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Bridging the gap: engaging Roma and migrant families in early childhood education through trust-based relationships

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ABSTRACT

Family participation and involvement in schools has been reported to be crucial for improving academic achievement and social cohesion, especially among those systematically excluded such as migrants or the Roma population. However, these families often participate less in school life. This hinders any attempt to reverse the cycle of inequality experienced in Europe by the Roma and migrant population, among others. This study focuses on a specific school that has successfully engaged Roma and migrant families. Particularly, this case study aims to identify the characteristics of the relationship that the Roma and migrant families have with the school and the way that parents' involvement in the education of their children has been promoted. The main results show that the participation of these families has been fostered by a strong collaboration constructed with egalitarian dialogue, trust and confidence-based relationships, and having a shared purpose of ensuring high-quality education for all children.

KEYWORDS

Family participation; early childhood education; Roma; migrants; relationships

Introduction

As poverty increases in Europe, escaping from deprivation in a fast-changing environment demands a combined effort that calls for different community agents to engage with local schools (Suárez-Orozco and Qin-Hilliard 2004). To address this situation, schools may promote inclusion through comprehensive equity schemes which encourage the involvement of families and communities (OECD 2016). However, engaging families with minority backgrounds in schools remains a challenge for European Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) institutions (Bove and Sharmahd 2020). It is essential to tackle this challenge from ECEC to ensure that family involvement has a positive impact on children's cognitive and emotional development (Reynolds et al. 2019). This is especially the case for Roma and migrant children, who otherwise are likely to be trapped in persistent social and educational inequalities (Vandekerckhove and Aarssen 2020).

There is substantial evidence that school-family collaboration contributes to various educational outcomes, such as development of social skills (Duddy 2019). Nevertheless, there are differences in the degree of family involvement. According to a study involving

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605 teachers in Israel, the extent to which parents were involved in schools appeared to be different in schools serving students and families with low socioeconomic status (SES) compared with those with high SES. Teachers reported less involvement of families with fewer socioeconomic resources (Addi-Raccah and Grinshtain 2017). Souto-Manning and Swick (2006) showed that families from a minority background tended to participate less often in school committees, volunteering and school meetings, and teachers often interpret this lower involvement as lack of interest. However, while social, language and cultural differences have been shown to play a key role in migrant family participation (Smith 2020), they have rarely been considered a justification for limited family involvement.

Furthermore, a recent study focused on interventions tackling inequalities experienced by immigrant, low-income, and Roma children in 8 European countries suggested that only 41% of the interventions explicitly involved these families (Aguiar et al. 2020). This demonstrated that there is a gap in participatory approaches engaging these families, including in decision-making processes (Carmona Santiago et al. 2019).

When Klaus and Marsh (2014) reviewed the challenges faced in Europe to achieve the inclusion of the Roma community in ECEC, they concluded that more flexible community-based services and activities that seek to build trust between educators and Roma communities could reach younger children. Recent research involving 477 practitioners working in ECEC services emphasised the importance of strengthening the relationship between ECEC services and the most vulnerable families to promote the inclusion of children and their families (Silva et al. 2020).

In this vein, the involvement in schools of families and community members from minority and vulnerable groups has already been shown to be crucial in improving academic achievement (Díez, Gatt, and Racionero 2011). In a longitudinal study by Flecha and Soler (2013), some educational actions were identified that had a positive impact on improving Roma children's learning outcomes and relationships. They highlighted that family participation in decision-making processes and in children's learning activities were particularly important for increasing both Roma children's engagement in school and their academic success. Furthermore, Garcia, Ruiz and Comas (2019) have shown that family participation in educational activities for themselves and as volunteers with children's groups contributes to strengthening the solidarity dynamics and to improving school climate.

Considering the positive links reported between the involvement of families with minority background, students' academic achievement and the improvement of school climate, it may be useful to pursue further interventions targeting equity and belongingness through family-school partnerships (Epstein 2018), within a democratic and open atmosphere (Van Laere, Van Houtte, and Vandenbroeck 2018). This might be easier to achieve if the school and the families have shared beliefs and values about what the central mission of the school should be. The positive effects from building and maintaining a trusting environment for the entire school community were explored by Price (2012), who concluded that having trusting school spaces has the potential to positively impact both academic success and social achievement.

Along these lines, EU research has reported the benefits that transforming schools into *Learning Communities* can have on educational success and social inclusion. *Learning Communities* is a community-based project that aims to transform schools through

dialogic learning and involves research-grounded schools that implement Successful Educational Actions (Flecha 2015). More than 600 such schools in Europe and South America, many of them located in high poverty areas and serving Roma and migrant children, have shown a reduction in drop-out rates and an increase in education quality and attainment. Research conducted in schools as *Learning Communities* demonstrated that they developed specific structures and criteria that ensured that migrant and vulnerable groups became involved in school daily life (Soler et al. 2019). Specifically, they encouraged families and community members to engage in educational activities with flexible scheduling, and they considered families to be allies in providing the best education for their children (Garcia, Ruiz, and Comas 2019; Girbés-Peco, Gairal-Casadó, and Torrego-Egido 2019). Yet, the ways in which school-family relationships operate and the characteristics that favour vulnerable families' participation remain under-explored. This study aims to explore the relationships between school-staff and Roma and migrant families in a *Learning Community* that has reported positive results since the 2009–2010 academic year. These have been particularly noticeable in academic attainment and in eradicating school conflicts and violence.

The following sections outline the research design used in this empirical study, which includes an in-depth description of the case study and data analysis, followed by the results obtained. The article ends with a discussion of the results and some concluding remarks.

Methods

The empirical data presented here derive from a case study conducted during the 2018–2019 academic year. This instrumental case study seeks to gain a better understanding of which characteristics of the relationships between Roma and migrant families promoted their greater involvement in their children's education. The rationale for choosing this case relied on the sustainable success reported by the school in learning and social relationships, which serves Roma and migrants in a very low SES area. A detailed description is provided below.

The school

The school is located in a very low SES neighbourhood in the outskirts of a city in Northern Spain. Most of the population who live there are Roma and some 9.1% are migrants, mainly from North Africa. The school provides education to children aged from 2 to 16 years old. At the time of the study, 304 students were enrolled all of whom had received grants from the Basque Government (to be provided with school materials and/or as part of school lunch programmes). A breakdown of the origin/ethnic background of these students is provided in Table 1.

Despite the disadvantaged social and living conditions of the population in this area, the school has achieved high standards since 2010. According to the school's data, drop-out levels have decreased, and absenteeism rates have been reduced from 20% to almost zero. In 2013 the school received a national award for its project as a *Learning Community*, particularly for its emphasis on providing high-quality interactions among students and a highly diverse population to improve learning and social relationships. They reported an 80% decrease in conflict at all stages of education.

Table 1. Origin/ethnic background of the students.

Roma	North Africa[1]	South America	Other European countries[2]	Asia[3]
172	86	21	9	16
56%	29%	7%	3%	5%

[1]Nigeria, Algeria, Morocco, Ghana, Sahara, Angola, Mauritania.
[2]Portugal, Ukraine, Albania, Macedonia.
[3]Syria, Pakistan, China.

The school's vision and mission are based on engaging family members and students from diverse cultural backgrounds to improve the education of all the children in the community (Garcia-Carrion et al. 2017). In this school, families volunteer in classroom activities, which involve 3–5 volunteers per group and session. They also participate in decision-making processes by sitting on four joint committees.

Participants

Twelve people participated in this study: 6 family members (see Table 2) and 6 school staff (see Table 3). The six family members had regularly participated in academic activities in the classroom (1-3 days per week) for periods ranging from 1 to 7 years. The three migrant mothers were not fluent in the official language of the school and participated in language training sessions for families.

Procedure

Ethical issues were addressed throughout in line with the EECERA Ethical Code (2014). It was ensured that all participants involved in the study were fairly and sensitively treated, with dignity and without prejudice, and respectful of religion, language, race, ethnicity, national origin or culture. Once the Ethics Committee of the University approved the study design, the research aims and the potential benefits for participants and the whole community were explained to the headteacher. All participants signed the informed consent. None of the participants withdrew from the study.

Interviews were conducted between February and May 2019, based on participants' availability and preference. The objectives of the interviews were: (a) to explore the relationships between the school's staff and Roma and migrant families; and b) to identify which characteristics of these relationships favoured their participation.

Table 2. Participant families.

Pseudonym	Gender	Number of children attending the school	Origin/Ethnic background	Activities enrolled in
Fatma (age 41)	Female	1	Algeria	Volunteer in classroom. Joint Committee member
Gabriel (age 40)	Male	2	Spain-Roma	Volunteer in classroom
Esther (age 40)	Female	3	Spain-Roma	Training. Volunteer in classroom
Dunia (age 30)	Female	2	Pakistan	Volunteer in classroom
Zineb (age 40)	Female	2	Saudi Arabia	Volunteer in classroom.
Carlos (age 27)	Male	2	South America	Training. Volunteer in classroom.

Table 3. Participant School-staff.

Pseudonym	Gender	Role	Origin/Ethnic background	Years in school/ teaching experience
Rosa	Female	Deputy head	Spain-Basque	7/29
Jon	Male	Headteacher	Spain-Basque	4/12
Miriam	Female	Coordinator of the Early Childhood stage	Spain-Basque	7/20
Lidia	Female	Teacher (5-year-old children)	Spain-Basque	3/11
Mikel	Male	Teacher (3-year-old children)	Spain-Basque	1/11
Amaia	Female	Teacher (2-year-old children)	Spain-Basque	10/12

All the interviews were transcribed verbatim and inductively analysed. The emerging categories were identified: (a) an established teaching staff, and (b) the features of the relationships between the school's staff and the students' families.

This study acknowledged the potential of conducting research *with*, rather than *about*, the most disadvantaged population, such as Roma or migrant families (Gómez et al. 2019). The preliminary results were discussed with the participants before reaching any final conclusions. It is our belief that every person, regardless of their academic background, skills, and language competence, can participate in dialogue and contribute valuable knowledge.

Results

Supportive relationships and cohesion among the school's staff

Cohesion among teachers seems to encourage shared positive attitudes towards family participation (Cheung and Kam 2019). This was one of the key characteristics of the studied school. Mikel, the teacher of 3-year-old children, stated: 'We are a very good team; we understand each other very well. It is also a very heterogeneous group. I think we make a great team. And there is a brilliant atmosphere between us'.

Having a cohesive environment among teachers was intended to offer children the best learning opportunities from their earlier years, through exhaustive planning and coordination. The coordinator of the Early Childhood stage emphasised this by using a metaphor from one of the best-known Spanish Golden Age plays, *Fuenteovejuna*, in which the power of people coming together led to success in overcoming injustice and achieving a shared purpose: 'Then also coordination, teamwork. Good work planning, knowing where we want to get to, where we are going … That's the key for success. All for one, as in Fuenteovejuna'.

Coordinated work promoted cohesion within the teaching team, of which families were also aware. This cohesion included the management team, who were involved as volunteers in the classroom on equal terms with the families. Positions of power became blurred, because all contributions were valued in light of the arguments provided. In this way, a migrant mother facilitated group dynamics with children in the same way as the head of studies would, which is not 'usual' in other schools.

> There is harmony between them, with the boss too. When she comes here with the children, she doesn't seem like a boss. She's the head of studies but she just comes and helps the children. This is strange, it doesn't happen in another countries, but it does happen here. The people who work with the teachers, the same ones, come and help here. I've never seen that. (Fatma. Migrant mum)

New teachers tend to benefit from this cohesion, which feeds back to form even stronger trusting relationships in schools (Price 2012). In this school, new teachers joined a dynamic environment where teachers, management team and families made it clear that their combined efforts go further than individual work, and managed to promote successful academic and social outcomes for all children.

> Everything is so tied up, so well organised, everything is so clear to them that when we first join, we pick it up straight away. (Lidia. Teacher)

Features of the relationship between teachers and families

One of the mothers reported that the school was 'like a family'. This section discusses the characteristics of the relationships identified by the participants that made this possible: (a) strong collaboration through egalitarian dialogue; (b) trust and confidence-based relationships; and (c) a shared, strong commitment to providing the best education for all children.

Strong collaboration through egalitarian dialogue

Egalitarian dialogue encourages the development of equal relationships, which can facilitate close collaboration between families and the school. Lidia, the 5-year-old teacher reported: 'What [the school] is very clear about is that the relationship with the families is on an equal footing. Very respectful and on an equal footing: 'no one is more important than anyone else'. This had a positive impact on young children. This positive impact was perceived by Roma mothers like Esther, who saw an improvement in her son's attitude towards the school: 'I like (participating) because my son is more joyful, he is happier; they are more keen to do things, they pay more attention to you, they feel better'.

The teaching team worked day by day to build relationships based on equality. They showcased the cultural intelligence of the families and took every opportunity to interact with them:

> I try to get families involved by having an equal relationship with them. I am always at the door from 9 to 9:30 and they talk to me about many personal things. People in their life and … that means that they have a relationship with me, and I can tell them: 'Come on, you can stay as a volunteer tomorrow.' (Miriam. Coordinator)

Even those in the most vulnerable situations, people felt included and capable of contributing just like others with academic degrees. Gabriel was a Roma dad who participated as a volunteer in the classroom on a weekly basis. He did not finish his primary education, and yet he participated on equal terms: 'They give you authority, just like they give to anyone else'. In the same way, Fatma reported: 'I'm like another teacher'. Their participation in the classroom diversified children's interactions, enriching their learning and social skills.

A relationship built on trust and confidence

Trust was a characteristic of the relationship between the teaching staff and families at the school. The results showed that families trusted teachers, and vice versa: 'Teachers have a close relationship of trust with families' (Amaia. Teacher). These relationships of trust

provided a safe environment for families: 'Our children's families feel loved and protected here, and this is very important.' (Rosa. Head of Studies)

The participants noted that greeting each family at the school's entrance every day fostered a feeling of trust between school staff and families, which led to families feeling safe to propose ideas.

> For me, that short time is very important. That's where you really build a relationship of trust with families, they trust you more. They feel they can confide in you and talk to you more and more. And they feel more reassured, more secure. (Lidia. Teacher)

> Here we hear everything they want to contribute to our school, and they can bring to us whatever they want to bring. It is very good that Miriam welcomes them first thing in the morning, so that they can feel safe to propose things. (Jon. Headteacher)

This result reveals a specific way to welcome students' families that is key to improve classroom climate in ECEC (McNally and Slutsky 2018). Indeed, the relationship of trust between school staff and the Roma and migrant families also included community life issues. These results show that it is possible to involve Roma and migrant families by overcoming reproductionist conceptions about the lack of interest of these families in the education of their children:

> Because families come very often. And not only as volunteers in the classroom. They come to ask you how to complete a grant application, and to talk about their problems. (Rosa. Head of Studies)

> They not only keep track of the children's lives, but also of their families' (Carlos. Migrant dad)

Common goal and shared purpose: providing the best education for all children

Families and school staff shared the goal of ensuring the best education was available to all, without any distinction, in line with the fourth Sustainable Development Goal. The teachers wanted the best for the children in the school and worked with the students' families to make this happen. The headteacher said that he wanted the same for his students as he did for his own children. This is a very powerful statement, since it does not apply the 'double standards' (Hargrove 1958) which have excluded the most vulnerable communities.

> You do things because you want the best for your students. What do we want? Well, we want for others what we would like for our own sons and daughters. So, there is a strong commitment and willingness to do things in our school. (Jon. Headteacher)

Families perceived this commitment and saw the positive impact it had on their children. This led them to become engaged as well and to support teachers in their work. For this reason, Fatma participated in her son's classroom as a volunteer, where she experienced this progress, not only in her son but in all the children: 'Here the teachers give everything they have to help children improve. My son always comes to school now, he has made good progress. They (children) are all better than before'.

The vision of this school relied on high expectations for all their students. This was an essential requirement, and therefore they took advantage of the help from everyone in the community to ensure that every child reached their maximum potential. From this

perspective, the impact of positive expectations on students increased, and it drove families' participation at the same time. As both a teacher and a mother stated, if they worked together everyone could do this, so this is how they managed to succeed:

> Everyone can do this, and everyone will. It is our confidence in their abilities that brings success to everything; we trust that we are all safe, we can see from the data. It is not just my opinion. (Lidia. Teacher)

> What helps students to succeed? Parents' participation, because you know what they do, because you see what they do, and that helps a lot. It's very important. (Zineb. Migrant mum)

Cultural differences or not speaking the language of the school was not an obstacle to participation, as the school's vision was shared by all. Zineb was a volunteer in reading and writing tasks, while she was also attending family education sessions to improve her level of Spanish. Lidia, the 5-year-old teacher see this participation as an asset for the class: 'When we have had volunteers from different cultures, we have seen that their purpose is the same as ours. They help the children, engage in interactive activities with a group. So, there is usually complicity [between us]'.

Every family's contribution was valued (rather than focusing on what they could not contribute), and this led to the discourse of 'lack' being set aside (Stacey 2019). Building on what families bring to school and their strengths has been shown to be an extremely effective strategy (Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti 2014).

Discussion

As the United Nations stated in the fourth Sustainable Development Goal, special efforts are needed to improve learning outcomes during the entire life cycle, especially for people in vulnerable settings. In this vein, the involvement in schools of families and community members from minority and vulnerable groups has been shown to be crucial in improving academic achievement, but it remains a challenge for European ECEC (Bove and Sharmahd 2020).

The results of this study are consistent with previous research on *Learning Communities*, which have shown that the participation of families in the classroom and in decision-making processes has a positive impact on improving students' attainment and social relationships in highly diverse contexts (Flecha and Soler 2013). The views of the 12 participants of this study revealed some key aspects that facilitate the involvement of families that traditionally have been less involved in school life (Addi-Raccah and Grinshtain 2017), thus bridging the gap and engaging Roma and migrant families in ECEC.

Strong collaboration through egalitarian dialogue minimises the hurdles that social, language and cultural differences can create for families from minority backgrounds (Souto-Manning and Swick 2006). When teacher-family relationships are built on trust and confidence, they showcase the knowledge of the community concerned by making meaningful connections between the school and students' lives (Gonzalez, Moll and Amanti 2014). The school helps families feel that their participation is essential for their children's success.

The results of this study confirm that Roma and migrant families can engage in transformative action and improve their context and situation (Díez, Gatt and Racionero 2011), helping to overcome the view that these families can only participate in routine tasks or

informative meetings, which leaves little room for building partnerships (Cheung and Kam 2019). These findings exemplify the Freirean concept of 'untested feasibility', which makes it possible to generate real transformations (Freire 2002).

Building relationships based on egalitarian dialogue open new horizons for previous research, which has found that the difference in power between teachers and families could be an insurmountable obstacle to family-school collaboration (Whyte and Karabon 2016). As shown by the data provided, the most vulnerable families became involved in the school just like everyone else, and they all shared the common goal of offering high-quality education for all. This means that there were no distinctions, and that everyone involved wished for others what they wished for themselves. This evidence may shed some light on new dynamics where double standards are no longer used.

Since this is a single case study conducted in one school, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, given the number of participants, the results of this study cannot be generalised to a wider population. Second, involving children in further research regarding family participation would enrich the findings, as children's participation is associated with 'influencing change and decision making' (Tisdall 2015). Future research could provide evidence through larger studies conducted in other contexts. Despite its limitations, this study has contributed to a better understanding of the relationships between families and schools that promote the involvement of Roma and migrant families in the education of their children. This is clearly a first step to overcome the vicious cycle of inequality in which many vulnerable populations are still trapped. Every effort must be made to contribute to the struggle to provide young children with the best start possible in education.

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