

1-1-2004

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Recommended Citation

Folch, Xavier (2004) "Romani Families Transforming the School," *Networks: An Online Journal for Teacher Research*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2470-6353.1160>

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Romani Families Transforming the School

by Xavier Folch and the Parents' Association

Xavier Folch is a Social Educator at the Primary School Salvador Vinyals i Galí in Terrassa; this article was written in collaboration with the Parents' Association of this school.

When we explain to people that we are lucky enough to work in neighborhoods with schools where a large number of families are Romany, at first they do not understand why we say this. When we tell people everything that we do, they do not believe it is possible. Because of the stigmatization of Roma there are labels associated to them, which lead to presumptions that those who relate to or work with Roma, rather than being lucky are unfortunate. It surprises people, however, that all those who work with Roma in a respectful way, avoiding stereotypes and clichés, learn to value all the positive aspects of the Romani culture.

CEIP Salvador Vinyals de Terrassa (Barcelona), is a school where the majority of children come from Romani families. There was a general feeling of disillusionment, as the teachers and families did not relate to each other. There was no participation and families did not have confidence in the school. The learning level was very low. Absenteeism was a common occurrence for many students, the school was under-used (enrollment, school cafeteria, after school activities, etc.) facing the imminent threat of closure of the only school in the Vilardell i Torressana neighborhood. But for the last two school years, the teachers, and families that take our children, the boys and girls of the school, and those of us working from outside the school, in other words the community and the school, have been experiencing a process of transformation. It would be difficult for us to say exactly when everything started to change with such intensity, nor could we identify only one possible cause which set it off. The merging of many efforts, large and small, has made it possible for this egalitarian dream to become real.

Teachers' and non-Romani families' lack of trust towards Romani families is disappearing. That is to say, the kind of mistrust that made them think that Roma could never value a school or support the teachers, participate in activities organized by the school and in short, be involved with the other families, and, basically, that they did not care about what their children did in school. Also, the mistrust is disappearing that Romani mothers had towards the teachers, about what they might teach their children and what their children might learn without losing their identity as Roma. The idea that Romani mothers only go to school to listen, stoically, to the reprimands of teachers explaining how badly their children behave, is coming to an end. Meetings, where I work in social services, in which we go round in circles together with the managing team trying to come up with dozens of projects aimed at reducing absenteeism and school failure, the lack of books and contact between the families and the school etc. are also over with. We are beginning to walk with firm steps towards real participation between teachers, families (Romani and non Romani) and agents outside of the school. All in all, the whole educational community is immersed in a process of transformation that is based on participation between families and teachers to animate, dream and improve the school. In the meeting when

we were preparing this article with the mothers from the school, with Paqui, Encarna, Montse, Begoña, M^a Flor, Rosi, M^a Ángeles and Carmen, they mentioned that Learning Communities has been a driving force that has generated "good vibes" and a good atmosphere in the school, and that it gives us hope to believe and feel that anything is possible.

Three semesters ago the possibility of participating in the "Learning Communities" project arose. The head of the Early childhood and primary school CEIP Salvador Vinyals, the head of a school close by, CEIP Mare de Déu de Montserrat, the social worker from EAP (Pedagogic Assessment team) and myself, visited a school that was working within this project. From this moment on, was when assessors from the CREA team (Special Center of Research in Theories and Practices for Overcoming Inequalities) at the University of Barcelona, began the "sensitization phase" in which the teaching team received training with CREA, dedicating 30 hours of their personal time. Later on, they decided, by majority, to get involved in the project. After, the mothers and fathers were also invited to decide whether they wanted to get involved in the project. From this point on, the dream phase was started, where all groups imagined: students, teachers and families "the school they wanted". The process, right from the start, has generated a level of participation and collaboration that we would never have imagined.

Among many other dreams, each one of the groups dreamt the following:

Families dreamt of organizing trips, groups and coffee mornings for mothers, to run sports competitions with other schools and training for family members. Children dreamt about not staying at home, doing workshops, having a climbing wall, and a playground. Teachers also dreamt that parents went to all of the meetings with the teachers, that families valued the school, and that they ran children's games in the playground with children aged 3-6. Other dreams were: To build a secondary school that is closer by, to build a nursery school for children 0-3 years of age, to fix up playgrounds so they would be more attractive and to cover the cemetery that is visible from the school.

All these dreams were not left unresolved. They were prioritized in a meeting with the fathers, mothers and teachers; in which mixed Commissions were created (mothers and teachers) in order to accomplish these dreams. Currently four work commissions are running, (Commission for infrastructure, Commission for claims, Commission for Organization, and a Commission for school-family relations.) Each commission meets to try to realize those dreams that have been prioritized. The most striking aspect of the work commissions is that teachers and mothers speak to each other, on egalitarian and mutually respectful terms. There is no distance or lack of trust. Every mother's opinion is as important as the teachers' and the relationships that are being established are beginning to break mutual stereotypes and consequently, are transforming the school community. Now the school has more doors open than ever before, and families including Romanis, enter and feel the school is their own. They are concerned, they participate and they make proposals. Any time is a good time to generate dialogue, which can start off an activity or a shared project. Romani mothers feel their children's school is closer than ever, and the school has become an active meeting point and a place to form relationships. Whatever activity they organize, it guarantees the participation of a large number of families who had never approached the school before. These dynamics are not usual in a school that is not based on the principles of Learning Communities. The other schools in the surrounding area, although having, a priori, a

greater potential for participation maintain totally opposite dynamics, based on a concept of a closed school that is impermeable to the family members' participation.

It is important to point out that the cafeteria in our school has also experienced this transformation. Since there are Romani monitors working in the cafeteria, the number of boys and girls that eat in the cafeteria has quadrupled in two school years. Families and teachers respect the work they do, and in general the concerns about the cafeteria being a possible source of conflict have disappeared.

The mixed commissions are organizing literacy courses, outings for mothers, voice training for mothers and ex-students that sing in the Evangelical church service, gym for mothers and above all, lots of participation in the daily life of the school. This participation is manifested also in the fact that both the president of the School's Parents' Association, Paqui Ugal, as well as a large number of mothers on the committee of the Association are Romani. It is also important to highlight that the school Advisory Council, the most important decision-making body in the school, has recently incorporated Romani women in response to the multicultural reality of the school.

We have the privilege of living and participating in a shared dream. Without even realizing it, the disenchantment, complaints, distrust and apathy are changing and being replaced by hope, participation and the belief that anything is possible if "all" participate in the dream. When we see the school and we look closely at who makes up this "all", we realize that the advisory board, teachers, the directive team, the education inspector, mothers and fathers, boys and girls, City Hall, the Federation of Neighbors Association's, (FAVIBC) and above all, the enthusiasm and knowledge of those at CREA, are making a utopia possible, right now. There is still more road ahead and dreams to accomplish, but the fact that we are taking the road together, with everybody's efforts, already guarantees that transformation is happening.