

Javier Díez-Palomar and Clive Kanes (eds.)

# Family and community in and out of the classroom: Ways to improve mathematics' achievement

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## Foreword

Javier Díez-Palomar

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It is a great honour to introduce these proceedings of the conference *Family and Communities in and out of the Classroom: Ways to Improve Mathematics' Achievement*. Current research in the field of education, and more precisely in mathematics education, suggests that learning is an individual outcome that emerges from a social process in which interactions play a central role. Understanding how people learn mathematics moves our attention beyond the boundaries of the classroom: it entails more than just observation of what happens within the walls. Teachers, families, peers, mass media, technologies of communication, and all persons living and moving around the child are involved in the learning process (Aubert, 2008; Valero, 2010), since the child interacts with all of them in a range of different ways: asking questions, exchanging experiences, sharing discoveries, arguing, using arguments to justify opinions, etc.

This conference expected to collect some meaningful contributions concerning the current state of the art, drawing on research evidence. Professor Castelli has a wide experience in the field of parent involvement and his keynote offers a frame for further discussion in this topic. Professor FitzSimons, with a large and international trajectory in mathematics education, introduces adult learners as learning subjects, and she makes some critical and interesting contributions about how adults learn mathematics everywhere. Professor Valero brings mathematics to the conference and introduces a workshop promoting participants to experience how the classroom may become a source of possibilities for mathematics teaching and learning, drawing on a socio-political perspective.

Contributions presented in this conference are a step forward in the research line which began with the project FAMA *Family Math for Adult Learners*, funded by the EU Commission (Grundtvig programme). FAMA has promoted the creation of a

European network focused on family and community involvement in mathematics teaching and learning.

Mathematics is not a popular topic within everyday discourse. Many envision it as a difficult subject. However, within current society there is a demand for people to be highly skilled. We all need to deal with the management of the data and information emerging from the application of ICT in our lives. New ways to think, work and organize data emerge in this picture. Mathematics can thus become a key tool for social inclusion. Families are aware of the importance of mathematics, not just because the curriculum, but also because the tracks towards inclusive careers (very often mathematics is seen as a *gatekeeper*). However, very often also families feel unable to overcome their own difficulties to help their children better learn and perform in mathematics. In this conference, we present some successful actions based on scientific evidence to encourage further practices to improve the mathematical achievements of all those children with greater difficulties in learning mathematics. This conference seeks to become a “first” step to transform children’s difficulties into possibilities.

Without further ado, I just want to give the floor to the participants in this conference, and their contributions.

# Chapter 1

## Insights from the community engagement in the field of mathematics education. A picture of hope

Javier Díez-Palomar

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain

In 2008 Aubert and her colleagues published a very inspiring book on *Dialogic Learning* stating that learning is not just a result of teachers-students-contents interaction (Aubert, Flecha, Garcia, Flecha, & Racionero, 2008). Not anymore. At least, not within the framework of our current society, in which children are exposed to many different sources of information, learning thus in a variety of different type of places and contexts. The relationship between learning, interactions, community, peers, teachers, and other significant educational agents is not new. Vygotsky (1978) in the early years of the twentieth century showed that children learn from interactions with a wide range of individuals. At that time he was able to problematize the assumption that learning is an individual process, hence educators and researchers need to pay attention to psychological variables to understand how it works. In Mathematics Education, during the sixties and the seventies, there was a huge wave of cognitivism trying to elucidate how the learning of mathematics works. The CGI program is very well known in our community (Carpenter, Fennema, Peterson, Chiang, & Franke, 1989; Carpenter, Fennema, Franke, Levi, & Empson, 2000; Secada, Fennema, & Adajian, 1995). However, this is not true anymore.

In this chapter, I draw on a large tradition of research looking on the impact of families and community members on the learning process (focusing on the Mathematics realm). A number of studies show evidence suggesting the importance of the community for children learning Mathematics. Also, this scientific literature highlights the prompts and the difficulties that parents, older siblings, and other relatives, must afford to be able to get engaged in the teaching of Mathematics. I will start this review putting on the floor two successful examples, to illustrate the importance of the community to transform and create real opportunities for learning Mathematics

(and other subjects as well). Then, I will frame my discussion looking back to the scientific background in this field, to provide the reader with some insights to better judge and understand the main argument in this chapter. Finally, I will return to the three examples, to let them talk on my behalf, since they are the real voices that must be listened to.

## Opening learning opportunities for everybody

Hope. This is a crucial and really meaningful word. Sometimes, looking at the discussions in the academia, arguments are split all over the place. Critical thinkers used to base the roots of their thinking in a pessimistic view of the world. In the field of education, we have notorious examples of this position. Well established authors such as Bourdieu (1970, 1990), Bernstein (1971), Bowles and Gintis (1976), Baudelot and Establet (1972), Anyon (1980), etc., have created a dramatic image of education and schools, as “reproductive” organizations of the capitalistic social structure. Looking at their articles and books, it would appear that school is only useful to reproduce the inequalities in our societies. If this is true, why are we teaching? There is no reason to do that, unless you are on the capitalism side. However, when you try to go deeper, and try to understand in a serious and scientific way how education works, you realize that actually the people holding the better qualified jobs, the people with the better opportunities in our societies, are the ones with more education (especially in terms of scientific and mathematic background). There are schools where the model drawn by Anyon (1980) can be identified, of course. Many schools located in very poor low-income neighbourhoods use traditional curricula, emphasizing memorization, mechanic ways to solve problems, practices to control students’ behaviour. Many teachers in these schools feel discouraged, and their expectations are really low. However, there are also successful schools all over the world, in very poor areas, and in spite of the difficulties, teachers and students are doing a very good job. How do these schools work, ? What is the difference?

Freire wrote about what he called *Pedagogy of Hope* (2004/1992). According to him, education (and social transformation) is not possible without hope. We need to believe in ourselves, to be sure that we can learn, that we are able to learn, to actually be able to do it so far. I met many adult learners that were afraid of learning, only because they never had the opportunity to go to school; later, when they became adults, they just thought they were not able to learn anything, because in order to learn, you need to be young: the older you are, the less you learn. This is not true and we have many examples of that. This is not true either for children. Freire wrote: “... hope needs practice in order to become historical concreteness... without the struggle, hope... dissipates, loses its bearings, and turns into hopelessness.” (Freire, 2004/1992, p. 2-3)



When looking at successful schools located in marginalized environments, hope is something that came through them. There are a number of different reasons to explain why they work. However, community engagement is one of the biggest and more prominent ones.

*Learning Communities* is a particular example of this picture. There is much evidence on this worldwide project accepted by the scientific community of researchers and educators (Díez-Palomar, & Flecha, 2010; Díez-Palomar, Gatt, & Racionero, 2011; Gatt, Ojala, & Soler, 2011; Gómez, 2002; Gómez, Mello, Santa Cruz, & Sordé, 2010). *Learning Communities* buries its roots in a large and established tradition of popular education. In the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, in some areas of Northern Spain, people used to live in small towns, and, after a whole day working in the landowner's fields, the citizens used to meet in the main square of the town to learn the alphabet and learn together (Flecha, López and Saco, 1994). Spain lived through many struggles, but this sense of popular education never disappeared. In the later seventies of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, a group of people in Barcelona started what is the first Learning Community in Spain. It was located in La Verneda – Sant Martí district, one of the more popular and low-income neighbourhoods in Barcelona at that time. The residents were striving for social services and equipment in their area, and, among other things, they requested from the authorities the creation of a school for adults, since the majority of them were illiterate or low qualified due to the lack of learning opportunities in Spain during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. There were 'lessons in the street', activist teachers teaching mathematics, reading, and writing in the middle of the street, in front of an old building that used to be the headquarters of the *Sección Femenina*, the women's section of Franco's dictatorship. This was in 1978. The residents finally occupied the building and eventually they were given it, and opened it to the community. They created a day-care for children, a public library, a place for elders, and an adult school as well. All free and open to the community. They dreamed it, and they got it thanks to the solidarity and the engagement of the whole neighbourhood. This was the very first *Learning Community*, although the people who created that school did not know it at that time. In fact, they began to organize meetings to read the main classics on Sociology, Education, Psychology, Philosophy, Economy, etc, to come with the roots of a serious approach to education led by persons such as Flecha (2000) or Gómez (2006), for example (Giner, 2010). They confronted the main theories in the social and educational fields with the empirical knowledge through *egalitarian dialogue* with adult learners participating in the school. Learning Communities started to generate a set of knowledge, putting together the voices of persons without school degrees with the main and the most quoted authorities in our disciplines. Many of them such as Freire, Habermas, Beck, Searle, Butler, Touraine, etc., were invited to have discussions on their research works. In mid-90s, three schools in Euskadi turned into Learning Communities. Drawing on all this background and the knowledge gained from the study of international successful practices

led to the extension of the Learning Communities into elementary schools. Since that time, the number of schools deciding to move towards this model is incessantly increasing, due to the positive impact of students' scores (Racionero, 2011). One of the main insights of the process of transformation towards a Learning Community is the involvement of the community (specially families and other close-activist individuals).

*Little Village Lawndale High School* opened its doors in the fall of 2005. It was the result of the community struggle for a new high school in a very low-income poor area in Chicago. For a number of years, the Latino community living in *La Villita* (Little Village) was requesting 30 million dollars set aside to build a new high school for their children. The authorities never came back to the district to build that equipment; hence, the money was in fact stolen. The funds were never used to create the school in this educationally underserved neighbourhood. In 2001, fourteen members of the Latino community living in this area conducted a 19-day hunger strike. Many people joined in the protest, even the strike. After these events, some people in the municipality lost their position and the community obtained the school. Latino families met with an architect and visited with him the more successful high schools in Chicago area. They were designing together to have the best high school ever, and eventually, they did. *Lawndale High School* comprises four independent small schools: *Multicultural Arts High School*, *Infinity Math, Science and Technology High School*, *World Language High School*, and *Social Justice High School*. The presence of the community is even on the architecture of the building: many different details remind students, families, teachers, and visitors of the social origins of this school. The community dreamed a better education for their children, and now everybody can read everywhere positive messages such as: "hope", "excellence", "respect", "*lucha*". Students are really focusing on their studies. The mission of the school is to "ensure that all students become critical thinkers through a curriculum that is rigorous, innovative, and implemented through meaningful school relationships", with the main aim of "increasing student learning and achievement" (SOJO, 2011). Values such as truth, transparency, struggle, sacrifice, ownership, agency, collective and community power are essential components of the school identity. The students' expectations are high: active participation in their own education inside and outside the classroom, personal responsibility, hard work to complete their school work and assignments, firm commitment to try to perform at the highest academic level possible, daily school attendance and on time, to represent the school responsibly and professionally at all times, etc. (SOJO, 2011). All freshmen have a starting session facilitated by some of the hunger strikers so nobody forgets that the school came from a community dream. Furthermore, the members of the community have created an educative project to empower and legitimate adults' knowledge, attaching importance to their own personal histories, through a group called *Writing Group* that meets to share readings and help them build new knowledge (and personal pride) in a deeply meaningful way.

These two cases point out the importance communities have in terms of educational success. After some years working in the field, I met many teachers complaining and asking why reforms, resources and their personal efforts are not enough to improve students' achievements. After all their hard work, children still fail systematically in the assessments. Some of them complain that families are not concerned about their children education, they are lazy, they do not control children' homework, assessments, etc. According to these teachers, this is what explains poor performance in some cases. However, after working for a while with families, I realized that they also are complaining on teachers' availability to listen to them and working together in order to provide a better learning framework for those children. All these struggles always stop any action for improvement. Parents and teachers blame each other while children are suffering the consequences. Next section provides a scientific literature review to help us better understand and discuss some of the prejudices around family engagement in mathematics teaching and learning.

## **Family and community engagement in mathematics through the lens of the scientific research**

There is a broad agreement on the idea that family engagement in education has a positive impact on children' performance and achievement (Fan and Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2003; Smit, Driessen, Sluiter, & Slegers, 2007). However, not all types of parent engagement have the same encouraging effect. I remember a funny cartoon showing a kid in front of a desk, looking down because of his bad grades, with his parents and the teacher looking severely at him.<sup>1</sup> The next image showed the same kid, also poor performing, but now the parents were the ones looking severely... not at the kid, but at the teacher, who was the one looking down. That was just a cartoon, but it appears to me very illustrative of some of the situations teachers complain about, nowadays. More importantly, this cartoon also points out to a social image that people have about teachers-families relationships, which have also a strong impact in terms of research.<sup>2</sup> Many authors have analysed the interactions between families and schools during the last ten years (Castelli, 2011).<sup>3</sup> Drawing on these studies, we can see families as supportive members of the education community. Parents think of education as something beneficial for them and their children (Azaola,

1. The author of this imagewas Emmanuel Chaunu. In the picture the reader may see two sides: one where a father and a mother are arguing with their kid, because of his terrible grades; another with almost the same picture, but forty years later (2009), where the parents are arguing not with the kid, but with the teacher.

2. Research is not free of ethical values. Scholars have a big responsibility towards the society (Chomsky). We need to be very aware that our research could be biased by social representations, and provoke as well particular images of the world.

3. See chapter 3 in this book.

2007). They can be cooperative, always ready to help with practical matters, respectful, friendly, creative, willing to work and contribute to the process of teaching and learning mathematics. In fact, Smit and colleagues distinguish between supportive parents, parents being more likely politicians, super-parents, and the career-maker parents.

Nevertheless, the research also reports about parents always complaining about the school, aggressive, conflictive, impatient, sometimes even theatrical in order to draw attention from the teacher (or the school). Smit and his colleagues call them “the tormentor” (Smit, et al., 2007). This is not new. Peressini (1998) wrote an interesting work analysing how parental involvement may turn into a barrier for teachers and schools. Here, she introduced a new element into the discussion, the fact that most of those parents were helpful on account of their lack of knowledge and understanding on the changes in terms of curriculum and teaching methods arisen from the reforms. This is part of a substantial discussion involving a number of different components, including lack of self-esteem (some parents seems to be just absent, because they do not see themselves as suited to make any kind of contribution, thus they may participate only under requirement); lack of memories (people, as times goes by, tend to forget their schooling); curriculum changes (as a consequence of scholars’ research and discussion on the most effective way to teach mathematics); lack of opportunities to attend school (many parents now want their children to be educated because, for personal situations during their childhood, they could not themselves go to school). Although some of these arguments may be right, it is also evident for the reader that they lead to a deficit approach to education: if parents involvement seems to pose so many troubles and concerns, it is mainly due to misunderstandings between parents and school due to a number of deficits on the parents’ side.

However, taking a more serious look at the scientific research work conducted on this topic, it is evident that family<sup>4</sup> engagement has always a positive impact both on students’ performances and on school/home relationships (Boethel, 2004; Desforges, 2003; Driessen & Smit, 2007; Epstein et al., 2002; Sreekanth, 2011). This occurs when participation is genuine and opportunities to get involved are truly democratic. With this word “democratic”, I want to indicate that family (or community) engagement becomes effective and transformative when parents, relatives, neighbours, volunteers, etc. actually have the opportunity and the room to contribute to the school practices. In Spain, any scholar has plenty of evidence of schools where “family in-

4. Although I use some times the term “parent” in order to be coherent with the original article / source I’m using at that moment, I prefer to use the terms “family” or “community” since they are more inclusive. By “family” I mean not just “mother” and “father”, but also siblings, grand-parents, and other relatives who may be involved in the learning process (including of course all range of categories coming from second marriages, partnerships, living-apart-together, and other models of living that people may adopt in our modern societies). By “community”, in addition, I extend the participation to all people involved, not just the family, but also neighbors, friends, peers, volunteers in the school, etc.

volvement” means “parents attending impossible meetings with teachers”, “useless assemblies to discuss the type of food the school may provide to the kids for their lunches”, or “possible destinations for the final fieldtrip after students graduation”. “Impossible” meetings because, most of the times, some teachers (not all of them, of course) plan the meeting during their school hours, but this usually does not fit with parents working schedules. Thus, teachers set a meeting, this is true, but nobody can attend, which, in fact, fact is like not setting any meeting nor open room for real discussion. “Useless” assemblies because core topics in terms of education, such as “curriculum”, “methods”, “contents”, “afterschool possibilities”, etc., are not usually the reasons to call families and set up a meeting with them. In fact, many teachers only call parents either because it is mandatory to have a family meeting with them once a year, or because the child is having behavioural problems, hence the teacher calls parents’ to notify them and make sure that some type of measure of discipline is carried out. Research conducted within schools placed in poor-income neighbourhoods suggest that many families, either do not care about teachers’ complaints (when it concerns unsubstantial issues such as fieldtrips, naïve information, etc.), or they just do not want to attend a meeting where somebody else is talking about how bad is his/her child.

All this changes when families really have room to contribute to the school. Opening the floor for real democratic participation is crucial to building trust between schools and families (Ho Sui Chu, 2007). The previous section of this chapter is full of examples of this. All schools presented there have a strong commitment to encourage community involvement within the school boundaries. In fact, in some cases school-neighbourhood/district boundaries are the same; it is not even clear where the school ends and where begins the neighbourhood, and vice-versa. The members of the *Learning Communities* really dream about the kind of education they want. Meetings there are crucial because people are designing the type of school they dream. Every single *voice* has room, and may contribute to the group, in fact, the actual students; everybody has in mind to get the best performance ever, because they have “high expectations” in terms of curriculum. *Little Village Lawndale High School* also shows the same image. We have seen that members of the community carried out a hunger strike to get the money from the municipality to build the building. It was also the community members who decided what type of school they wanted, and they even visited with an architect the best high schools in town to decide what they wanted for their children. The community also designed the learning plans, chose the curriculum among all the wide variety of curriculum series in the United States, with the support of university professors sensitive to this type of egalitarian participation. All these examples show what Freire called “dialogic action” (1998), used by Flecha (2000) to build his “dialogic learning” theory. The direction of the decisions (the power) is bottom up, and not the opposite.

From a mathematics education viewpoint, Epstein and Hoover-Dempsey are among the more prominent contributors to the analysis of parent involvement. Both

of them produced a classification to describe the different types of parent involvement they noticed among families when working with them. Hoover-Dempsey and her colleagues distinguished between what they called “home-based involvement” and “school-based involvement”. Starting from this model, they talked about “modeling”, “reinforcement”, and “direct instruction” to identify a range of different situations, including those where parents perform as reference (models) themselves; where parents give their children interest, attention, and rewards regarding school behaviours (reinforcement); and where parents stimulate their children asking them questions, using mathematics involving orders, commands, or requests for clear answers and explanations from their children regarding mathematical tasks (direct instruction).

Epstein (2011) lately has pointed out an interesting remark regarding parental involvement, since she recommends differentiating between what she calls “parental involvement”, and “school, family, and community partnership”. She claims that we need to pay attention to (at least) six different types of involvement, moving forward from the strictly “scholar framework” (in-school) to a broader approach involving the community. This need to open the field to look out the school boundaries is a very well established recommendation from the more serious current researches in the world. *INCLUD-ED*, the biggest research in compulsory education nowadays in Europe, identified five different approaches to family and community involvement: “informative”, “consultative”, “decisive”, “evaluative”, and “educative” (*INCLUD-ED Consortium, 2009*). According to this research work, the more democratic and participative the relationships between families and schools, the more successful will children performance be.

Hoover-Dempsey claims that parents come into learning mathematics because they want to help their children with the school assignments (Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2005). In doing so, parents go through a complex process of role identity construction as “supporters” (with all the different approaches highlighted by recent works such as *INCLUD-ED*). Their main role is to learn as much mathematics as they need to be able to get into their children’s curriculum. This is connected with what Hoover-Dempsey calls “parental self-efficacy for helping the child succeed in school”. However, when parents (and other relatives) start doing things in terms of going back to school (either to meet teachers or attend workshops or mathematics lessons themselves), most of them realize they want to learn mathematics because they just want either to remember their mathematics, or to learn new concepts (Díez-Palomar, Menéndez, Civil, 2011).

While parents come to the school, they bring their own perception of invitations for involvement from others. Hoover-Dempsey and her colleague Sandler state that parents have different perceptions regarding invitations depending if they come as general invitations (such as opening meetings, events, etc.), or as specific invitations (such as appointments with the teacher or the advisor of their child). Parents may feel

differently and go to the school in a different mood and with different expectations, which may also explain the why the families find participation easy or difficult, something that many researches point out when analysing family involvement. In addition, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler also notice the impact of life context in two different ways: first of all, in terms of parents self-perceived knowledge and skills (ability to support their children); and secondly, also in terms of what they call parents self-perceived time and energy. This matches with my experience working with families. Many of them, at some point, feel unable to help their children on account of their lack of... everything. Family and community involvement in these cases depends on a deep and large work of building individuals identities as what Civil (2001) calls “resources” (she claims that parents are not just learners, but also resources since they have very rich-mathematics backgrounds, so they can become facilitators and leaders also). Thus family and community involvement means also legitimating practices to bring value to individuals' funds-of-knowledge.

Here, an issue also arises in terms of social and economic context, since people from low-income neighbourhoods face more troubles in these terms than people from other areas. In fact, families from low-income districts are usually more conformist with teachers' decisions, in contrast with families from better areas, which are usually more demanding concerning their children education. While the former usually believe that teachers know better “what is better for my child”, the latter have a clear idea of what they want from the school, and they view teachers as public servants who must report on their own work (in the sense of accountability). Some authors, such as Bourdieu (1970), explained this behavior on account of the differences in terms of “cultural capital”. Only individuals with a strong cultural capital are able to face school and teachers to demand particular school requirements regarding curriculum, for example. However, drawing from researches such as INCLUD-ED (2009) or Walberg's (1984), for example, we can state that this type of relationship does not depend on the social class, nor on the cultural capital, but on the sense of “community involvement” in that neighbourhood. All the cases discussed in the previous section are good examples of poor communities that came with really high quality schools, drawing on a strong activism and participation. The crucial fact then is how much room do families and other members of the community have in order to be able to make their demands.

## Concluding remarks

I remember that day coming in a K-classroom in a *Learning Community*. There were over twenty little “gentlemen” and “ladies”, three years-old, who turned their heads back to me, to see “the stranger” walking into their classroom. Suddenly, one of them, a little blond girl, pointed out with her finger to me, and said: “He is the Math teach-