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E-STEP – Supporting Parents’ Participation in Schools: Case Study of Model Experimental Junior High School of Patras

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Abstract

Teachers’ and school directors’ ability to cooperate with parents is one of the priorities EU Member States for the achievement of high level of teaching and education. The parental engagement is meant to be one of 16 qualitative indicators of school education and the schools are considered as “learning communities” where students, parents and teachers have a common vision for the school issues. Teachers, as key-agents, need to develop positive attitudes and particular skills in order to invite, motivate, support parents and collaborate with them and to deal with the barriers. The project E-STEP is a transnational cooperative European project funded by the Comenius program (Lifelong Learning Program) and intends to help teachers and school managers acquire and reinforce such attitudes, skills, knowledge and qualifications that will enable to effectively engage parents in schools and interact with them through social networking technologies. E-STEP achieved this through developing, implementing and evaluating a training scheme for teachers aimed to improve such skills. The project and its results are presented in this paper, as well the implementation of the project products in the Model Experimental Junior High School of Patras as case study.

Keywords: parental engagement, education, ODS, E-STEP, schools

Introduction

Parental role in the learning process is very important and constitutes primary field of study and research in education. Parental engagement in school is acknowledged as one of the most important factors for increasing student learning and success (Epstein & Jansorn, 2004). Despite the varying perceptions, types and degrees of parental involvement, there is consensus that it is associated with a range of positive indicators, including attainment (from early childhood until adolescence and even adulthood), school dropout reduction and fewer behaviour problems (Stevenson & Baker, 1987). Teachers, as key-agents, need to develop positive attitudes and particular skills in order to invite, motivate, support parents and collaborate with them and to deal with the barriers.

Over the last years, several actions have been realized in schools for the support and the enhancement of parental engagement. However, in few cases the parental engagement has been achieved through the use of social networking tools, which are today’s main means of communication, due to the widespread use of internet.

The E-STEP project (Reference Number: 539498-LLP-1-2013-1-GR-COMENIUS-CMP) intends to help teachers and school managers acquire and reinforce such attitudes, skills, knowledge and qualifications that will enable them to effectively engage parents in schooling and interact with them through social networking technologies. In the present paper the issue of parental engagement is presented as well as indicative good practices from Greek schools. Moreover, the main results of the project, the E-STEP Training Framework is presented and accompanied by its implementation in participating school as well as its evaluation. The E-STEP Training Framework has been already applied in 125 schools in 5 different European countries (Austria, Bulgaria, Greece, UK, Ireland. At the end of the paper a case study from Model Junior High School of Patras is demonstrated.

Parental engagement - Good practices

The definition of parental engagement involves activities that are realized in the school, and the parents participate in them with various ways or they engage in undertaken activities at home, which are connected with the school and the learning process (Nova-Kaltsouni, 2004). Schools which are successful in parental engagement, have a wide definition of the term 'parental engagement': This term includes the parent's avocation with child at home, interest for the child's performance/ progress and often parent-school interaction. Teachers in such schools dedicate time to inform the parents for parents' rights and obligations in correlation with their children's education (Goodhall & Vorhaus, 2011).

The issue of parental engagement in Greece has only recently gained theoretical and empirical interest since the educational policy had not given much attention to parents' active participation in the school setting. The educational legislation of 2006 concerning mandatory attendance of five-year-old children in the Kindergarten (Educational Act 3518/21-12-2006) and guidelines in the new Kindergarten curriculum released by the Pedagogical Institute in 2011 emphasize parental participation in schooling and close parent-teacher communication and collaboration. These developments in the new Kindergarten curriculum are considered as the most innovative in the Greek educational reality in terms of family-school interaction (Petroyiannis, 2014). However this reform affects Pre-Primary schools only. The official instructions given to Primary and Secondary Schools are limited to issues of communication between teachers and parents regarding pupil's progress records and discipline issues.

During the E-STEP project a collection of good practices of parental engagement with the use of social networking technologies was realized. The review of existing practices and literature yielded 21 cases: 1 in Austria, 3 in Bulgaria, 6 in Greece, 3 in Cyprus, 2 in Ireland and 6 in the UK.

A big range of practices was identified across countries in terms of coordinating institutions and particular objectives, duration, types and level of schools, initiators, target groups (numbers and particular profiles of participating schools, teachers, parents, pupils and other persons involved). In Greece 3 cases initiated by Primary or Secondary Schools, 1 case was found in a school in the frame of a European project and 1 case in the Scientific network for Adult Education. The 6 cases in Greece and the 3 in Cyprus were about:

- A relatively large-scale project in which parents participated in action community environmental education activities
- A project in which 4 schools organized collaborative Greek language lessons to migrant parents
- A comparative study of two Cypriot school communities, in which collaborative action groups of parents, teachers and pupils were established
- A cultural education programme for parents and pupils that took place in informal learning settings.
- A report from a Greek school that participated in ARION project on preventing violence by improving schools' and parents' relationships.
- Three reports from schools that are taking own initiatives to collaborate with parents.
- An intervention that invited parents and teachers to a common interactive workshop, in order to build bridges of communication.

The mentioned activities in Greece as well as in the rest countries are presented in the detailed document "Review and identification of state-of-art good cases and scenarios of teachers' and parents' collaboration" in the following link http://hermes.westgate.gr/estep/wp-includes/document/Dl.1_Report%20on%20European%20State%20of%20Art%20and%20Use%20cases.pdf

Teachers' Training Framework

E-STEP Training Framework

The Teachers' Training Framework is derived from the principles about meanings, contexts, values and forms of parental engagement that have emerged from the work of E-STEP project. The E-STEP Training Framework enables trainees to:

- explore key issues and debates in parental engagement;
- engage with the wider school community to better understand parental engagement and the existing and potential roles of social media in their own context;
- create new meanings, identities and roles in relation to parental engagement;
- experiment with social media as a tool to support effective parental engagement;
- collaborate with parents, teachers and the wider school community;
- drive innovation and implement change.

The framework design is underpinned by an enquiry-based approach, participatory action research (PAR), that encourages inclusive, collaborative and co-constructionist approaches to institutional growth and development. PAR is process orientated and starts with reflexive engagement with the everyday experiences of participants in the school/college community enabling trainees to develop, in collaboration with others, grounded descriptions of how parental engagement 'currently works' in their particular context. This then allows the community to 'work towards change', the next stage of the PAR process, that is distinctive, highly differentiated and tailored very particularly to the needs and aspirations of the institution and the community it serves.

Throughout their learning participants will explore social networking technologies in two ways; as a context for stimulating and sharing their own thinking, learning and collaboration; and as potential tools to support and facilitate new ways of working and interacting with parents. As such they will be immersed in an experiential learning programme through which they will learn about the potential of social media through 'real-life' engagement and participation in a learning context.

The Training Framework comprises three modules that, taken together, train participants to work competently and confidently with the PAR learning cycle, each module representing a stage in the classic PAR process: documenting and contextualising the current situation; working towards change; and understanding impact, affect and influence. **Module one**, 'Understanding Parental Engagement in Context', will introduce action research methodologies, modes and strategies and open up exploration of key concepts and definitions. **Module two**, 'Working towards change: planning and implementing context specific parental engagement', will facilitate a series of interventions derived directly from the close examination of the school/college context undertaken in module one. **Module three**, 'Parental Engagement in practice: understanding outcomes, impact and influence', will explore a range of strategies for documenting, describing and evaluating the outcomes of parental engagement in practice. The full Training Framework is available here: <http://hermes.westgate.gr/estep/wp-include/document/D2.1%20Training%20Framework%20Design.pdf>

The ESTEP Training Framework has been designed for use by any member of the school's professional community including school leaders, teachers and ICT coordinators. The generative nature of the framework means that the framework user, and their local, strategic priorities, is always the starting point for ESTEP actions. As such the framework is useful to a wide range of users and can be flexed to achieve a broad spectrum of purposes from micro-interventions at the level of a single class teacher working with their own class and a discrete group of parents to a whole school focus led by the senior leadership team or across school ICT co-ordinator. Apparently, the teachers should take into account that during the implementation of activities with parents the parental involvement has to be under control and parents must not intervene in the teaching process and the teacher's role shouldn't be underestimated.

Evaluation

The Training Framework was pilot implemented during the E-STEP project in two phases. Firstly, the partners organized training workshops with teachers as trainees. In the phase A 22 schools from Austria, Bulgaria, Greece, UK and Ireland participated in the undertaken training workshops. The participating teachers designed an action plan for their schools involving parents with the use of social networking tools (i.e. ODS platform, Facebook, Twitter, forum, etc.). According the evaluation of the phase A, a new updated Trainees' Guide was produced and the next phase of implementation was realized. During the phase B of implementation 113 schools participated from the mentioned countries.

In this sub-chapter the results of the evaluation from the Phase A of the implementation are presented. On of the most used evaluation

methods for educational programs is responsive evaluation (Stake, 1973) since the responsive model is more:

- suitable for a two-step evaluation, providing feedback for training program modifications.
- feasible based on the specific time limits and resources available within the E-STEP project.

The evaluation followed a 3 steps approach:

1 Before the organization of the seminars

- Trainees' guide usefulness and easiness to comprehend
- New knowledge acquired

2 Right after the closure of a seminar

- Evaluation on logical interconnection between sections
- Program Duration Feasibility
- Content quality and quantity
- Educational techniques used in the seminar
- New knowledge acquired

3 15 days after the seminars

- Evaluation of the skills acquired after the training workshop

The tools for the evaluation were online questionnaires with multiple choice questions and some "open"- free text questions. The analysis of the answers was done by collecting the questions in suitable tables and for the questions where a negative assessment has done, a deeper analysis followed based on qualitative responses. According to this methodology the main results were the following:

A. In relation with the supportive material

- The extra material was not used by the most participants. This happened because they had not enough time to study it before the seminars. Moreover, the participants believed that the material was not proper for their preparation for the seminar so they didn't study it. For this reason for the phase B of the implementation a) the material was sent several days before the workshop, and b) there was need to add an extra chapter focusing in the active techniques that the Training Framework includes and how the trainees are involved.
- Despite the fact that active and participatory educational techniques were used, the trainees (teachers) didn't feel confident enough to follow the proposed approach. For this reason they asked extra material with good practices as examples from other schools to be available online.

B. In relation with the Training Framework

- In the second module 'Working towards change: planning and implementing context specific parental engagement', the participants commented that a more practical method is needed, mostly through their increased participation in the collection of proposals for the encouragement of the parental engagement.
- The third module 'Parental Engagement in practice: understanding outcomes, impact and influence' was difficult for the trainees and some suggestions for enhancement were proposed as follows:
 - o Presentation of specific action plans
 - o Incorporation of the impact of more examples
 - o Provision of examples and case studies

C. General opinion about the meaning of the acquired skills

- A significant number of participants didn't accept the parental engagement as crucial issue for the school life. This was expressed through their responses in the questionnaires by upholding that they will be not able to apply these techniques. This attitude led in the production of an extra educational and supportive material including all the good practices from various European schools as well as the participating teachers' opinions.

The updated Training Framework included all the above mentioned recommendations and seminars for 113 schools were organized. The evaluation of the phase B is ongoing and it will lead to the final Training Framework as the main deliverable of the E-STEP project.

Case study

If the school is to be considered as a manager of knowledge, this could not possibly function other than as an organization where the number of people involved are dedicated to caring, maintaining, dissipating and transforming information. The Model Experimental Junior High of Patras has been trying within the margins that its institutional framework allows, to implement a knowledge management program which objectives are to achieve specific learning outcomes such as knowledge sharing, improved performance, competitive advantage and high levels of learning and functional innovation in a public school. So -through the investigation and application of prior knowledge- an attempt has been made to create new knowledge for students and teachers alike, always bearing in mind that in any educational application, learning as a product of learning rather than the teaching process itself is the desired outcome (Lionarakis, 2006. This new knowledge could be the result of learning about theories, opinions, events or how to behave under given conditions or it could be a way of thinking or action (Kalantzis & Cope, 2013. Knowledge management is realized through the organization and reshaping of the curriculum using technology-driven opportunities, especially through the teacher's learning process and professional development. The creative use of new technologies in Model Experimental Junior High of Patras in conjunction with the release of productive, critical and creative forces of teachers and students could -under certain conditions- contribute to the tipping or improving of those traditional training features that have converted students into passive receivers of information and teachers to carriers of knowledge enveloped in the uniform of authority (A Raptis, Rapti & A., 2002. The latter may cause the beginning of a new period in the school reality, in order to create "thinking" schools with active subjects, and social and political education, which will create hope for the formation of post-social and political affairs free from fear of witches objecting to anything new, authentic or different.

As part of Model Experimental Schools' participation in the research project E-STEP, has taken seriously, the fact that the school development in a different way -which is off hook significantly from the stereotypes of past years it has been considered necessary for teachers, students and parents alike to understand the action plan.

Having assumed successful parents' briefings at the beginning of the last two school years, a group of teachers agreed to participate in the program. The Model Experimental Junior High of Patras participated in the international meeting of the project and teacher

representatives expressed their views on the need for a more organized and systematic communication with parents. Stages then followed the implementation of the program as it was designed by the project team (meetings for information, training workshops, partnerships with other schools, informing parents etc.). The school participated in the training workshop organized by the lead partner of the project in CTI "Diophantus", through which the participating teachers became more aware of the necessity of parental involvement in schools, they identified specific points on which parental involvement would help and they reported the obstacles they could possibly face. The participation in the seminar as well as the study of the Training Plan provided them with the skills to design an action plan for the parents' participation in which communication would be made through a social networking tool. The school already had an account in Open Discovery Space (ODS) and so the next step was to create a community of teachers who posted material related not only to courses but also to other general information about school events. The school formed a suitable questionnaire (http://portal.opendiscoveryspace.eu/sites/default/files/e-step_erotimatologio.pdf) that was distributed to parents and it concerned the identification of requirements and their views on how they can develop a digital teacher-parent communication. The results of the questionnaire showed the need for parents to develop a more immediate, frequent and fast communication with the school through a platform. Parents additionally to inquiring updates on progress, absences, student problems, activities or school events, also requested access to educational materials, curricula, innovations applied to the school, modern education applications and teaching approaches. The latter indicates the need to participate in their children learning process. It is noted here that the Internal School Regulation has already been prepared and posted on the school website which provides all the necessary information and operating conditions of the school community. Also parents can on each first working day of the month as well as two days a week, using a specific program, to collaborate in person with teachers. However, through parents answers the need for forming a space on the platform became prevalent, that will provide counseling to parents on matters relating to the upbringing and education of their children. There they could talk with a counselor or a school specialist about their children behavioral or communication problems. The E-STEP community created in ODS, largely met many of the requests set by parents and so an attempt was made to establish digital communication between parents and school. Unfortunately, the school's heavy workload as well as resistance from teachers has demanded space and time. To this moment the procedures that will allow the full development of such a communication have not been fully completed. It is worth noting that the school's Association of Parents and Guardians has supported this effort and there were times that they were asking for additional information on the program. Alongside teachers and other partner schools showed genuine interest to implementing similar innovations in their school. However, the community will remain a vibrant community for the next school year as is expected that as a result of the familiarity of using the platform the average effective digital communication between parents-teachers-school will have strengthened parental involvement.

Concluding this report in the case of Model Experimental Junior High school, we have noted that the institutional changes that have occurred in the operation of MEAs and the enlargement of frames of action of a school have created the certainty of a positive climate of cooperation and participation in educational affairs. A climate that

is already inherent in public school units, but their development has increasingly been hampered by bureaucratic mechanisms and regulatory frameworks. Simultaneously, the presence of state mechanisms in education which function that transform the teacher into a dispatcher civil servant is now forced to change format. The latter has not been easy or painless, as it requires a change in the way of looking at the concept of "participation", which can eventually be dangerous for the system. The possibility of a training module to leverage its experience and develop innovative culture is a challenge in a society that is constantly changing and with it we are changing too. Meanwhile, the implementation of an action plan based on respect for the teacher and aiming at professional development as well as the parallel creation of communication mechanisms, the cooperation with students, parents and the wider social and educational context, can lead in the near future to the transformation towards a thinking school. A school that can learn of its shortcomings and mistakes, new ideas coming and that its vision remains to be collective creation and pursuit.

Conclusion

The E-STEP project emphasized on the teachers' and parents' needs in order to develop a Training Framework based on these needs and then to apply this Training Framework in real conditions with teachers and parents. During the project 135 schools were trained on E-STEP principles and it is obvious that the parental engagement should be adapted in each school according the existing conditions. The advantages of the parental engagement verified both from teachers and parents and the proposed Training Framework covered the teachers' needs a lot. However, from the parents' side in some cases there was not will to cooperate with the teachers especially through the social networking tools. The most frequent reason was the problem of digital illiteracy which is met in people in rural and remoted areas. Undoubtedly, the E-STEP project triggered the expansion of the Training Framework in order to face phenomena of bullying since the active participation of the parents in schooling and the frequent communication between teachers and parents (which can be achieved with the use of social networking technologies) are significant factors for the prevention of bullying.

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