detailed in *Unit 3*, Mixed Committees are formed of students and their families, staff and/or other educational professionals and volunteers, thereby representing the diversity of the educational community. Mixed Committees are in charge of carrying out changes orientated towards the specific Successful Educational Actions which have been devised for the centre. These Committees, approved by the School Council, are organised in accordance with the priorities that the centre has proposed for developing Successful Actions and they coordinate, implement, supervise and assess continuously a specific aspect or activity. Some possible responsibilities of Mixed Committees are as follows: Volunteers, Learning, Communication, Coexistence, etc.

Mixed Committees are always open to new proposals and change through discussion and consensus. Such decisions are based on the validity of reason of all viewpoints without being imposed by individuals or groups in power including educational professionals.

To find out more:

Flecha, R. & Soler, M. (2013) Turning difficulties into possibilities: engaging Roma families and students in school through dialogic learning. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 43(4), p. 451-465. doi:10.1080/0305764X.2013.819068

INCLUD-ED Consortium (2009). *Actions for success in schools in Europe*. Brussels: European Commission

Padrós, M., García, R., de Mello, R., & Molina S. (2011). Contrasting scientific knowledge with knowledge from the lifeworld: The Dialogic Inclusion Contract. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 17 (3), 304-312.

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Bakhtin, M. M. (1984). *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

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Creemers, B. P. M., & Reezigt, G. J. (1996). School level conditions affecting the effectiveness of instruction. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 7(3), 197-228.

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