Training in Learning Communities

Unit 9

FAMILY EDUCATION AND DIALOGIC TRAINING FOR TEACHERS

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In an information society, children's education moves forward significantly if all education agents improve their own training as well. This unit presents two Successful Educational Actions: Family Education and Dialogic Training for teachers. In spite of the great importance of families in the education of children, training of education agents has traditionally been exclusively provided for teaching staff, so teachers have ultimately been the only beneficiaries. The majority of research has also focused on analysing faculty training, with no attention paid to the training of the families, relatives and other community members. Family Education improves the skills and awareness of adults who coexist with students on a day-to-day basis, thereby having a key a impact on their children's learning. From the perspective of teachers, Dialogic Training for teachers provides staff with opportunities to explore education theories and to keep their awareness as current as possible in accordance with the latest and most relevant research, including the community in the training spaces.

9.1. Family Education

We often hear that the success of students depends on the formal education level of their parents. Students of parents who have a university degree are more likely themselves to go to university and achieve high academic grades. They are less likely to give up on or drop out of school. However, such apparent statistical correlations between parents' educational background and their child's academic results do not establish any kind of causality, neither are they decisive.

If, however, schools support equality rather than inequality, generations will overcome traditional educational levels so those who face most challenges, ultimately have equal access to university. It is now known that the relationship between parents' degrees and their children's educational achievements can be altered and that every parent, regardless of the educational level they may have, can aspire to their children attending the best universities in the world. Research has shown that what affects the learning of children, more than their families' educational level, are the kind of activities and training in which they take part. One particular Successful Educational Action therefore responds to this by making family and community training available and accessible in the knowledge and skill areas they choose but with an emphasis on instrumental skills.

Once again, however, the desirable form of education for Learning Community families should be clarified in order to distinguish it from some other practices. For example, over the course of the past years, something called the 'school for parents' has become common. This usually consists of 'experts' who talk on topics connected with their children's upbringing in terms of diet and discipline and so on. Although a space for sharing and debate is established, the underlying premise of such sessions is that an 'expert' is suggesting to parents the best ways of bringing up or educating their children. These types of activities are not considered related to or to be family education. The same is true of training programs devised by staff based on their own opinions without considering demands and needs of the participants.

Family education as a Successful Educational Action means that it is the parents, uncles and aunts, grandparents and so on of students who decide what has to be learnt and when and how this will take place. Families meet, gather everyone's requirements and consider possibilities for starting training. They decide on the timetable and which days to train on. The families themselves are the ones who interact, engage in dialogue and decide on which training to aim for and also how it will be undertaken. For example, in one particular Learning Community, Arabic-speaking mothers were interested in literacy classes and after debating it, decided that such classes would only be for women and another group for men would be organised.

> '*It is possible to overcome social inequalities by fostering the education of families showing that the family environment can also be transformed*' (INCLUD-ED, 2011, p. 73).

Types of activities

Training activities can vary a great deal. However, it is advisable and usually preferred by families that training is orientated towards improving skills and essential knowledge important for life in today's society. This means families have an opportunity to help their children with their homework, to read together, to support them in academic issues and so on. In reality one of the most common motivations for becoming involved in family education is the desire to help their children with homework or to support their learning.

Dialogic Literary Gatherings (see Unit 7): Community members from a diversity of backgrounds according to culture, nationality, religion, beliefs, lifestyle, age, and education share dialogue, create critical reflections and construct learning about a piece of classic universal literature. Here, individuals who have never before read such books demonstrate a great sense of satisfaction and enthusiasm. Examples of universal literature include works by James Joyce, Cortázar and Safo and titles such as 'Arabian Nights', Ramayana and the Odyssey.

Information and Communication Technologies: Courses and workshops on specific computer programmes such as Word and Excel or the use of social plat-

forms such as Twitter are commonly requested by families. In certain cases relatives and students can work together, so that they can support each other in learning how to use such tools.

Languages: In centres with immigrants, families can opt to learn the language of the country which they are living in. Apart from acquiring a key tool for contributing towards their children's learning, such skills afford them increased social and economic opportunities. In other cases, families choose training in foreign languages such as English or French.

Literacy Campaign: In centres with student families who do not read or write, training in literacy is no doubt a priority. Many Learning Communities present very positive experiences related to literacy training and language learning. For instance, at one particular school where there was a majority of Moroccan women, a women's group was created in which participants have a space to learn about, share and discuss issues they were interested in while improving their skills in literacy.

Mathematics: Some families find it difficult to help their children in their mathematics homework. With this in mind, training in mathematics is given priority.

The RTD project EDUFAM, research funded by the National Research Plan of the Government of Spain, has identified some of the characteristics that have contributed to the success of family education offered by schools that are Learning Communities:

1)	Participation of families in making decisions in relation to relevant aspects of the training (content, schedule, organization, etc.).
2)	High expectations towards the participants in the educational programs and towards their abilities.
3)	Promotion of instrumental learning (reading, writing, mathematics, oral expression, etc.).
4)	Accreditation of the knowledge acquired through official certificates.
5)	Training based on scientific evidence.
6)	Implementation of strategies to overcome linguistic and/or cultural barriers
7)	Representation of vulnerable groups among the participants in the training and promotion of diversity in the programs.
8)	Promotion of opportunities for family conciliation.
9)	Educational success of the children of the participants as an explicit objective of the training.
10)	Promotion of dialogical leadership.
11)	Promotion of solidarity.
12)	Promotion of positive learning climates.

| 13) | Provide support to schools and create alliances with other services and agents to carry out the family education programs. |
| 14) | Involvement of the management team and the teaching staff in the promotion of the family education in the school. |

An experience of literacy classes:

'Lucia's school for some time now has organised literacy classes for women with such a big participation that the group had to be split in two. Many of those women not only learn to read and write, but immediately started to take part in a Dialogic Literary Gathering' (Racionero, Ortega, García, & Flecha, 2012, p. 141)

The benefits of family education

Family education benefits the adults participating directly as well as their children and the community by becoming an activity which overcomes educational and social inequalities.

For the adults who take part, training provides them with knowledge and skills which can be applied in all spheres of their life including personal, family and social. Learning how to read, improving language skills and learning how to use the internet, for example, are personally rewarding achievements which are easily transferred to daily life. Such progress also contributes to higher self-esteem and self-confidence thereby increasing their capacity to participate in discussions and debates. New opportunities in the labour market open up due to better academic training. For example, the families of one particular school decided to undertake training towards attaining their Secondary Education Certificate in order that they have a qualification with which to apply for better work positions.

Furthermore, adults convey satisfaction and interest in what they are learning and in education as a whole to their children; this means they are better able to support them in their homework, to ask them about their schoolwork or to share study time with them at home. Consequently, children's perceptions of their relatives are transformed into the realisation that they are people who can be asked questions, who can resolve their doubts or who they can share the learning process with. This all serves to make learning more meaningful.

Family education also changes relationships between the school and its surrounding community. Relationships between the school and student families are

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strengthened creating increased meaning for students regarding their motivation to progress and a resulting effort to attend school every day. This closer relationship also has an influence on relatives' expectations with regards to their children's educational future. Participation in training activities results in increased trust, stronger bonds between families, the faculty and the school and greater mutual understanding and tolerance. Furthermore, families' and children's expectations grow and motivate children to continue with their studies and, as a result of perceiving higher expectations, children generate greater motivation to continue studying. In addition, it favors the creation of new bonds and the increase of understanding and tolerance among the diverse members of the educational community.

The following is a summary of the positive impact provided by the formation of family members in four specific areas: benefits for family members, students, the center and the neighborhood. These examples of improvement have been collected by the EDUFAM research project:

Benefits for family members	Benefits for students
a. Increased cultural level	a. Improvement in educational results
b. Increased expectations	b. Behavior improvement
c. Increased motivation towards learning	c. Increased motivation towards learning
d. Increased self confidence, self-esteem and perception of well-being	d. Increased participation in educational tasks and initiatives
e. Increased participation	e. Increased expectations
f. Emergence of leadership	f. Identification of new role-models
g. Creation and reinforcement of social networks	g. Increased interactions around learning and education
h. Obtaining new role-models in the educational field	
Benefits for the schools	**Benefits for the neighborhood**
a. Improvement of family-school communication	a. Strengthening the relationship between the school and the community
b. Increased school participation	b. Increased interactions on learning and education outside the school
c. Improvement of the school climate	c. Reduction of racist and classist prejudices in the neighbourhood neighborhood
d. Reduction of prejudices towards families belonging to cultural minorities	d. Improvement of coexistence in the neighbourhoodneighborhood
	e. Coordination with services and professionals from different social areas

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**An example of the influence of family training
on academic performance:**

'When Karim started the 3rd year of primary education, he could not read nor write. He had arrived in Terrassa the year before. He made new friends in his new school and quickly learnt to speak, but he had little interest in academic learning and it was hard for him. One morning, just before starting class, his teacher caught him reading a science book. After a year and a half since arriving in the neighbourhood, his mother, Farida, signed up to literacy classes. She had made the step to attend her son's school to learn. This change caused an even more profound transformation: she helped Karim to find the need to learn. He is now delighted to see his mother at his school and whenever Farida goes to class he tells her: 'Come on Mum, get your folder and let's go to school'. In the afternoon, when Karim goes home, they do the homework together and read together the tales that Karim borrows from the library. He is aware that she likes it and this way they learn even more.'

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

The following excerpt by Arantza Pomares Zulueta, coordinator of Sansomendi CPI Learning Community, offers a concise summary:

**An experience of relatives' training
at Sansomendi CPI:**

[...] As the years pass by, training is more and more extensive covering in all cases the educational needs of the families, their interests and demands. Families feel they can take part in the proposed training activities at the centre. Families take computer courses, do their Certificate in Secondary Education, study literacy, Spanish for foreigners, ceramics and participate in Literary Gatherings, during school hours and free of charge. Active participation in these training courses creates the feeling of belonging to school centres for families with positive results in the transformation of the school's wider community and the involvement it has in education processes and children's learning.

Pomares, A. (2011). Familias en el CPI Sansomendi. De las dificultades a las posibilidades. *Suplemento Escuela*, 3, 5-7

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9.2. Dialogic training for teachers

Teachers at elementary, secondary and adult education levels implement Successful Educational Actions in Learning Communities which provide the best opportunities for every child, teenager and adult in their classroom. They also develop ethical rigour in their own professionalism through participation in training for continuous improvement in their field with evidence-based knowledge. Such training is done through dialogue, in line with the best training practices of teaching staff at international level.

Dialogic training. What is essential

Learning Communities are founded on proposals which result from in-depth studies by the international scientific community. As mentioned in *Unit 1*, the international scientific community presents its findings related to interaction-based approaches in key scientific reviews and takes part in international research (such as in the European Commission Research Framework Programme in Europe) and involves the best universities in the world. The international scientific community is not formed of people from the popular press, the TV, Google or talk shows, neither are they people who offer personal commentary or humour. Although it is true that the press performs very important functions in democratic societies, it is not, nor is it supposed to be, a scientific model of knowledge. It cannot be assumed that the education system of a particular country is as it is shown on, for example, a TV documentary. Similarly, staff training cannot be based on press cuttings although regrettably, in some centres, this practice still occurs. If doctors were trained in treating cancer on the basis of news reports, it would be unacceptable. Families are free to make personal choices about how best to educate their own children, but no one should propose her/his opinion as valid scientific knowledge when considering the education of children as a whole.

Teaching staff have the mission to incorporate the latest scientific research into their training just as doctors are expected to do. Whenever teacher training is reduced simply to discovering random activities, rather than scientific ones, the role of the teacher is underused and the consequences of this are missed opportunities for further contributing to the lives of young people, those for whom they are working.

Maintaining an evidence-based foundation also allows teaching staff to describe their practices more effectively in dialogue with families, inspectors, local administration, university faculties and students. Without a basis in scientific evidence, dialogue remains a case of one opinion against another. When accompanied by evidence, families are able to understand and assess teaching practices for themselves and frequently appreciate the opportunity to increase their awareness of the field of education since what they ultimately want is the best possible education for their children.

Individuals committed to both training and Gatherings which focus on educational theories can ask themselves which theories and evidence their approaches and proposals are based on and, by the same token, whether or not they are accepted by the international scientific community. In fact, in training Gatherings for Learning Communities, people participating from both centre staff and student families, can search for references in internet databases to activities being discussed. This way everyone can be involved in finding a scientific basis for education practices at the centre.

It is a fact that teaching staff need to be aware of the best education theories. To this end, it is also true that we must clarify what a theory is and what it is not. Unfortunately, theory is often associated with boredom and empty message for practice. This is untrue. Theory provides knowledge. The best education writers are those who are regularly in the classroom so that they may better reflect, review, research and progress. International researchers such as Gordon Wells, Courtney Cazden of Harvard University or Professor Linda Hargreaves of Cambridge University, for example, have taken advantage of their visits to Spain to attend Learning Communities to connect Interactive Groups or Dialogic Literary Gatherings with their own realities, and their own research.

If teaching staff wish to improve the theory behind their teaching practices they have to read and be updated. Since modern life often makes this difficult, it is sensible to select key texts rich in benefit. It is always worthwhile to select the writing of prominent education researchers such as Vygotsky and Freire, or the work of recent theorists such as Bruner and Habermas. Thus, teaching professionals place themselves, as Robert Merton used to say, 'on the shoulders of giants'. Texts in other fields can also be selected. For example, if there is interest in gender issues, prominent feminist writers such as Judith Butler or Lidia Puigvert are options for reading. Furthermore, Butler has an in depth awareness of Learning Communities.

Another essential aspect in faculty training in Learning Communities is ensuring current awareness of Successful Educational Actions being implemented across schools in order to discover where optimum results are being achieved. The official Learning Communities websites[1] details the schools who are carrying out Successful Educational Actions, as well as the names of the consultants that have been trained in adhering to the evidence-based foundations of the project. The implementation of these SEAs must be assessed from the perspective of how they are based on effective theory.

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[1] Websites related to Learning Communities in Europe:
    Seas4All Project: http://seas4all.eu/
    Step4Seas Project: https://www.step4seas.org/
    Websites related to Learning Communities in Spain: http://utopiadream.info/ca/
    Websites related to Learning Communities in Latin America: http://www.comunidaddeaprendizaje.com.es/
    [Checked in December 2017]

Information available on the internet can be readily consulted, updated and, in turn, become conversation topics in centres. Learning depends on interactions and that includes the staff learning too. Therefore, a continuous self-training of the teachers is ensured by fostering comments, reflections, questions and information sharing as can be seen in the following examples:

— Two teachers have gone to a nearby city, together with two mothers, to talk about their centres, in order to collaborate with another Learning Community and set up a very rewarding dialogue. The following day, it is important to share the comments made by the two mothers and the people from the other school and to address queries from listeners. All this is continuous training for the staff in the form of a conversation feeds the excitement of the project and fosters new transformations.

— Several teachers are reading a book for a Dialogic Pedagogic Gathering called *Education and Democracy* by John Dewey. They meet the day before the Gathering, when a report comes on the news referring to a public debate about education policies of today and of course they cannot help but compare said news with the book they are reading and they talk about it. The following day, the Gathering is even more intense and full of rich arguments.

— Twitter, Facebook and other platforms are continuously advancing, providing real-time information and outcomes from various Learning Communities. There are people who not only share opinions and materials with hundreds of followers, but they also enliven corridor talk, the good morning welcome or lunchtime conversation.

These conversations encourage the faculty to reflect on their practice from the Successful Educational Actions. As a matter of fact, teachers worry, reflect and continuously talk about their practice, at times as a relief, at times looking for solutions. But if this reflection is done without having as a key model the actions that improve both results and cohabitation, it develops into random ideas and overall failure. Improvement can only result from evidence-based SEAs and reflection on practice.

It is also essential that staff training includes examining how to practise egalitarian dialogue with families, with other staff and with students. Traditionally, teaching staff, as with other professional groups, have conducted communication with families from a non-egalitarian position, from the standpoint of their 'expert' status (even more so with non-academic families). However, upholding professional rigour in order to improve education requires a more egalitarian dialogue which is not based on power play but on approaches such as dialogic communicative actions (Soler & Flecha, 2010). The egalitarian dialogue process in Mixed Committees, assemblies and in classrooms where people with different backgrounds and different ways of thinking work together, requires daily skills development.

An example of joint training for teaching staff and relatives

'All the groups were open to volunteers too and to other staff such as the care-taker or the cook. It was clear that the only way to achieve the desired transformation was by involving anybody who had some kind of relationship with the student body and their families. Debates were far more rewarding if training was open to people from a variety of backgrounds. Besides this, scientific research has proven that the training of adults who are connected to the centre children in a non-professional way such as in the case of relatives and friends, is far more productive from the point of view of improving learning and academic performance than teacher training. Everybody should be included in the training.' (Racionero et al, 2012)

Egalitarian dialogue is also related to another key aspect, that of never discrediting community values or marginalising vulnerable groups. Staff values are no better or worse than those of the rest of the community. Frequently, unconsciously, staff are convinced they have the best way of seeing certain things and try to impose arbitrary values from a standpoint of status. This type of behaviour is fairly common also in relation to aspects of gender, for instance. Some teachers believe they have values which are more pro-female or more liberated than the mothers and families they work with and that therefore they have to foster a culture of such 'liberation'.

A women-only literacy group ... ?

A Maghrebi group of mothers at a school wish to create a literacy group. Of course, it would be women-only. They do not want any man in the same space. Amongst the teaching staff, some are against this, since they consider it means allowing a practice based on inequality between men and women. For staff in disagreement, it should be a condition that any literacy group is mixed because this would also serve to 'overcome' outdated values based on male chauvinist traditions.

Other teachers challenge those who say the activity must be mixed by talking about going out with their group of female friends at night time or at hen parties or having partners who are not egalitarian. To take a family training course agreed by everyone, is what actually will foster success, and in any case, this does not exclude the possibility of performing some other activities, mixed or not. Subsequently, some of the Maghrebi women who have started to do literacy courses join Interactive Groups as volunteers and take part in Mixed Commitees and ultimately one of them is elected to the School Council. They are neither passive nor submissive women, they defend their own and their children's right to education and they are taking their own personal and collective decisions, without blocking or obstructing the opinions of others. Consensus is therefore possible.

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The evaluation of staff training in Learning Communities should be based on its impact on improving student results, the implementation of scientific-based classroom practice and the contribution of this practice to the improvement of all types of outcomes (academic, ethos, coexistence, wellbeing). Assessment strictly based upon the level of satisfaction of teachers who attend the sessions sometimes results in the goal of the training becoming more about who has made most jokes or who has established better group dynamics. Professional development centres, management teams and training managers may therefore introduce questions to assessment forms so that training assessment aligns fully with the improvement of centre results and outcomes.

Aspects which improve faculty training

Dialogic Pedagogical Gatherings

Following the same format as Dialogic Gatherings of art, mathematics and so on (UNIT 7), Dialogic Pedagogical Gatherings bring staff and families closer, in a more direct and profound way. with the theoretical and scientific basis of Successful Educational Actions. Teams formed of a diversity of people involved in children's education, particularly teaching staff, consultants, advisors and so on, read together key international texts. In every case, the original text is sourced.

The aforementioned Gatherings are also known as 'book in hand seminars', to avoid a current practice in education which is to discuss and write on topics that have not even been read, bringing about apocryphal interpretations of theoretical contributions and strange ideas about educational practices. In the Gatherings, collective knowledge construction is based upon egalitarian dialogue about the reading. The people who take part in the Gathering have to indicate the page number and paragraph of that fragment or idea to which they are referring in their commentary, criticism or analysis. Through dialogic reading, educational activities which are currently generating most success and equality are discovered. This exercise in shared reading allows teaching staff the opportunity to discuss educational practices with the reference points of evidence and original sources.

When training starts from the point of a dialogic vision, knowledge appears as a result of an egalitarian dialogue and interactions between the group members who are participating in the training. Combined reflections allow for the incorporation of varying points of view, knowledge and models presented with reasoning. Thus, everybody participating in the training process generates a greater intersubjective comprehension of the topic under discussion. This comprehension process makes it possible to combine theory with practice, thus creating strategies and useful skills for teaching practices. This allows us to get closer to the notion of continuous training provided by relevant authors such as Paulo Freire:

'*The dialectics between practice and theory must be completely experienced in training theory contexts, to look for the reason for things. Continuous training as a critical reflection of practice is based on said dialectics between practice and theory.*' (Freire, 1994)

Dialogic reading allows for, through interaction with text, the connection of theory with practice in the day-to-day life of the centre. At the same time, collective solutions can be found based on what has been learnt from texts as well as personal experience. The reflection process of profound dialogue enables teaching staff to gradually build knowledge and make their job more meaningful.

An example of a Dialogic Pedagogic Gathering at CEP in Seville:

'*We have read Freire, Flecha, Vygotsky, Bruner, Touraine, Apple and other authors that probably, on our own, we would have never read. We have shared differing viewpoints on the same readings but the most relevant factor has been to discover the powerful training character of the Gathering through theoretical reflection and shared practice. Dialogic Gatherings are a social and personal transformation instrument.*'

López, G. & Nogales, F. (2012). Formadores para transformar. El origen de las Comunidades en Sevilla. *Suplemento Escuela.* 1, 6-7

Share experiences and support new Learning Communities

Also, aside from researching and becoming involved with news and discussions about Learning Communities on the internet, it is advisable to broaden the debate and contribute to other schools and other professionals the experiences that have already been carried out in our school. It can be done in many ways, such as publishing materials and resources used in Successful Educational Actions on the school's website or sharing experiences through talks and meetings with other schools.

Coherence

Finally, it is essential that an effort is made to convey in a coherent, consistent manner those values which students are asked to equally uphold. Values such as respect, solidarity, freedom, equality, camaraderie or listening are not learned in a class on values, but throughout the day in all areas and all school contexts. Even better would be to continue the practice of these values in community life and put them into practice daily. This is the best form of education regarding values that a professional can provide in their key role as teacher.

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> **To find out more:**
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