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Social Mapping in the Context of a Community-build Day: Strategy to Strengthen Links with Community in a Small Rural School

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Abstract

In this paper we present a strategy for linking the school with its territory carried out in a colegio rural agrupado (a rural primary school serving several small populations on different sites) in the province of Valencia (Spain). A one-day community-building event was organised to promote community participation and development, with two aims: to provide information on the projects carried out in the school with local community involvement; and to apply a participatory social diagnostic tool (SDT), namely, social mapping. The strategy falls within the methodological framework of a process of Participatory Action Research (PAR). We analyse the meaning of PAR in the context of the experience and describe how the various stages were carried out. The results show the implications for community agents that the mapping strategy had in linking the school to its local area. We conclude by outlining a series of reflections on the basic factors that foster the link between the school and its local context, and we highlight the great potential of this strategy for resituating the school in its territory and revealing previously hidden relationships and resources.

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1. Introduction

A school that aims to be truly intercultural and inclusive must involve civil society in the decisions taken within it, in defining its purposes, coordinating personal and institutional relationships and proposing cultural models that make

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the school an agent for social change. Some authors (Apple & Beane, 2005; Bolívar, 2000; Flecha & Tortajada, 1999; Jiménez & Pozuelos, 2001) have explored structured educational experiences from the position of democratic participation and joint action by the educational community (pupils, teachers, families and social and community agents). It is our view that the processes of socio-community transformation for building intercultural and inclusive schools have a strong ally in the democratising dynamics of schools. Our research experience also tells us that initiatives for change taken within the limits of the school cannot, on their own, bring transformations to its environment (Traver, Sales & Moliner, 2010). For this to happen the school must open up to its territory, and create links with the collective and individual agents that live and give life to community interactions. This opposite is also true: a transformation in the locality, neighbourhood, village or city is not possible if the school is not included. Permeability (Santos Guerra, 2000) is a key factor in allowing the school and the locality in which it is embedded to create links and open up to community life by contributing and building shared knowledge. These schools are embedded in their locality; they are places of collective action, plural and multifaceted educational spaces that enhance their local context. However, this possibility is neither uniform nor automatic, since participatory action must frequently overcome numerous structural, organisational, personal or cultural hurdles that interfere in the processes of change.

The notion of community links takes us to the concept of community. For Jiménez and Pozuelos (2001): “*The concept of community [...] is enriched when it is related to that of the territory (district). The neighbourhood, locality, or territory is not just a transitional space where we carry out our daily activities; it is also an environment of education and coexistence that is worth taking into account*” (p.13). Undoubtedly, the relationships between the families, the educational community and the school will vary considerably in accordance with how each school understands the concept of educational community, the degree of openness and its relationships with the local context, and the channels and kinds of participation and in what activities.

The school environment is therefore understood as an object of learning on which to reflect and analyse, and a didactic resource. This approach takes us towards a communitarian, integrating curriculum – neither localist nor ethnocentric – that enables and seeks the participation of all the social sectors making up the school and favours critical intervention in the environment and its transformation towards greater solidarity (Jiménez & Pozuelos, 2001). It is also crucial to look beyond the immediate environment; we believe that the criteria of proximity in learning should not be exclusively restricted to spatial criteria only, but should incorporate other aspects such as ideology, experience and life. For this to happen, the participation of all sectors in the educational community must be fostered and strengthened by building collaboration networks and ensuring flexibility in the participatory structures, thereby encouraging porosity and permeability between the various spheres of the educational universe: formal, non-formal, and informal education.

One general strategy for linking the school with its community is to run joint educational projects that connect the school with its surrounding area (Moliner, Traver, Ruiz & Segarra, in press). Such projects emerge and flourish when the following conditions are in place: 1) the opportunity for contact among community agents (people and institutions); 2) knowledge about each another, as communities are made up of various groups with different backgrounds, social structures, value systems and cultural conceptions of the world; 3) the opportunity to work together in such a way that people can explore their interests and needs as a group; and 4) the opportunity for joint reflection and active planning for transformative action.

In this vein, the mapping activity organised as part of a community-building day offers a frame of action that can mobilise the community in order to analyse, in co-ordinated manner, its immediate context and establish its priorities in relation to the educational resources available in the area.

2. Descriptive Study

This study describes and analyses a strategy for community participation and linking up with the territory, namely, mapping. The initiative began with a request from the educational community to organise a community-building day to provide information about the projects carried out in the school and the local community's participation in them, and to apply a participatory social diagnostic (PSD) technique – social mapping – that would open the way for proposals for joint action plans shared between the school and the community.

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