Resilient teaching practices towards inclusive educational communities. Realities and opportunities in a phase of social emergency

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Abstract

This research explores the partnership between families and schools in periods of social emergency within the framework of the project: "INCLUEDUX. Resilience Strategies for the Inclusion of Vulnerable Students in Situations of Social Emergency. Practices and Opportunities for Educational Transformation". The project was funded by the Ministry of Science and Innovation in the 2020 call and is driven by six universities in Catalonia, Andalusia, and Aragon. Based on quantitative and qualitative techniques, the study analyses resilience strategies for the inclusion of vulnerable students and the opportunities for educational transformation in 25 Spanish schools selected for their best practices in attending to vulnerable school populations, especially the Roma community and students of migrant origin. The results reflect renewed school practices to sustain the relationship between actors in the educational community amid the social emergency. They also show how schools with a pre-existing quality relationship with families before to emergency situations

overcame the health crisis with greater strengthening but highlighted a concerning weakening of the community bond despite the efforts made by the teaching staff.

Key words

Relationship Between Schools and Families; At-Risk Students; Social emergency; Pandemic; Resilience.

Prácticas docentes resilientes en la relación entre profesorado y familias en contextos socioeconómicos vulnerables. Realidades y oportunidades en una fase de emergencia social

Resumen

Esta investigación explora la relación entre familias y escuelas en períodos de emergencia social en el marco del proyecto: "INCLUEDUX. Estrategias de resiliencia para la inclusión de alumnado en vulnerabilidad ante situaciones de emergencia social. Prácticas y oportunidades para la transformación educativa". El proyecto ha recibido financiación del Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación en la convocatoria 2020 y está impulsado por 6 universidades en Catalunya, Andalucía y Aragón. En base a técnicas cuantitativas y cualitativas, se analizan las estrategias de resiliencia para la inclusión del alumnado con vulnerabilidad y las oportunidades para la transformación educativa en 25 centros escolares españoles seleccionados por sus buenas prácticas en la atención al colectivo escolar vulnerable, especialmente pueblo gitano y alumnado de origen migrante. Los resultados reflejan prácticas escolares renovadas para el sostenimiento de la relación entre los actores de la comunidad educativa ante la situación de emergencia social. También muestran cómo los centros educativos con una relación de calidad con las familias preexistente a las situaciones de emergencia superaron la coyuntura de crisis con un mayor fortalecimiento, pero señalan un preocupante debilitamiento del vínculo comunitario a pesar de los esfuerzos realizados por el profesorado.

Palabras clave

Relación escuela familias; estudiantes en riesgo; emergencia social; pandemia; resiliencia.

Introduction

The importance of family involvement in schooling is undeniable, with clear positive effects on students, families, teachers, and the governance of schools (Blanch and Lemkow-Tovias, 2021; Garreta and Llevot, 2022). In this regard, the family plays a fundamental role in the formal education of their children. Positive parenting has a favourable influence on the development of cognitive and linguistic skills (Blanch and Lemkow-Tovias, 2021; Green et al., 2007; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001; Blasco, 2018; Pomerantz et al., 2007; Sénéchal, 2006; Prime et al., 2023). To achieve this, it is essential to build bridges between schools and homes by promoting various programs and different strategies (Blanch, Duran et al., 2012; Park and Holloway, 2018).

Research conducted during social and health emergencies, such as the COVID-19 lockdown, highlights the opportunities that Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) offered to bring educational institutions closer to homes, providing benefits to both contexts by

allowing shared and coordinated responsibilities (Vicente-Fernández et al., 2020; García Díaz, 2021). However, difficulties associated with the digital divide persist in some groups (Díez-Gutiérrez and Gajardo-Espinoza, 2021; Jacovkis and Tarabini, 2021). For example, Jacovkis and Tarabini (2021) show how the socioeconomic characteristics of students influenced the pedagogical monitoring strategies that schools designed and implemented during the 2020 social and health crisis. The volume of mandatory activities sent by schools to homes increased as students' socioeconomic status improved. Consequently, community strategies are needed to mitigate inequalities exacerbated by these situations of emergency and to contribute to the social sustainability of the educational and community system (Martínez-Lozano et al., 2023).

In such challenging contexts, Hortigüela-Alcalá et al. (2020) highlight that families struggled to manage virtual tasks, although they valued the communication maintained with both the school and teaching staff positively. Conversely, teachers considered the support provided by families to be appropriate. Nonetheless, families' undesired experience of homeschooling during the crisis was documented in seven European countries. In Spain, a wide range of negative experiences was reported, such as increased stress and worries, domestic conflicts, and parents' consumption of drugs and alcohol, especially when they received no support from the school for online teaching (Thorell et al., 2022). Stress experienced by parents in supporting schoolwork during lockdown was minimized in families with higher incomes (Sonnenscheina and Stites, 2021).

A case study in Catalonia revealed that less than half of students in vulnerable contexts completed school assignments (Fernández-Rodrigo, 2020). In Madrid, another study showed the positive impact of online technologies on intensifying contact between schools and minors and their families, identifying their needs, and providing emotional support. In Barcelona, evidence exists of how the use of a shared app improved communication with families in complex contexts (León-Nabal et al., 2021). However, the digital divide was again shown to deepen due to a lack of resources, connectivity, and/or skills among the most vulnerable populations (Urosa and Lázaro, 2021).

These studies, along with others, highlight how inclusive schooling remains a significant challenge, particularly regarding participation and communication with families in situations of sociocultural and economic risk (Corres-Medreano et al., 2022). Almirall-Ferran (2021) emphasizes technological advances that facilitated relationships with families of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in contexts of social emergencies. Nevertheless, it was evident that students still needed regular interaction with teachers, their explanations, class attendance, and contact with peers.

Despite the relevance of this issue and its critical role in the academic success of students, particularly in compulsory education stages, little is known about the relationship between educational institutions and families, especially in the most vulnerable contexts and during moments of difficulty. For these reasons, this article builds on the importance of the bonds between schools and vulnerable families, aiming to analyse how this relationship may have changed during and after a social emergency.

Methodology

This study, like other publications in this volume, is part of a larger research project funded by the Ministry of Science, Innovation, and Universities (PID2020-118198RB-I00). The project broadly seeks to examine the impact of the pandemic on the educational community in schools serving socially vulnerable populations. The research adopts a mixed-methods

approach, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative data collected from various participant samples over three phases: The first phase, involving a quantitative approach, was conducted between 2021 and 2022; during the second phase, carried out between 2022 and 2023, interviews were conducted; and in the third phase, conducted between 2023 and 2024, additional interviews were carried out.

Participants

The general sample of participating schools was obtained through intentional sampling to conduct the study in primary and secondary schools across all participating regions, adhering to three inclusion criteria: being schools located in socioeconomically vulnerable areas, serving vulnerable student populations (particularly Roma students and those of migrant origin), and implementing good practices in addressing the needs of these school populations.

In the first phase, a total of 328 professionals from 25 primary and secondary schools located in Barcelona, Málaga, Sevilla, Vic, and Zaragoza participated. In the second phase, 29 individuals with various leadership roles in the school teams participated, selected intentionally from the schools contacted during the previous phase. In the third phase, 13 families, considered particularly interesting cases from the schools, participated, with representation from across Spain.

It is important to note that all participants took part voluntarily, anonymously, and without receiving any compensation.

Instruments

As previously explained, the data collection approach followed a mixed-methods framework, involving different types of instruments across the three phases of the study. In the first phase, two ad hoc questionnaires were designed by experts after an in-depth literature review. The first, aimed at teachers and educational staff, was called the "Cuestionario de Aula" -Classroom Questionnaire- (Arias-Sánchez et al., 2024a). The second, created for professionals in leadership positions within school management teams, was called the "Cuestionario de Centro" -School Questionnaire- (Arias-Sánchez et al., 2024b). Both questionnaires gathered information about the main actions undertaken during the lockdown period from March to June 2020 and the subsequent academic year.

In the second phase, semi-structured interviews were designed to deepen and cross-check the information collected through the previously administered questionnaires. These interviews have not been published but are available to anyone who contacts the authors of this article.

Finally, in the third phase, additional ad hoc interviews were designed and supervised by experts with significant experience in the field and in psychological and educational evaluation. These are also available to any researcher who contacts the corresponding author.

Procedure

To conduct the research, ethical mechanisms were established following the regulations of the ethics committee at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. This included, as previously mentioned, the voluntary participation of all individuals and the signing of a consent

document by all participants involved in the sample: school leadership teams, teaching staff, and families.

The results presented in this article pertain to the key findings after all phases of the research. Quantitative and qualitative data were analysed separately to be coherently integrated into the results (Creswell and Clark, 2017).

The quantitative data analysis in this article involved a descriptive analysis of 14 open-ended questions and 3 closed-ended questions (using Likert scales) from the "School Questionnaire." For qualitative data, predefined categories were established based on the theoretical framework shared across different regions. Subsequently, the various interviews were analysed by teams consisting of three Ph.D. researchers from different universities, initially individually and then collaboratively to validate the results.

In a third step, all teams compared and validated the category system, incorporating emergent categories identified during individual analysis. Once the category system was validated, each interview was reanalysed as part of a double-validation procedure. Among the topics that received particular attention were school-family contact strategies, family responses, good practices, and satisfaction mentioned regarding events during the lockdown phase. Additionally, objectives, continuity elements, successful practices, and evaluations by schools regarding their relationship with families during the post-lockdown phase were also analysed.

The results will be presented in a chronological order—lockdown to post-lockdown—integrating the most relevant information obtained from the questionnaires, as well as quotes from the interviews that illustrate the most significant findings.

Results

Schools and families in vulnerable areas during the lockdown period

The first notable aspect of the analysis of school-family contact strategies employed by all educational centers during the studied period was their diversity, originality, and adaptability to an uncertain situation, evolving as circumstances changed and practices proved more effective:

> … we received materials at home by postal mail and also through a dissemination group that we had with the teachers. They created it at that moment so that we could stay connected, and every day they sent us an audio or video from the teachers explaining a little about what we had to do. Every two or three weeks, we received a package with worksheets and other materials (…), and the teachers called us weekly to check in, asking how we were, how the children were doing, and then spoke with the children too. They also connected virtually several times so the children could see their classmates and teachers, which helped a lot. (Interview, Mother 1, Primary School, Aragon, Center 9)

Regarding feedback from families, 23% of surveyed centers reported receiving gratitude through compliments or notes of thanks that emphasized the perception of not being abandoned in their vulnerable homes. Despite the difficulties of the moment, 91% of the studied educational centers reported not receiving any complaints from families in vulnerable situations:

> We received no complaints. The administration did an enormous job to involve vulnerable families and show them the importance of continuing schooling during the lockdown. (Questionnaire, Primary School, Catalonia, Center 3)

57% of the schools introduced changes to their relationship with families that were well-received, while only 9.5% identified negative changes in their interaction with homes during the lockdown:

> Most vulnerable families did not participate in their children's educational follow-up.(Questionnaire, Secondary School, Aragon, Center 8)

> Some families stopped answering calls from the school administration. (Questionnaire, Primary School, Catalonia, Center 3)

On the positive side, teachers and school administrators paradoxically noted that, at a time when disconnection and isolation seemed most likely, a climate of closeness and mutual support between schools and families was achieved, which was very gratifying:

> Connections were strengthened, relationships intensified, and mutual trust and understanding were generated. (Questionnaire, Primary School, Catalonia, Center 5)

95% of the surveyed schools identified good practices in their relationships with families during the lockdown. Additionally, 62% highlighted the critical role of the community, associations, or social services in fostering good family-school relations.

Table 1.

Summary of school assessments on the family-school relationship during the emergency

	N	%	Total, schools that answer the question
Schools that did not receive complaints from families	20	90.9	22
Schools that received compliments from families	5	22.7	22
Schools that made positive changes to foster/improve the relationship with families	12	57.1	21
Schools that rate negatively their relationship with families	2	9.5	21
Schools that carry out good practices in the relationship with families	20	95.2	21
Schools that carry out good practices in the relationship with families through the involvement of the surrounding community (associations, neighbours, other organisations)	13	61.9	21

Source: Own creation

The strong connection was also reflected through high average scores in the various satisfaction measures rated by the surveyed schools, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2.

Satisfaction of schools with the family-school relationship during confinement

	Mean	Median	Standard deviation
The school strengthened communication with families through existing and/or newly created channels	4.55	5	0.74
Support and follow-up actions were carried out for families who showed greater difficulty or disengagement	4.62	5	0.59
The school rates satisfactorily the relationship maintained with families throughout the confinement period	4.10	4	0.77

Source: Own creation, where 1 indicates totally disagree and 5 totally agree with the statement.

The satisfaction expressed by teachers and school management teams in the questionnaire results aligns with the perceptions of families. In the interviews, families emphasized the value they placed on being able to participate in the school and how motivation and trust facilitated their relationship with the institution during the most challenging stages of the emergency.

The bonds and communication established in extreme situations appeared to foster the continuity of the school system, with a more personalized approach to family interactions. In this regard, as illustrated by the following verbatim excerpt, a migrant mother shared how her relationship with the educational center in Spain emotionally supported her after the loss of a family member and during her temporary return to her country of origin:

> When I am in Morocco, and Morocco [is] very far. And call me [they call me from the school], you know, and ask me [to ask me how I am]. (…). I don't want to return to Spain or anything, you know? I want to stay with my family, but when they call me here [from the school], I feel like I have something in Spain, that I have to come back [that I have to return]. (Interview, Mother 2, Catalonia, Center 1)

Finally, it is worth highlighting those teachers who experienced social emergency situations indicated that communication with families was prioritized around three main themes: communication and information channels, school tasks for students, and guidelines and resources to support children during circumstances of alert and disruption of normalcy.

Schools and Families in Vulnerable Areas During the Post-Lockdown Period

In the studied cases, questionnaire results showed that in the academic year following the lockdown, only 10.5% of the surveyed schools explicitly identified any objectives related to the relationship with families. Similarly, in subsequent interviews, when asked whether the practices initiated during the lockdown continued into the next academic year (2020/2021), only 18% reported prioritizing practices concerning families.

Additionally, in the 2020/2021 academic year, only 12.5% of surveyed schools provided examples of good or successful practices in which families played a central role. Meanwhile, 29% of schools that implemented actions to support the most vulnerable students identified families as key agents. Highlighted practices included the continued use of new technologies, flexible approaches to family interactions, and attention to the family dimension in student relationships.

Furthermore, 57% of the schools mentioned at least one good practice or successful strategy implemented after the most acute phase of the social and health alert to strengthen

relationships with families, particularly those in more vulnerable situations. Some of the identified elements were:

> Meetings, calls, lending devices for home use, as well as connectivity tools. Delivering school supplies, books, readings, stories, and games to students' homes. (Questionnaire, Primary School, Catalonia, Center 3)

> Organizing family workshops to encourage school attendance, as some had grown accustomed to remote learning. (Questionnaire, Secondary School, Andalusia, Center 17)

> A monthly newsletter. (Questionnaire, Primary School, Catalonia, Center 20)

Teachers and school leadership teams were also surveyed regarding their perception of their efforts during the post-lockdown phase. According to the survey data, the average satisfaction level of educational centers with family-school relationships after the lockdown was 4.14 (SD = 0.99) on a 5-point Likert scale. Table 3 provides a summary of the various evaluations made by schools regarding their relationship with families following the most acute phase of the social and health crisis.

Table 3.

Summary of the schools 'evaluation of the family-school relationship in the school year following

the social-health emergency

	N	%	Total schools responding to the question
Schools that identify objectives that include the relationship with families in the 2020/21 school year	2	10.5	19
Schools that identify good continuity practices with families in the 2020/21 school year	3	17.6	17
Schools that identify good practices with families as protagonists in the 2020/21 school year	2	12.5	16
Schools that identify actions to support the most vulnerable students taking their families into account in the 2020/21 school year	5	29.4	17
Schools that identify actions dedicated to families in the 2020/21 school year	12	57.1	21

Source: Own creation

The analysed contributions also highlighted the need for interdisciplinary teams in schools, including not only teachers but also psychologists, social educators, and others, to provide effective support:

> Schools lack social workers to assist teachers, but also to help us; they should act as facilitators of meeting points between the school and vulnerable families because teachers cannot handle everything. (Interview, Primary School, Catalonia, Center 3)

Following the emergency situation, some schools adopted measures to improve the reception of the most vulnerable families by creating a safe and nurturing space within the school, as explained by one teacher:

> In fact, we are very clear about this, but we must ensure we remain clear that everyone here at the school must work on the pedagogy of care; that is our guiding

principle. We do not neglect it. (Questionnaire, School, Primary and Secondary Education, Catalonia, Center 4)

Other schools succeeded in changing their methodologies and dynamics, for example, through new support from Family Associations (AFA) where they existed. One school noted, both in the questionnaire and the interview, that it maintained the multi-level group established to address the social emergency and transformed it into a learning community. In several schools, some innovations introduced during the crisis were deemed valuable and retained, such as co-teaching, extracurricular support, and shared leisure activities.

Based on the analysed data and cross-referenced with various instruments, it was identified that in regions where the inclusion of non-academic professional educators (psychologists, social educators, or emotional educators) was facilitated within the educational teams, the strength of family-school relationships was significantly enhanced.

Discussion and Conclusions

This research analyses and provides evidence on how a social emergency situation transformed the relationship between educational centers and families from marginalized groups, such as the Roma community and the most vulnerable immigrant students. Responses from 328 questionnaires administered to educational teams and school leadership across the country, 29 interviews with leadership teams, and 13 interviews with families were analysed. It was observed that schools, particularly in socioeconomically vulnerable areas, transitioned from being primarily educational resources before the emergency to becoming the primary source of assistance for many families during the crisis. Interviews revealed that, during this phase, for some newly arrived families or those surviving through informal economies (with no income capacity during this period), schools became practically the only resource for physical and emotional survival.

In this context, surveyed schools identified key organizational changes they had to implement to adapt to the crisis. Among the new strategies, for instance, was the introduction of weekly reports sent to students and their families about the students' work to detect disengagement and intervene. Simultaneously, 24% of the schools explicitly emphasized the importance of the family environment as a context for intervention when describing their main pedagogical criteria. Some of the contributions included guided and structured activity proposals, tutorials on the school website, curriculum adaptation prioritizing content requiring minimal assistance from teachers and families, learning situations involving the whole family, or promoting educational activities based on everyday household experiences to make learning more tangible for students.

This research shows that the studied schools implemented creative strategies beyond simple phone calls to ensure that information and educational activities reached students facing connectivity issues or lacking technological devices. These included providing data purchase support for internet access, loaning portable devices and Wi-Fi cards from the schools, or seeking contact through neighbours. Among the most vulnerable groups, such as recent arrivals or the Roma community, mechanisms were established to distribute educational support materials, involve volunteers to establish contact with families, or have other families print educational materials to distribute to those in need.

The results also indicate that, during the lockdown, teachers in poor areas played a fundamental role for many families by providing not only educational support but also assistance with vital needs. Personalized and fluid communication, utilizing multiple channels, fostered greater trust between parties. This trust allowed for addressing both

educational aspects and urgent needs related to survival in a social crisis context. Establishing consistent communication proved key to building and maintaining trust, a factor highlighted in the scientific literature as crucial for sustaining relationships (Gregorio, 2020; Essomba and Tarrés, 2023).

The analysis of 25 primary and secondary schools across three autonomous communities revealed that educational teams and families in highly vulnerable situations positively valued the collaboration achieved during an extremely challenging context. However, over time, many schools admitted they had not succeeded in fully restoring pre-emergency school-family relationships. The data reflect that the management of the emergency in educational centers tended to polarize pre-existing relationships: in some cases, ties with families were significantly strengthened, while in others, they weakened almost completely.

The schools that best responded to the needs of their vulnerable students were those with a strong and pre-existing community framework, which served as a foundation for initiatives developed during the crisis. This contributed to the overall resilience of the educational system during a critical moment, such as the lockdown in Spain. This finding aligns with other studies emphasizing the importance of school-family relationships for students' educational success and strengthening the family's role as the core of an inclusive school (Martínez-Lozano, 2023; Urosa and Lázaro, 2021).

This study is not without limitations, such as the differentiation of information provided by families with children of varying ages. It is significant that families participating in the study had children at different educational levels simultaneously. For this reason, we chose not to analyse the data by stages. However, we believe that future research would benefit from segmenting the sample to provide more detailed and precise information for each educational stage, as well as a more detailed analysis of differences between regions. This requires a methodological approach incorporating the analysis of public policies and the realities of each region, which fell beyond the objectives of this study.

In conclusion, within the framework of inclusive education, it is essential to implement additional strategies to overcome linguistic and cultural barriers that hinder communication between schools, teachers, and the most vulnerable families, thereby facilitating the resilience of the school system (Lehrer et al., 2022). We believe it is crucial to continue researching the approaches that work best to foster genuinely democratic and participatory relationships in educational centers to achieve a fairer, more inclusive, and higher-quality education.

Acknowledgments

Ethics Committee

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the Ethics Committee on Animal and Human Experimentation (CEEAH) of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (reference number CEEAH6272, approval date: 12/02/2022).

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