Strategies to link schools to their territories. A Survey Study

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Abstract

The inclusive intercultural school is based on a participatory and democratic education model. It promotes critical citizenship and links schools to their territory so they become agents of social transformation. The aim of this study is to learn about the links between territory and schools in different contexts in Spain. To this end a survey was performed in preschool, primary, secondary and special education schools in the regions of Valencia and Murcia and the Basque Country. A total of 242 schools responded to a 32-item questionnaire, which gathers information from the school principals on the relationship between their schools and the territory. The analysis shows schools are responsive to the notion of opening up to the surrounding community through curricular and cultural activities related to neighborhood or town organizations. However, there is a lower incidence of volunteer work and building networks with other institutions. The results reveal a socio-communitarian and participatory vision of education in schools. This approach can encourage a sense of belonging and shared leadership. However, the approach lacks strategies to establish more sustainable and systematic links with the territory for promoting real social change.

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1. Introduction

Education and culture must constantly reflect on and analyze today’s diverse and plural reality. According to Kincheloe and Steinberg (1999), the great challenge facing education is to provide the conditions that ensure equal opportunities and social transformation based on cultural construction-reconstruction. The school, as a social institution, must therefore be a living space where active democracy facilitates full citizen participation and the construction of collective knowledge based on its social context (Susinos & Rodriguez-Hoyos, 2011).

Drawing on the above premises, our conception of the intercultural inclusive school is one that is fully embedded in its territory, that means an “included” school. This model of school constructs an educational and cultural project based on a vision of reality as an open system where, as in Gimeno Sacristán’s (2001) metaphorical description, different cultural groups form a vast network connected by numerous threads acting as communication channels. This idea of school and society is grounded on critical citizenship that calls for commitment, active involvement, reflection and participation under an inclusive approach to leadership (Traver, Sales & Moliner, 2010).

Thus, the previous literature associates the intercultural inclusive school with democratic values and practices, and with citizen participation strategies that link the school to its territory so as to transform it (Torney-Purta & Barber, 2005; Bolívar, 2006).

This link refers to:

- A shared cultural project of common values and objectives that gives meaning and cohesion to the educational community. It means sharing a social-communitarian vision of education, breaking down barriers between formal and informal learning processes (Ainscow et al., 2012).
- Spaces and times for citizen participation: establishing routine moments and places for participation in school life, creating opportunities for learning and dialogue, and innovation strategies that promote intercultural communication, a sense of belonging and critical citizenship (Sales, Traver & García, 2011).
- A network of support and cooperation to increase schools’ capacity to deal with diversity in an inclusive way (Echeita et al., 2013). Indeed, the search for support networks demonstrates a sustainable culture of change in a school (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006).
- Commitment to social transformation: the school-territory link is associated with social change, social improvement in a general sense. The school cannot be omitted from citizen movements that accept their responsibility to put their agency and empowerment into practice (García Perez, 2009; Sales, 2012).

These foundations provide the basis for our analysis of the school-territory links in three Spanish autonomous communities, through a survey study as a part of a broader research project on strategies for citizen participation in the included school.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

The research question addressed in this study is: What strategies do schools use to build links with their territory? We aim to understand and analyze the strategies a school community uses to link to their territory: How do schools connect their activities to their neighborhood or town? What kind of organizations collaborate with the school? Is there a network with other institutions?

The study is based on descriptive-exploratory research methodology: a survey study. The questionnaires were sent by e-mail to principals of preschool, primary, secondary and special education schools. The response rate was 9.3%: 242 questionnaires were returned from the 2,614 sent out in the three regions.

2.2. Sample

The sample comprised 242 preschool, primary, secondary and special education schools in the regions of Valencia and Murcia and the Basque Country. The sample is distributed as follows: 118 (48.8%) preschool and primary schools,
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