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Turning difficulties into possibilities: engaging Roma families and students in school through dialogic learning

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Turning difficulties into possibilities: engaging Roma families and students in school through dialogic learning

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Schools and communities may have a key role in reversing the cycle of inequality that the Roma suffer in Europe. Aiming at reducing existing inequalities, dialogic learning aims to ensure high levels of academic learning for all children, by involving the whole community through egalitarian dialogue. Less well known are the implications of this approach for the Roma in highly marginalised areas. This article presents the results of a longitudinal case study in a Spanish primary school, undertaken as part of the European Union-funded INCLUD-ED Integrated Project. It reports on educational actions grounded in dialogic learning, which have succeeded in engaging families and communities in the school, the classroom and other learning spaces. Based on a dialogic school-based transformation, Roma families participated in children's learning activities and decision-making spaces. We explore how these actions involving Roma families are developed and the effect they may have in improving learning and engagement.

Keywords: Roma; dialogic learning; transformation; school engagement; family participation

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The large-scale European Union-funded research INCLUD-ED, Strategies for Inclusion and Social Cohesion in Europe from Education (European Commission, FP6, 2006–2011) has identified Successful Educational Actions (SEAs) that have improved educational outcomes for many children and young people in Europe. These actions are characterised by reorganising the available resources in the school and the community to support all pupils' academic achievement, instead of segregating some of them according to ability or by lowering down their educational opportunities. SEAs derive from a rigorous analysis of the educational systems, theories and practices, particularly, from the successful actions identified in 27 case studies across the European Union of schools serving families from low socioeconomic status where children achieve excellent results (Valls & Padrós, 2011). For instance, some SEAs studied through the INCLUD-ED Project are interactive groups, dialogic reading, after-school clubs and some family education programmes like the dialogic literary gatherings. As a result of implementing these SEAs, these

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schools have improved students' performance and enhanced social cohesion, providing all children with better learning opportunities to reduce social and educational inequalities (Flecha, García, Gómez, & Latorre, 2009). These are not isolated best practices that lead to good results in particular cases or contexts. Rather, they are actions which have resulted in school success in different countries and very different environments, as they contain universal components, transferable across contexts. These SEAs were clarified in the INCLUD-ED Final Conference, held at the European Parliament's headquarters on 6 December 2011. Researchers, including Members of Parliament, and end-users – including Roma family members – presented together the actions that have evidenced improvements in schools and communities, regardless of children's ethnic background or socioeconomic status.

In order to achieve the inclusive growth currently aimed for Europe (European Commission, 2010), it is necessary to provide schools and communities with the actions that help citizens succeed in education, and consequently gain access to the labour market and to full participation in society. This is particularly important for the most vulnerable, such as the Roma.[1] INCLUD-ED has responded to these challenges by analysing the educational actions that contribute to social cohesion, providing key elements and courses of action to improve educational and social policies. Since this is a multidimensional topic, it was addressed through six subprojects. This article focuses on the results obtained from a four-year longitudinal case study conducted under one of the INCLUD-ED sub-projects (Project 6). We studied La Paz Primary School for four years, and identified and analysed a range of SEAs implemented there, assessing their impact on improving Roma children's learning outcomes and coexistence (Flecha, 2012). Among them, family participation in decision-making processes and in children's learning activities emerged as particularly important for increasing both Roma children's engagement in school and their academic success. This paper will draw on these two concrete SEAs, how they were developed in La Paz school and their impact in reducing school disengagement of Roma children and their families.

The case study: La Paz Primary School

La Paz Primary School is located in a very deprived neighbourhood of the city of Albacete, Spain, where the Roma constitute 90% of the population. Most families have limited literacy (i.e. around 50% have some basic education and 25% are illiterate) and with a highly precarious economic situation. Since the 1980s, the neighbourhood situation declined further, along with the primary school. The situation within the school was intolerable, with high rates of early school leaving, absenteeism and conflicts in the classrooms, as well as conflicts between teachers and families (Padros, Garcia, de Mello, & Molina, 2011). Consequently, school enrolment decreased enormously, and around 300 students were lost over 10 years. By the academic year 2005–06, only 40 pupils were attending regularly.

According to the school internal evaluations, in 2006 children at the different grades had very low linguistic competence and low reading and writing skills, as compared to the average at their age. Mathematics abilities proved to be also poor across the different levels. Overall, hardly any child had an appropriate level of attainment, and conflicts among pupils and between them and teachers occurred every day. In this scenario, many Roma families removed their children from the school and no longer trusted the teachers, contrasting with the widespread myth

about the Roma that they are not interested in education and dislike schools (Bhopal, 2011; Gómez & Vargas, 2003). According to Wilson (2003), ghetto schools provide low-quality education and low expectations. These schools often water down the curriculum and provide low academic levels, little stimulating material and less quality instrumental learning, as compared to other schools (Anyon, 1995; Darling-Hammond, 1996; Oakes, 1990). Conversely, improving the educational levels in these schools has been identified to make an important contribution to getting out of the ghetto (Wilson, 2003).

Looking for a real solution to this critical situation, local authorities and school administrators, in dialogue with INCLUD-ED researchers, decided to implement the *Dialogic Inclusion Contract*. This is a dialogical procedure in which researchers, families, children, teachers, community members, and policymakers recreate through egalitarian dialogue the SEAs previously identified through research, in order to transform the educational and the social context (Aubert, 2011). Together they decided to implement in the school the SEAs oriented to academic achievement, which challenged educational stereotypes about the Roma. To make that possible, the regional government closed the school and re-opened it again with new staff, who committed to being trained on the SEAs and implementing them. The children and families of the new school decided on a new name, and St. John Primary became La Paz (which means peace).

Once the SEAs were implemented, the children's learning outcomes improved significantly, as will be reflected in the section on results. Children now attend the school every day, far more enthusiastically than before. In this article we will see how SEAs transformed the school at different levels, reducing the traditional mismatch between the Roma students' and families' demands and the school. We will focus specifically on how dialogic learning which includes interactions between teachers, learners, and also family and community members in the school, leads to educational success and social cohesion in schools.

The dialogic approach to enhance Roma children's learning based on the participation of the community

Educating Roma children is still a challenge in Europe. Data from the Roma Education Fund (2010) show that about 75% of Roma people have completed less than a primary education, and that the percentage of Roma dropouts from primary school varies across different countries, from 15 to 69%. Roma schooling is also affected by high rates of absenteeism and by particular educational practices of segregation carried out in many schools (Greenberg, 2010).

In addition, the stereotypes and folk assumptions with regard to a 'natural' Roma disaffection with school have also contributed to the educational exclusion of the Roma. These stereotypes are linked to the idea that the Roma, in order to preserve their culture, exclude themselves from mainstream education. Roma researchers such as Hancock (1988) and Rose (1983) have questioned these assumptions, arguing that they are used by the non-Roma to keep them at the margins of society. Similarly, other analyses about the Roma children in mainstream schools have concluded that school disaffection can be explained by the ethnocentric perspective of educational systems (Gómez & Vargas, 2003). Therefore, mainstream schools do not consider engaging in dialogue with Roma families, who end up perceiving the school as an institution of the non-Roma world. According to Gómez and Vargas

(2003), 'schools have been sites for assimilation, reproduction, and the perpetuation of social exclusion … when they include and value their culture and hear and recognize Romaní voices, Romà disaffection turns into passion' (p. 560).

Research has found that family involvement in schools improves children's achievement (Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, & Weiss, 2006; Epstein, 1991). By getting involved in the school, parents improve their skills related to school activities, which allows them to better help their children; in addition, increased dialogue and communication between the family and the school helps resolve both behavioural and academic issues (Hill & Taylor, 2004; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). The same is true in relation to Roma families. There are a number of studies that have explored the relationship between the Roma students and families and the non-Roma schools and teachers, and how it impacts on Roma children's engagement with education and on school performance. The Roma Education Fund (2010) highlights that engaging Roma parents in their children's education is an important way to increase students' educational opportunities, to help them do better in school and ensure their access to compulsory education. However, Bhopal (2004) identified that Roma families, despite the positive value they give to schooling, do not trust the educational institutions that have to care for their children. This constitutes an important barrier for Roma children's education. Along these lines, Derrington (2005) found that parents' prior experiences in education and held beliefs about schools had an influence on breaking down home–school relationships as well as on Roma students' disengagement with secondary school. There is, therefore, a 'cultural dissonance' (Derrington, 2007) between the families' and the schools' expectations, which is a factor impacting Roma students' retention in education. In this context, promoting dialogue with the Roma community has been identified as central to closing this gap and to transforming these situations (Bhopal, 2004). In addition, the commitment of the school staff to create inclusive schools has also been studied as an element of key importance for the inclusion of the Roma (Bhopal & Myers, 2009).

The role of dialogue in learning and development has been central in a number of learning theories and the object of an important body of research. Dialogue is the basis of cooperative situations of learning among students and between students and other community members. The dialogic learning approach includes all the many interactions with diverse people that support children's learning in the school and beyond. Some studies have highlighted the importance of enhancing such interactions. For instance, when children work in smaller groups they can develop higher levels of interaction (Galton, Hargreaves, & Pell, 2009). Teachers can create moments of dialogic inquiry in the classrooms (Wells, 1999) which involve looking for solutions through dialogue (through cooperative interactions mediated by language). Furthermore, the involvement of parents from different backgrounds in children's learning increases interaction opportunities (Rogoff, Goodman Turkanis, & Bartlett, 2001).

Dialogic learning considers learning interactions that occur among peers but also between children and significant adults, including teachers, relatives and other members of the community (García, 2012). It entails the transformation of the learners' social context through multiplying learning interactions in the different spaces in which children act (i.e. classroom, school, after school, home). It also considers the importance of dialogue based on egalitarian relationships. That means that the interactions should be based on the validity of the arguments provided or the intentions

to reach understanding and agreements, rather than power claims, or imposition (Habermas, 1984). Research shows that today's children learn more and better when learning is organised from the dialogic learning principles and includes interactions with adults other than teachers (Flecha, 2012). Roma children have been particularly affected by segregation practices, limited educational opportunities and the consequent high levels of school dropout (Greenberg, 2010). That is why the importance of engaging the Roma community in defining actions and policies has been emphasised. Greenfields and Ryder (2012) showed how research done 'with' and 'for' Roma rather than 'on' them contributed to their economic and social inclusion by including their voice. The transformation of schools into Learning Communities is an example. According to the European Commission (2010), 'Schools as Learning Communities' create favourable conditions that support students at risk of dropping out, by increasing the commitment of pupils, teachers, parents and other stakeholders in supporting school quality and development. These schools are implementing SEAs (evidence based) to create spaces for dialogic learning with the participation of all the community (Flecha et al., 2009). They are accounting for a wide range of knowledge, skills and learning levels to help reduce the disadvantaged situation of Roma students and improve the quality of their education (Tellado & Sava, 2010).

Drawing from results of the INCLUD-ED Project, this article explores how La Paz Primary School, a Learning Community, engages in a dialogic-based transformation by involving Roma families to put into practice particular SEAs in various learning spaces. We also analyse how the multiple and diverse learning interactions arising from the implementation of the SEAs have a twofold and related impact: on the one hand, these actions have contributed to Roma pupils succeeding in the school and reversing the situation of educational inequality that they had experienced; on the other hand, Roma families became regular active agents in the school, transforming it from within, making it a place of their own, and thus reducing the existing mismatch between Roma families and the school.

Methods

The empirical data presented in this work derive from the longitudinal case study conducted using communicative methodology (Puigvert, Christou, & Holford, 2012). From a communicative methodology approach, scientific knowledge is constructed through dialogue between researchers and social actors, from the premise that all human beings are capable of language and action (Habermas, 1984) and therefore they can contribute to the process of interpretation and analysis. Communicative methodology goes beyond traditional research, often based on collecting information from the Roma and the researchers being the only ones interpreting the data (Gómez, Racionero, & Sordé, 2010). Instead, the communicative methodology is, on the one hand, based on a dual perspective which accounts for both the system (experts' scientific knowledge) and the lifeworld (subject's knowledge from the common sense). On the other hand, it focuses on the analysis of the overcoming of social inequalities through critical reflection about both excluding and transformative dimensions. Using this communicative approach, the results from the INCLUD-ED Project have been approved in several European Commission recommendations and resolutions.[2]

Data collection

For the longitudinal case study, qualitative data and quantitative data were collected from 2006 to 2010 at La Paz school. Each year the qualitative study involved 13 communicative life stories with family members, one communicative focus group with professionals working in the school, five communicative observations and 13 open-ended interviews with professionals and representatives from the administration and from community organisations. Communicative life stories gathered Roma family members' reflections about their experience of increased participation in the school, as well as how they impacted their children's school engagement. Through the focus groups and interviews, school teachers and other professionals reported and reflected collectively on the school transformations based on Roma parents' participation. Finally, the observations carried out both in classrooms and in school decision-making spaces allowed the analysis of the types and content of the interactions that took place there and that characterised Roma families' participation in the school. Additionally, quantitative data were gathered each year through (1) analysis of the results of standardised national tests on children's academic performance, and (2) a questionnaire addressed to pupils about their perceptions in relation to these learning improvements. The sample each year was 36, 65, 76 and 89 primary school pupils, respectively, from different ages.

Findings: engaging families and community in the transformation of the school through a dialogical approach

The implementation of SEAs in La Paz school followed a dialogic and participatory process in which the whole school community decided how the school had to be transformed to reverse the educational exclusion they were suffering. Involving the families in the process of transforming their reality and that of their children has been key to helping them develop a sense of belonging to the school and a belief in possibility, not only on an individual but also on a collective basis. Throughout the four years of the longitudinal case study, we followed the implementation of diverse SEAs and how they influenced children's attitudes and learning outcomes. In this section we will focus on two of these SEAs. First we will characterise each of them, alongside the participants' perceptions about their impact, to later discuss the sustainability of children's learning improvements across time.

A school where Roma dare to dream: participation in decision-making

The first stage of the school transformation was the 'Dream.' During this phase, the school organised activities for teachers, families and children in which they talked about the kind of school they would like, and expressed preferences and dreams related to learning and to the school. Everybody was encouraged to participate in the Dream. After the Dream, a Mixed Committee (of teachers, family members and pupils) classified all the dreams to make them visible to all the school community. They also proposed priorities for the school emerging from those dreams that were discussed and approved in the first General Assembly of La Paz Primary School. The Mixed Committees would meet periodically and the Assembly annually. Opening up the decision-making processes in the school to the community allowed, on the one hand, the raising up of Roma voices and the undermining of the idea that

neither Roma children nor their families were interested in school education, or that they felt their culture threatened in schools. On the other hand, the involvement of the community allowed the reformation of a mainstream school through dialogue with the Roma about the SEAs, the educational goals for their children, their own potential to support this education and the presence of the Roma identity, among other issues, in order to help develop a shared educational project. Maria's[3] words show how teachers spoke to the Roma families and used language to include them in the decision-making process by asking them for their opinions and desires. Teachers' interactions encouraged families, particularly Roma mothers like Maria, to participate and engage in dreaming the school:

> 'We are going to do this, we are going to completely change the school, and you will also contribute everything you want for the school.' The head teacher told us this and it has been a great change, and now the school is too much … and I hope that it carries on like this … They also count on us: 'What do you think? If we were going to do such and such, … what would you like most to do, this or that?' and they meet with us, we do many meetings, we meet once a week.

The teaching staff ensured that spaces and opportunities existed so that Roma families participated in the school, because they were aware of the positive impact this would have on the school performance. Assemblies were created as a means of encouraging the participation of families and members of the community in La Paz school. The whole community was invited to participate in these assemblies, which were held at least once a year, and everyone's voice was taken into consideration. Jose, the Inspector, attended one of these mass assemblies where almost all families of the pupils from the school participated. He explained:

> When the first general school assembly was arranged, around 60 people attended it, that is, family members of all types, the full teaching staff and myself. No one could remember so many people getting together in school before … perhaps 80 or 90% of the families of the school were represented, as well as neighbourhood associations.

This evidence challenges unfounded perceptions that Roma families are not interested in school. In the same vein, Roma mothers like Carmen argue that when they see the value, they are eager to participate. She said:

> Everything that is good for our children and for the school, we contribute. If there is a meeting and I cannot stay for half an hour … but even if it is only for five minutes I would go there, to see what they are talking about.

The Dream opened a space for dialogue in which Roma families brought interests and concerns about their children's education to the fore. One of the dreams was related to helping students to finish compulsory education. After finishing primary education in the neighbourhood school, the pupils from La Paz had to go to secondary schools in other parts of the city. This became a real barrier for Roma adolescents. On the one hand, the neighbourhood was physically separated by a road, which they had to cross; on the other hand, their neighbourhood was strongly stigmatised by the rest of the city. For this reason, many were at risk of dropping out and not completing secondary education. Increasing the educational provision in La Paz school was an initiative suggested by the families which was implemented

by the teachers and the educational administration. Four years after the Dream, the school witnessed the first cohort of pupils graduating from secondary education.[4] In this case, attending the school they know, in their own neighbourhood, was crucial in reducing truancy and preventing early school leaving. Julio, as a Roma father and a member of a local Roma association, describes this situation:

> Since they do the whole secondary school here, because they do it here, my children attend, my children will be here, because they are in their [own] neighbourhood, they are in their [own] environment. And they will complete it and they will get their education.

Thus, through a dialogical process where the community was taken into account in the decision-making processes, not only were education difficulties identified, but also the best way to tackle them. The dialogue between the teaching staff and the members of the community allowed the start of a process of transformation of the context which implied, in Freirian terms, turning difficulties into possibilities (Freire, 1997). Ultimately, the Roma community's participation in the school's Dream, the Assemblies and the Mixed Committees through a dialogic process helped to reduce the Roma children's exclusion from the educational system. These shared spaces between families and teachers also transformed families' and children's educational expectations, and changed difficulties into new opportunities never dreamed before. Julio continued:

> My older daughter is finishing the secondary school this year, now she is working very hard and doing better every day. Now she knows she can do it, she wants to go to college, she wants to be an educator and continue working hard for the children of this neighbourhood … and I want that too.

Transforming classroom interactions: family and community involvement in children's learning

One of the SEAs that La Paz school decided to implement was Interactive Groups. This is a form of organising classroom activity into small heterogeneous groups, with several adult guides, and based on dialogic learning. Family and community members participated in these groups as volunteers, and their role was to promote and encourage supportive learning interactions between pupils. All children were committed to completing their tasks and helping the others in their group, so that at the end of the session they had all finished the task successfully. Everyone was therefore accountable for the group's performance.

Before the transformation of the school, Roma families were not even allowed to cross the main entrance of the school door. This was partly because of the assumption that Roma relatives were not equipped to contribute to the children's learning. However, the teachers, the Principal and the Inspector rapidly observed important improvements in learning processes and achievement. Families' participation in the classroom increased the children's efforts and motivation for learning. For instance Luisa, a Roma mother who volunteers in the school, explains the effect her participation had on a particular boy in terms of the child's engagement in the learning activity. She realised how important her participation was for one particular child, and in turn, this became a very important reason for her to continue participating in the school.

> There are other children whose parents don't come, and when I come they [children] immediately say, 'come and help me', and maybe the day I don't come they do nothing. When I talk to the teacher she tells me so. But the day I do come, children do everything; I mean they work harder … I come almost every day because of that child, because when I come he is happier, he feels more like working … but the day I don't come, he falls asleep in the classroom, and does nothing, so … I come mostly because of that child, so that he can make progress.

Most teachers confirmed that the pupils became more motivated when Roma relatives and neighbours from the community interacted with them in the classroom: they put more effort into their own work and in helping their classmates; they increased engagement into class dynamics and improved their learning process. Nuria, a primary education teacher interviewed, described the effects of this participation on children's motivation as follows:

> Specifically, the parents who participated in Interactive Groups … you could see that their daughter or son got involved, made an effort, became motivated, helped the others, incorporated into the dynamic … becoming very productive children.

In addition, they learned more because they could engage in more and different kinds of interactions, as there were four adult volunteers in each classroom. Lucía, a Roma girl, says that she appreciates how having more people in the classroom helped her and explains how engaging in dialogue with those adults enhanced her learning:

> [How much do you learn when there are other people in the classroom?] A lot … because I'm not used to [having] lots of people there and when they explain things to me it stays in my head.

On the one hand, the knowledge stays in Lucía's head because she feels closer to these volunteers and it helps her to strengthen the meaning of schooling. On the other hand, their interaction is not based on 'expertise.' The fact that the participating mothers do not have academic credentials prevents one-way learning interactions in the classroom: with the adult explaining and the children listening. Esther, a teacher of eight-year-olds, illustrates how parents' participation in Interactive Groups does not require having a specific curricular knowledge but to be able to foster cooperation and dialogue:

> Parents who participate in interactive groups, we know that it is not necessary for them to have any special pedagogical knowledge, they simply join the group, encourage the children to help each other, … I mean, although they might not know how to add or subtract on a paper … they can see that the children are adding and subtracting and how they do it and help each other. They also observe how the children internalise this knowledge, and … can still interact with the children through the strategies they themselves provide for the children.

The contributions of the Roma volunteers are based not on academic intelligence but on the cultural intelligence they have derived from their own experience and the cultural context they share with the children (Oliver & Gatt, 2010). As part of this cultural intelligence, Luisa knows how to deal with the different children in the group and how to foster their participation in knowledge construction. She knows

the children well from the neighbourhood and, when she interacts with them, she takes into account that some of them are shy and others more talkative, and brilliantly manages the group to encourage a balance in their participation. All the children feel their contributions are important; and they all look at Luisa with respect. Because of this understanding, she succeeds in managing the children's interactions:

> For example, Luis, who is very quiet, I try to talk to him so that he can give his opinion also, so that he will talk to me or describe something to me because, since I see that he's so quiet, when I do that it breaks the ice and then he starts … And once he starts speaking, he does not stop. But he is quieter. Juan is not. Sometimes I have to interrupt him or tell him to stop for a while and let his other classmates talk. I talk to him just as I do with Luis, but in a different way.

Luisa contributes to the interactions in a different manner from the teacher, thus enriching the learning process in the small group. With their non-expert background and language code, families' members like her contribute to the creation of a supportive learning environment, accounting for the different characteristics of the children. Although Verónica, a young Roma mother of six children, did not finish her primary school, her dialogue with Jaime promotes the boy's self-reflection and development of meta-cognitive strategies that help him to do better in his academic task. In her speech we notice that it is not only what she says, but also how she says it, the affectionate tone with which she talks to the child, her empathy and understanding:

> Jaime is a very restless child, for instance, I tell him, 'Jaime, listen to me dear, look, when you hurry, how do you do it? You do it badly and ugly, don't you? And when you go slowly, how do you do it? You do it very nice and very clean, right?' He wants to do it faster and I tell him 'Jaime, slowly dear' and then he goes slowly and so on, and I ask him 'how did you do it?' and he says 'very nice', and I tell him 'you see?'

When Roma families participate in education activities, like Interactive Groups, the transformation of learning goes beyond the school walls. The dialogic learning interactions promoted in the school context also transfer to other contexts that these adults and children share. As a result, the learning habits and activities in their homes changed, and children and families started to interact around learning in ways they never did before, as this teacher describes:

> The children are much more encouraged to learn. They take books home to read, because they are already reading with their father or mother, and [they have the idea of] 'I know how to read now' because before they did not know how to read because they [just] learned this year. So of course, because they are more motivated, they want to participate more.

Impact on the children's learning outcomes

The implementation of the SEAs in La Paz school has had an impact in the whole process of school change. Since the SEAs described above started to be implemented in 2006–07 pupils have improved their academic performance, as reflected in their higher scores on the national standardised tests (see Figure 1). Specifically, when the dialogic transformation process started building upon family involvement in educational activities, Roma children's engagement increased.

The results from the standardised tests conducted by the Department of Education show the pupils' improvements in specific subjects. In 2007–08, the eight-year-olds' classroom showed an improvement from the previous year from 1 to 2.5 (out of 5)[5] in all language skills evaluated: listening, speaking, talking, reading, writing and language use. The results obtained in subsequent standardised tests between 2008–09 and 2009–10 maintained the improvements in language skills as well as the rest of the skills evaluated. In the case of nine-year-old pupils, they improved in language from 2 to 3 (out of 5), and the same improvement was obtained in cultural and artistic skills, social and citizenship skills, learning to learn, autonomy, and emotional skills. Additionally, their score in mathematics increased from 1 to 3 (out of 5), and the score in knowledge and interaction with the physical world from 2 up to 4. It is particularly relevant that the pupils surpassed the scale mean score in all these areas.

Data from the questionnaires completed by the students about their perception of their learning improvement are consistent with the academic results obtained in the tests. Throughout the four-year period of the longitudinal study, the percentage of children perceiving that they had improved 'very much' in mathematics increased from 63.89% to 94.59% (Table 1).

The same is true for reading, which also improved from 58.33% to 89.04% according to the children's perception (Table 2).

Finally, the rates of pupils' absenteeism were reduced considerably. While in 2006–07 there was a 30% rate of absenteeism, in 2007–08 this had been reduced to 10% and in 2008–09 absenteeism was just occasional. In the same period, the enrolment of new pupils in the school increased (see Figure 2). In 2009–10 the percentage of pupils' enrolment grew 27.66% in relation to the previous year, and the 2010–11 enrolment grew an additional 10.56%.

According to the data presented above, children's academic outcomes have improved since the implementation of SEAs. The different types of data analysed – quantitative and qualitative – confirm the same trend, and particularly the quantitative data show that the improvement has been sustained throughout the studied period.

Table 1. Children's perception of their own improvement in mathematics (%).

	2006–07	2007–08	2008–09	2009–10
Very much	63.89	84.75	88.00	94.59
A little	33.33	13.56	10.67	4.05
Not at all	2.78	1.69	1.33	1.35

Table 2. Children's perception of their own improvement in reading (%).

	2006–07	2007–08	2008–09	2009–10
Very much	58.33	89.83	82.89	89.04
A little	38.89	10.17	15.79	8.22
Not at all	2.78	0.00	1.32	2.74

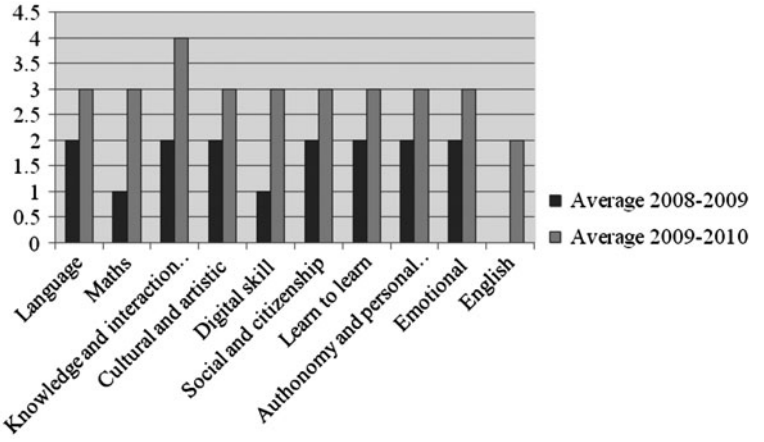

Figure 1. Average scores for nine-year-old pupils in standardised tests, La Paz Primary School, 2008–09/2009–10.

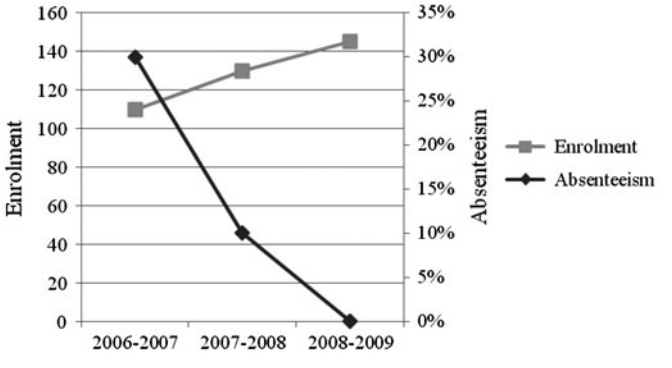

Figure 2. Trends in pupils' enrolment and absenteeism between 2006–07 and 2008–09.

Discussion

Before the transformation of La Paz school, Roma children continuously experienced failure and had few opportunities to engage in actual learning. For example, they used not to work together with their classmates; they were expected to work individually, but just drawing and colouring. Learning activities had little meaning for them, as they did not offer any cognitive challenge. Parents had rarely been in the school and did not feel the school could help them to improve their educational level or to participate more fully in society. Many Roma children and families did not want to go to such a school. But La Paz school pupils have since then significantly improved their academic results, showing that it is possible to transform this situation and create the conditions for learning interactions that improve the performance of Roma children and increase their engagement.

The results presented here, based on the way learning is promoted at La Paz, are consistent with learning theories which state that interaction, dialogue and small-group work promote children's learning. These results show that pupils belonging to cultural minorities, and specifically Roma children, benefit from

dialogic learning interactions. Importantly, dialogue-based learning interactions address the problems inherent in educational practices often aimed at students from minority groups, which minimise their possibilities for richer learning interactions and therefore their learning outcomes.

Importantly, La Paz school also shows that the power of learning through dialogue is enhanced when such dialogues include relatives and other members of the community who have historically been excluded from participation in educational activities, and actually from the school discourse. This is particularly crucial in a context like that of La Paz, where most of the families are Roma and only have a basic education or even less. The involvement of these families in the school's learning spaces creates bridges between the community and the school discourses and transforms the traditionally unequal relations between them – and also gives community context to the school curriculum.

In addition, when families take part in learning interactions they create the conditions for learning-related dialogue. These adults do not need to have an academic education to help their children learn. Indeed, the Roma women participating in La Paz classrooms do not have such knowledge. Instead, they apply the knowledge they have developed from their experience and their social context. This knowledge is crucial for managing the behaviour of children from minority groups, for supporting and motivating them, and for encouraging them to engage in peer support and reasoning, and in sharing learning strategies. Moreover, these women's engagement in learning activities makes it possible to transfer these in-school interactions between children and families to the home context and to other spaces in the neighbourhood. This makes it possible to extend the period of learning time beyond the time in school, which has proven to foster children's learning and achievement.

These results suggest how important it is for schools to create learning spaces where children and relatives can learn together and engage in interactions and dialogues that bring together the school, the community life, the curriculum and their identities. This is especially important for Roma students, as they are often pushed into practices that promote segregation, and their families and communities are seen as not interested in education and as incapable of contributing intellectually.

The case of La Paz exemplifies what Freire (1970) calls the 'untested feasibility.' Roma engagement and success in school had been an 'untested' reality that mainstream schools have usually not been able to establish, and for which the Roma themselves were blamed. But being 'untested' did not mean being 'unfeasible.' When educational actions are shaped and implemented in dialogue with the community, this 'untested' reality is imagined as possible and becomes a reality that can be created by transforming the existing reality. The success of La Paz, however, was not to 'test' a good idea but rather to implement SEAs which had already demonstrated, with evidence from research, that they worked. The SEAs were recreated in the context of La Paz which in turn constitutes more evidence of the transferability of these actions.

When schools offer such spaces for dialogic learning with community members, the school world and the Roma world no longer need to be separate and incompatible realities. Attending and succeeding at school does not mean giving up the Roma identity any more, as all the Roma families and children (like in La Paz) can take part in decision-making processes, including education and curriculum-related decisions, and can act as intellectual contributors in the classrooms and beyond, to eventually create a school that is helping the Roma children to succeed educationally. By recreating the

school with their participation, the assumed 'Roma disaffection' with schooling disappears. The case discussed in this article shows that when schools and communities dream together the school they want for their children, stereotyped folk assumptions are broken down and educational possibilities then emerge. Families worldwide want the best for their children but they need to know which are the successful actions and how they can contribute, having been so removed from schools for such a long time. In La Paz the dream came true through implementing SEAs based on dialogic learning, which have proven equally successful in a range of other contexts. Luisa, like many Roma mothers in La Paz, expresses this well when she talks about her children:

> You see, last year … not a soul could get him to go there, and he would say 'the teacher yells at me, and the teacher scolds me', not a soul could get him into the school, and now it's 8 am and he is up, … which is incredible, and ready to learn. Indeed, there's been here a lot of improvement.

These social and educational consequences justify all the effort.

Notes

1. We acknowledge the common use of the term GRT [Gypsies, Roma and Travellers] in the UK. In this paper we use the term 'Roma' used at the Council of Europe. It refers to Roma, Sinti, Kale and related groups in Europe, Travellers and the Eastern Europe groups, and covers the wide diversity of the groups concerned, including persons who identify themselves as 'Gypsies'.
2. European Commission (2011); European Parliament resolution of 9 March 2011 on the *EU Strategy on Roma Inclusion* (2010/2276(INI)).
3. All the teachers, relatives and children interviewed that will appear in this text have been appropriately anonymised through a pseudonym.
4. Secondary education refers to compulsory education from 12 to 16 years old in the Spanish educational system.
5. The standardised tests conducted by the regional government provide the results through a range score from 1 to 5.

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