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Teacher Education in Schools as Learning Communities: Transforming High-Poverty Schools through Dialogic Learning

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Abstract: Teachers' professional development in Schools as Learning Communities may become a key process for the sustainability and transferability of this model worldwide. Learning Communities (LC) is a community-based project that aims to transform schools through dialogic learning and involves research-grounded schools that implement Successful Educational Actions (SEAs). More than 600 such schools in Europe and South America, many of them located in high poverty areas, have shown a reduction in drop-out rates and an increase in school quality and attainment. This article analyses how teachers' professional development is built in these schools. Following a communicative methodology approach, we analyse the implementation of the programme in four schools in South America. The main features are grounded in transformative theories and socially responsive research and provide evidence-based arguments and practical knowledge for effective implementation built upon egalitarian relationships and communication within the entire community.

Introduction

Despite the scientific knowledge developed on how to improve teaching and learning processes to foster educational success and inclusion for all, much is still to be learned about how to break the cycle of educational inequalities among students in high-poverty schools. Access to quality education is at the heart of the inequality issue (Darling-Hammond, 1996), and this issue is directly related to the quality of the teaching students receive. However, teachers alone cannot address all the complex challenges students face in their daily lives (Lampert & Burnett, 2015). The question about how teachers keep teaching and how students keep learning in high-poverty schools cannot be answered without paying close attention to the role of their families and community members. As the African proverb says, *it takes a village to raise a child*. Schools as Learning Communities become a driving force of the transformation of the sociocultural context where children grow and develop by involving families and communities in all learning spaces (Flecha & Soler, 2013).

Learning Communities is a project of school transformation aimed at achieving educational success for all students based on the implementation of what has been defined as *Successful Educational Actions* (SEAs) (Flecha, 2015). This concept is one of the main results of a large-scale EU-funded research project, *INCLUD-ED*, which has been the only research in SSH selected by the European Commission as a success story for its scientific, policy and social impact (European Commission, 2011). *INCLUD-ED: Strategies for inclusion and social cohesion in Europe from education* (FP6, 2006-2011) aimed at identifying educational actions that promoted both school success for all students and social

cohesion and inclusion in their communities. The study focused mainly on disadvantaged schools serving ethnic minority students, such as the Roma people. The analysis of educational systems, policies and practices across 27 European countries shed light on some educational interventions promising to have a positive impact in the school and in the community. Those defined as (SEAs) were those interventions that improved students' attainment and social relationships in many diverse contexts, regardless the socioeconomic, national and cultural environment of the school. This positive impact occurred even in one of the most deprived and marginalised schools in Southern Europe, 90% of whose students were Roma, where the implementation of such SEAs contributed to transforming difficulties into possibilities for the school and the neighbourhood (Flecha & Soler, 2013).

SEAs provide educational practitioners, researchers and policy makers with a powerful tool to be recreated across national and cultural boundaries to address global challenges in education. As these SEAs have been shown to work in many diverse contexts (from early childhood to prisons), they are potentially transferrable to other contexts, schools and communities. The implementation of SEAs in new contexts always builds upon scientific evidence of the impact achieved in those places where they have been previously implemented. They are transferred once they have been proven to be effective (Álvarez, García-Carrión, Puigvert, Pulido & Schubert, 2016).

However, the potential transferability and recreation of the SEAs in new contexts cannot be taken for granted. Despite the role children, families and communities play in the project, the teachers are crucial agents of change for the scaling up and sustainability of the project. Consequently, teachers' professional development (PD) is the first step required to transform the school into a Learning Community. Professional development has been claimed as one of the key factors that influences student achievement and that improves classroom management and instruction (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Hattie, 2009). Nevertheless, not all professional development programmes have achieved the expected impact. Some of the criticisms claim that PD programmes are usually less related to what is occurring in the classroom (Schwille & Dembélé, 2007) or are 'intellectually superficial, disconnected from deep issues of curriculum and learning, fragmented, and non-cumulative' (Ball & Cohen, 1999: 3-4). Acknowledging the need to provide high quality professional development for teachers, and especially for those already working in high-poverty schools, this paper focuses on the professional development that occurs in Schools as Learning Communities.

This programme is the first step in performing the project and involves all the school staff, and it can also be opened to families and community members. It is an intensive 30-hour training programme titled 'Raising Awareness', which aims to promote critical reflection and action, along the same lines of the Freirean concept of "conscientização" (Freire, 1970). The aim of this paper is to analyse how this specific professional development is built in four cases in South American countries and to explore the main features of this training. A better understanding of the programme and lessons learned from this small exploratory study, where the project has been recently transferred, can shed light on opportunities for other schools to recreate the programme worldwide.

First, we situate the debate in the contemporary approaches to teacher professional development and present the model developed in Schools as Learning Communities. Second, we introduce the research question, methodological approach, and data collection and analysis. Third, we describe the results obtained according to the established categories of analysis. Finally, we end with brief conclusions of our research for a global improvement of education. By focusing our analysis on four different countries, this paper may contribute further evidence to support the extension of evidence-based professional development in Schools as Learning Communities.

Contemporary Models of Teacher Professional Development

Emphasis is given in Learning Communities to the value of high-quality professional development and is consistent with the existing evidence of its importance for maintaining continuous improvement in teacher quality (Phillips, 2008). According to Borko and colleagues (Borko, Jacobs & Koellner, 2010), effective professional development should be situated in practice— for example, when teachers know and become part of the community — and focus on student learning. This approach is particularly relevant for its effects on schools serving disadvantaged children and communities. There is a large need for improving teacher quality throughout the schooling system, particularly within the schools with the greatest academic needs (Lampert, Burnett & Davie, 2012).

Teachers need to incorporate critical thinking in their practice that connects their own knowledge with that of their diverse and underprivileged students — based on the idea of generativity — to meet their educational needs (Ball, 2009). As the least prepared teachers usually work in some of the most diverse and underresourced communities, teacher professional development programmes need to push prospective teachers to replace their feelings of insecurity, discomfort and inadequacy with feelings of agency, advocacy and efficacy (Ball, 2009).

Providing teachers with active learning opportunities and including opportunities for feedback and reflection are essential in any current teacher professional development programme (Birman, Desimone, Porter and Garet, 2000; Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss & Shapley, 2007). However, unless professional development can provide teachers with the tools to address diversity and to do much more challenging work, traditional approaches to training teachers are likely to remain superficial and not improve teacher quality. Instead, teachers need more opportunities to reflect on their own practices and reconsider what they have been doing in light of evidence-based findings and new knowledge grounded on transformative theories and generative approaches (Ball, 2015, p.117).

This approach to high quality teachers for high-poverty schools has been already developed in initial teacher training. The programme National Exceptional Teachers for Disadvantaged Schools (NETDS), which has been developed in Australia, is a significant example that aims to prepare excellent teachers for high-poverty schools (Lampert & Burnett, 2015). Along the same line, Jenkin (2016) stresses the role of teacher-education providers in training their graduates to improve their curriculum since research shows that teachers are not yet proficient in the skills needed to deliver this type of curriculum effectively. If quality teaching is one of the most significant systemic factors contributing to student achievement, and learning ‘on the job’ in the first years is the factor most associated with improvement in student achievement (Wright, 2015, p. 2), professional development will be critical for those teachers who start the process of transformation of the school into a Learning Community.

Teacher Professional Development in Schools as Learning Communities

The conceptual framework that guides teacher PD in Schools as Learning Communities starts with the premise that ‘learning primarily depends on the interactions and dialogues that the students have, not only with teachers but also with the other students, their families and other members of the community’ (Flecha, 2015, p. 71). It is one of the accounts of how people learn through communicative interaction and builds on a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of dialogic teaching and learning. It considers contributions from multiple disciplines of the social sciences — pedagogy, psychology, sociology, and linguistics, among others — that have contributed to explaining how people

learn through interactions with others. Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory (1978) is crucial to understanding that the development of higher mental functions is eminently social and language-mediated, and it depends on instruction in cooperation with adults or more capable others. In addition, this dialogic approach to education is intrinsically transformative and emancipatory when educator and learner take an egalitarian stance to promote deeper and critical thinking (Freire, 1970). Far from a ‘banking model’ of education with a teacher depositing knowledge for students who are rarely allowed or encouraged to question such knowledge or elaborate on it, the dialogic action fosters democracy within a problem-posing pedagogy where learners become active participants who reflect critically upon their world (Freire, 1970). In the same vein, Dialogic Learning builds on Habermas’ (1984) communicative action, which brings to the educational dialogue the importance to create ‘ideal situations of communication’ where participants’ contributions are more egalitarian than power-based. Accordingly, they seek agreement, and greater levels of understanding are achieved by argumentation based on ‘validity claims’, allowing individuals to engage in transformative social action (Habermas, 1984).

Building on these theories, Flecha (2000) developed his ‘dialogic learning’ approach that was initially applied to adult education and later expanded to many diverse schools. He found that adult participants, with no academic background, used dialogue in a very transformative way when they shared interpretations of classic texts in a literary circle. His conceptualization articulates seven principles that emerged from those dialogues and interactions are characterized as (1) being egalitarian, (2) capitalizing on every participant’s cultural intelligence, (3) provoking critical transformation instead of adaptation to the environment, (4) fostering the instructional dimension of dialogue, (5) being solidarity-based, (6) making meaning for the entire group, and (7) allowing individual and group differences to form an egalitarian perspective. These seven principles of Flecha’s dialogic learning (see Table 1) are the theoretical basis of the teacher professional development in Schools as Learning Communities.

Principle	Definition
egalitarian dialogue	Contributions are considered according to the validity of their reasoning, instead of the positions of power held by those who speak
cultural intelligence	Academic, communicative, and practical knowledge and abilities people develop to solve problems in everyday life
transformation	Dialogues that lead to higher mental functions are those that are transformative on multiple levels (prior knowledge, social relations, learners’ identity, and contexts of development)
instrumental dimension	Language and communication are used as a tool to construct knowledge together and increase learning
solidarity	Interactions are solidarity based when they occur in egalitarian and horizontal relations; the main motivation is that everyone learns together.
creation of meaning	Dialogues become sources of personal and social meaning
equality of differences	Every student, regardless of ethnic, cultural, or linguistic background, gender, sexual orientation, or religion has the same opportunity to engage in dialogue, share opinions, have those opinions evaluated on the basis of the arguments provided, and ultimately have the same chance of successful learning

Table 1. Seven principles of Dialogic Learning Theory (Flecha, 2000)

This theory, practice and research-based knowledge are combined during the training teachers receive to become a School as Learning Community, which is named ‘Raising Awareness’. This first stage of the project is an intensive training for the entire staff and other members of the community to learn about and reflect upon those theoretical and research bases of the project. During 30 hours, usually distributed over five days with sessions delivered in the morning and afternoon (see Table 2), which are delivered not only by scholars and faculty but also in dialogue and collaboration with teachers and family members who have previously implemented the project in their schools. Teachers delve into the seven principles with practical examples, that will guide communicative interactions among teachers, students, families and community members in these schools.

1 st module	2 nd module	3 rd module	4 th module	5 th module
Learning Communities. Information-based Society and School	Dialogic Learning Principles & Successful Educational Actions (SEAs)	SEA: Interactive Groups	SEA: Dialogic Reading & Dialogic Literary Gatherings	SEA: Dialogic Prevention of Violence
Research-based content: INCLUD-ED Project	Stages of the project and Organization	SEA: Educative Participation of the Community	Practical: Dialogic Literary Gathering	Questions, Doubts, Conclusions

Table 2. ‘Raising Awareness’ Professional Development Program

Although the modules included in the programme are the same as those in other programmes, they are not delivered without accounting for the context and concerns of the schools and the teachers who participate. Consequently, the programme aims at creating the opportunities for new dialogues with the teachers and other members of the community who relate those contents to their own classroom and school context. The sessions are grounded on the dialogic approach to allow everyone to talk and express their concerns regarding the theoretical or practical implications of implementing the project.

Methods

The exploratory study we present in this article addresses the following research questions:

What are the main features of the ‘Raising Awareness’ teacher professional development programme in Learning Communities?

Are there any components that particularly help or hinder further implementation of the project in the South American context?

For this purpose, the communicative methodology of research was employed (Gómez, Puigvert & Flecha, 2011). This methodology is based on the intersubjective knowledge creation among the researchers and end-users of the research, who engage in dialogue and joint reflection to reach shared interpretations of the study. The communicative methodology is oriented towards the transformation of the social reality that is being analysed. According to this orientation, data analysis accounts for exclusionary components of the reality studied— those that lead to exclusion or inequalities for certain groups or people (exclusionary dimension) — and transformative components — those that overcome such situations and lead to transformation (transformative dimension; Flecha & Soler, 2014).

The 30-hour intensive professional development programme ‘Raising Awareness’ was conducted in primary and secondary schools from February 2014 to October 2014. These schools were located in disadvantaged areas in Colombia, Mexico, Peru and Brazil, and

between 25 and 50 teachers participated in the sessions. Two different researchers from our team conducted communicative observations during the five-day training and registered interactions (questions, comments, and reflections) initiated by the participating teachers. At the end of the training, four communicative focus groups were conducted with teachers who were willing to join the discussion and provide their feedback on the training.

A coding scheme was developed (see Table 3), informed by the theoretical foundations of the project and refined according to the data collected during the observations. Two main categories were defined: (1) dialogic learning and (2) evidence-based findings. As noted above, dialogic learning and its seven principles are the main theoretical basis of the project that is presented and discussed throughout the professional development programme. Data from the observations and focus groups are coded under this category when they refer to these principles and the ways in which the conceptual framework may facilitate or hinder the process of implementing Learning Communities. Evidence-based findings are formed by any information related to research-based knowledge and evidence-based training highlighted by the participants or observed in the sessions.

	Evidence-based findings	Dialogic learning
Exclusionary dimension	1	3
Transformative dimension	2	4

Table 3. Coding scheme

All categories were divided into transformative and exclusionary dimensions, according to the premises of the communicative data analysis (Pulido, Elboj, Campdepadrós & Cabré, 2014). For the purpose of this analysis, exclusionary dimensions refer to the barriers and resistances expressed by the teachers to further development of the project; transformative dimensions are those aspects of the professional development that teachers identify as facilitators to transfer and implement the project in their classrooms and schools.

Findings

The observations and teachers’ voices analysed in this article show two main features of the ‘Raising Awareness’ professional development. First, the dialogic approach embedded in the programme is twofold: dialogic learning principles are the basis of the project, and a dialogic space of critical reflection is created that may also include families and other participants. Second, evidence-based findings from research are provided and discussed with the teachers. In this section, we offer more details about these features and some of the barriers and facilitators identified.

Dialogic Approach to Professional Development

Engaging with the work of scholars such as Freire, Vygotsky, Bruner or Habermas, the theoretical underpinnings of the Flecha’s concept of Dialogic Learning, encourages teachers to rethink the educational challenges they face in their schools and communities and to use that knowledge to enable transformation of the school. These transformative theories have been shown to support future teachers in their pedagogical decisions and in the belief that all children can learn and succeed (Ball, 2015). Similarly, through knowing about and discussing the seven principles of dialogic learning, teachers realize they can be agents of change by promoting transformative social and educational interactions. However, this process is not free of resistance.

Teachers' scepticism emerged as one of the barriers to delving into the knowledge and to envisioning the implementation of the project in their schools. Teachers in Mexico argued, 'For a long time we have been told many theories, but our results have not changed at all.' Participation in previous training that proved to have limited benefits for improving the education of disadvantaged students had influenced these teachers to become more sceptical.

Some of the theories they had been trained on have been highly questioned by the scientific community (Egan, 2005, Mello, 2012). Nevertheless, the reflective process enhanced in the training unveiled the adverse effects of those previous theories lacking empirical evidence. Those approaches were opposite to the transformative educational theories (e.g., Bruner, 1997; Vygotsky, 1978; Freire, 2000) that underpin the Learning Communities and that explain the success achieved and the benefits for educational practices across countries. In the discussion groups, one teacher noted:

I think we felt overwhelmed as we realized as a result of previous training our teaching practice has been the opposite to those theories that support transformation of inequalities and school success, most of those 'assumptions' have formed their pillars of our knowledge for long time.

In their reflection, they acknowledged that those preconceptions, which deeply affected their thoughts on their past and future school practice, were shaken. Some examples of the preconceptions common to all the countries were grouping students by achievement or implementing compensatory measures oriented towards adaptation instead of transformation.

The training allowed teachers to delve into the principles of dialogic learning. Observations conducted during the training sessions in a poor rural area of Peru described teachers' interest in discussing in depth the concept of cultural intelligence. In this indigenous Quechua community, many of the residents are illiterate. The discussion evolved around the importance of the knowledge these people have, which, although non-academic, is relevant for the children's education. Indeed, when schools capitalize on the array of cultural and intellectual resources available in local households and communities, they can improve the learning of the students in those communities (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). In this regard, researchers provided examples from other case studies of illiterate women who volunteered in primary and secondary schools, accelerating students' learning through their promotion of *interactive groups*.

This dialogic orientation was in contrast to some teachers' previous training, such as in Peru, which was mostly focused on specific programmes, with specific materials, and with a fundamentally technical perspective. This resonates with traditional models of professional development and is more focused on standardized subject knowledge. The dialogic approach embedded in the Learning Communities programme entailed much more reflection and dialogue to reach agreements among the participants and overcome teachers' resistance. One particular aspect has been to open the 'Raising Awareness' programme to families and community members who wish to join the training. This was observed in Colombia, where families and teachers together engaged in dialogue during the training. Teachers acknowledged that they needed these families to implement the project. Secondary school teachers shared fears and insecurities about the role of families in the project and specifically proposed whether the participation of non-academic families could be negative. A debate was opened in which families also participated, although parents were less active in the discussion, probably as a result of being in a context where they still perceived teachers as experts. The result of the debate was a joint decision to support and promote family participation in classrooms and learning spaces. Similarly, in Mexico, parents' involvement in the training facilitated dealing with possible barriers and resistances that would have emerged later in the project development. In that case, it contributed to dialogic literary gatherings with the support of families and the principal.

During the training session, the principal showed her interest with DLG. Immediately, she asked if it was possible to organize one during the week of the training. There was also a group of mothers who supported the principal, and together started to look for several books from the classic universal literature. They decided to use the book "Uncle Tom's Cabin".

This dialogic space shared between teachers and families resulted in teachers changing their views towards the families. This was also observed in Peru, where a dialogic literary gathering was held with the participants of the training. The person who opened the debate was a father with only basic education. With an educational level much lower than the teachers', he had perfectly understood the dynamic of the gatherings. He read a paragraph and shared his reflection on the need to cooperate and how it creates more benefits, while comparing the reality he knew with the story of the book's main character. Although he was speaking with no academic style or background, his point was totally clear and relevant to the discussion. The teachers' facial expressions changed to admiration at the profound reflections of this father, and as a result, they began to see their students' relatives differently and value their knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005), considering them as intellectual contributors. Teachers showed to have grasped two principles of the Dialogic Learning: a) the principle of 'egalitarian dialogue', which helped them to engage in an egalitarian relationship with the families and b) the principle of 'cultural intelligence' recognizing how family members and students can contribute from diverse cultural backgrounds to achieve a shared objective: to improve the education of the children of the community.

Evidence-based Findings

The 'Raising Awareness' programme provides evidence-based findings and knowledge for the teachers to transform their classroom practices for educational success and inclusion for all. It is particularly important for those teachers who serve poor, marginalized and underserved students to become generative thinkers (Ball, 2015). In our program, teachers learned about and reflected on how Successful Educational Actions work and the results achieved when they were applied in other schools and contexts.

In these training sessions, teachers in the four observed cases asked questions about how to implement SEAs such as *interactive groups* or *dialogic literary gatherings* in their own context. Much empirical evidence from diverse high poverty schools, mainly from European schools and some from the South American context, was provided and discussed with the researchers. One of the common resistances observed was teachers' concern about the feasibility of implementing the SEAs in their own circumstances. Comments such as 'this proves to work in Europe and in your country, but here it is different' usually appeared in the debate.

In Colombia, a teacher raised some concerns and reservations about the effectiveness of the project in their difficult context, affected by poverty and marginalization. Another colleague argued instead that as the Learning Communities was a communitarian project, the school would be able to involve families, community members and grassroots movements and in this way demonstrate from the beginning the possibility to gather people together under the same common objective.

Opening that dialogic space to teachers' concerns, needs and realities and the constraints of their school environments was crucial to achieve a deeper understanding of the implications of 'contextualism'. To some extent, arguing that the project would not succeed because of a context of high poverty and deprivation was accepting the situation in a deterministic way.

Providing data grounded on success stories in similar contexts inspired the teachers and encouraged them not only to understand what the principle of ‘transformation’ meant but also to envision the recreation of the SEAs in their schools. In Brazil, one of the teachers involved in the training highlighted the detailed and profound explanations the speakers provided to the group and how they connected their own concerns to previous SEAs’ implementation. As a result, teachers perceived this combination of theory, research and practice to be a key motivating factor for them to think about implementing the project themselves.

It was a very good week because we were also engaging in dialogue with researchers’ explanation, and they linked the project to different scenarios, types of schools and communities (...) and after that, we started thinking how we will implement this in Brazil; how this implementation, in these schools, will be organized.

Our data suggest that including empirical evidence from other countries in the training empowers the teachers to make a positive decision to transform the school into a Learning Community and put SEAs into practice. As critical educators, we cannot accept the statement that ‘Things are the way they are because they cannot be different’ (Freire, 2000, p.36). Consequently, the cross-national teacher professional development process that we study can contribute to a successful preparation of teachers to transform and improve their schools in underserved communities.

Evidence-based findings from other schools’ practical experience have a real impact on teachers. Testimonies from teachers working in Learning Communities in high-poverty schools that show the SEAs’ positive impact on families with low levels of literacy, indigenous or Roma background and the voices of the families and students themselves made a big impact on the teachers (García-Carrión, 2016). They observed how theory previously explained is put into practice and visualized real practice through the stories of ‘equal peers’. The presentation of evidence-based findings by a teacher from another school who has already experienced the benefits of the intervention is much more welcome in the audience. As one researcher reported,

They have been impressed by the visit, especially by the Dialogic Gatherings, and also the participation of families. Teachers highlighted the pride of parents to be in their children’s class, and how the teacher explained how they take decisions and resolve conflicts, they loved it. They also highlighted how in DLG, children were following the story and understood the book very well.

The evidence-based findings teachers acquire during the training are explicitly underpinned by theory and build on existing practices and knowledge. This is not educational innovation for its own sake, in which innovation means ‘making things different’ without sound empirical evidence of improvement. In the schools as Learning Communities, the innovative approach is not the result of “trusting” or “trying” something new, but it is a decision shared by teachers, students and families based on evidence. The testimonies of teachers collected in the observations and focus groups showed high appreciation of the evidenced-based education gained, especially in the cases when they had previously received other training with no reference to empirical evidence. One of the teachers explained:

We believe it is a proposal that is very well documented, which is very well supported, which is not improvising, which is proved and evaluated and has obtained good results, (...) that shows us that we can transform the school with an effort to which all we contribute.

In addition to the scientific basis of the training, another relevant feature in the process is the opportunity for teachers’ reflection on their own practice and how to improve it in view of evidence-based findings. The new information received often led teachers to think

about the distance between ‘What am I achieving with what I am doing now in the class?’ and ‘What could I achieved by doing some SEAs?’ In the current climate of measuring improvements through the narrow lens of standardized testing, Colombian teachers particularly emphasized that they learned that it is possible to improve both attainment and social and emotional learning with this project. Their previous training was much more oriented towards increased performance, despite losing a solidarity-based school climate. With training, they gained tools for making it possible to achieve both dimensions without having to choose one or the other. Different opinions from teachers participating in the training agreed that it was one of the best trainings they had ever received and emphasized the rigour and scientific basis of the arguments provided as fundamental.

Conclusions

Schools located in disadvantaged communities face multiple challenges and work under complex situations. Research conducted in schools and communities that succeed despite the odds presents Schools as Learning Communities as a community-based model grounded in research that is contributing to overcoming inequalities (Flecha & Soler, 2013). As discussed, this model of schools has already been transferred to other countries in Latin America. As teachers’ professional development is the first step to enable the project’s implementation, we have suggested in this article some of the main features that can facilitate or hinder the process.

Although the findings reveal some particularly relevant features in the ‘Raising Awareness’ program, there remains much to learn, particularly in relation to understanding these features’ impact on the project’s implementation. Thus, the significance of this exploratory study lies in identifying key components that may enable the transfer of the project to other schools and contexts. Ultimately, this professional development provides teachers, families and their communities with research-based knowledge and tools to improve students’ learning, social and emotional development and inclusion by involving the entire community.

As shown, the ‘Raising Awareness’ professional development led the teachers to take a critical stance. They critically engaged in a training characterized by (a) using a dialogic approach to learn and discuss the theoretical basis of dialogic learning and (b) providing evidence-based findings for the teachers to make decisions regarding their pedagogical practices in collaboration with the community. These features have been found to be transversal across different schools and countries participating in the training. We acknowledge that schools differ greatly, and not all activities have the same effect in different contexts. Some features might act as ‘specific core elements’ (Guksey, 2009, p. 229) that are recreated in each context through egalitarian dialogue and interaction within the entire community. As a consequence, this is not a top-down approach, but it creates a dialogic stance that contributes to the transferability of the Learning Communities.

On the one hand, evidence-based findings lead to teachers’ reflection on their own practice and eventually to changing some of their previous assumptions on education. This approach to professional development differs from other perspectives mainly because of its technical knowledge used to implement methodologies and materials and its grounding on the idea of teachers as transformative intellectuals. With this perspective, teachers must analyse and reflect on their daily practice to improve the realities where they intervene (Giroux, 2010), and for this purpose the relevant knowledge available must be considered.

On the other hand, the dialogic approach observed shows, to some extent, a type of coherence between what was explained— dialogic learning principles — and what was done.

Building on the principle of egalitarian dialogue during the training, researchers' views or knowledge was not imposed on teachers nor were teachers' views or knowledge imposed on families or students based on their status. Instead, dialogues and decisions relied on contrasting the available scientific knowledge with the existent knowledge in each context provided by the teachers and the community. In addition, it opened the opportunity for the teachers to develop more egalitarian relationships.

The 'Raising Awareness' phase in Learning Communities is a researched-based teacher professional development explicitly underpinned by transformative theories and research, dialogic-based towards critical reflection, and community-based, accounting for the needs and realities of each school and community to ultimately improve children's learning and development. This approach is consistent with the research that has demonstrated the importance of training to access and reflect on scientific bases that may lead educational systems to succeed (Jyrhämä et al., 2008; Toom et al., 2010).

As part of an exploratory study, we must acknowledge several limitations. Because our data were based on the initial training, which is the starting point for the project's implementation, for this article we had no data on the subsequent impact of this training on students' improvement in learning and coexistence in these schools. At this point of the study, we have not been able to provide any information about changes in teachers' pedagogical practices. This is a critical issue to be examined in further research, and we are committed to continuing research enabling social impact.

Schools as Learning Communities has been recently expanded in South America, with 404 schools currently developing the project at different stages. Nonetheless, there are many more schools in poor areas still suffering from segregation, low quality teaching and social exclusion. Many are desperately looking for solutions. If there is something that has already made a difference in similar contexts, can it not work in another context? Of course, there will be many complexities along the way, but 'contextualism' can be dangerous in immobilizing us in the fight against injustice and inequality. As public scholars, we echo Freire's words and assume that 'one of the most important tasks for progressive intellectuals is to demystify postmodern discourses with respect to the inexorability of this situation. I vehemently reject such immobilization of history' (Freire, 2000, p.26).

Transnational and collaborative research is currently tackling the global challenge of providing a better quality education for high-poverty schools and their communities (Gómez, 2015-2018). Gathering more evidence of how teacher training may change teachers' assumptions and attitudes, how their resistances can be overcome, and how to enable teachers to transform despair into hope in high-poverty schools justifies our efforts.

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