How do vulnerable youth complete secondary education? The key role of families and the community

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This article demonstrates how the engagement of families and other community members in decision-making processes in a school may prevent early school leaving among vulnerable youth and simultaneously increase their enrolment in secondary education. Based on a large-scale, EU-funded study, this article focuses on the case of one school located in a deprived area inhabited mainly by Roma people –one of the vulnerable populations most affected by early school leaving – where a specific egalitarian participatory process of Roma families was implemented. According to the analysis of the collected data, this participation contributed to a reduction in student dropout rates during primary education, led to the implementation of compulsory secondary education in the same school, and increased the numbers of students who graduated from secondary school. These achievements transformed the educational and social prospects of vulnerable youth who were following the path to failure and who now dream of continuing their studies. Furthermore, these youth are acting as role models for younger children in primary education, helping to prevent school dropout and early school leaving from early ages. The case shows how the community participation in decision-making processes transformed the climate and expectations regarding education in the neighbourhood.

Introduction

Young people are considered to be a vulnerable population. Among the specific problems that they face, the *Lisbon Declaration on Youth Policies and Programmes* (UNESCO 1998) highlighted the situation of youth living in poverty as a main concern and called attention to young people affected by unemployment and those belonging to

ethnic and cultural minorities, who also face adverse situations that must be acknowledged. Additionally, youth are more directly affected than other groups, given their age, by school failure, school segregation and educational exclusion, which contribute to later exclusion from the labour market and other social areas (Pantea 2015). More specifically, early school leaving is considered a component of youth vulnerability that compromises their successful transition to adulthood (European Social Network 2010; Fernandes-Alcantara 2012). Not completing high school has been associated with being more vulnerable economically, having worse health and having fewer overall opportunities (Geraghty, Erbstein, and Greenfield 2010). Low school performance has been defined as a "marker of risk" and an indicator of negative outcomes in adolescence and beyond, and truancy has been noted as a "problem behaviour" leading to serious consequences during the transition to adulthood (Fernandes-Alcantara 2012).

In addition, youth belonging to other vulnerable groups such as migrants or cultural minorities and those with low socio-economic status are more likely to leave school early (Camilleri-Cassar 2014; European Social Network 2010). Poverty, community conditions and family structure have been identified as three primary antecedents of risk that shape the impoverished neighbourhoods where vulnerable youth live (Fernandes-Alcantara 2012). In addition, school experience among this vulnerable youth population is characterised by a feeling of isolation and lack of control over their education (Thompson, Russell, and Simmons 2014). In this regard, the European Social Network recommends the implementation of holistic solutions that involve community and civic society groups and include family support (European Social Network 2010).

Educational success is defined by the European Commission as a decrease in dropout rates, completion of upper secondary education and participation in tertiary

education (European Commission 2000). Given that educational success relates to subsequent access to diverse social areas and contributes to social inclusion, the successful completion of secondary education is an important determinant for youth to achieve full inclusion in society, and it consequently is a priority in Europe, as reflected by the Europe 2020 strategy (European Commission 2010a). One of the priorities of this strategy is inclusive growth, which includes investment in skills and training and has three main objectives, one of which is to improve educational attainment in Europe by reducing school dropout rates below 10% and reaching the level at which at least 40% of 30-34-year-olds have completed third-level education (European Commission 2011a).

The challenge to achieve such objectives is greater for vulnerable youth, such as the Roma. According to the survey conducted by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA 2014), on average, 14 % of Roma children of compulsory school age are not in education, compared to 3 % of non-Roma children living close by. Data on early school leaving reveals a huge gap in educational attainment between the Roma and non-Roma in Europe. The percentage of Roma early school leavers aged 18-24 ranges from 72% in the Czech Republic to more than 93% in Romania, France, Spain, Portugal and Greece. This means that most of the Roma youth within this age range leave school without obtaining a vocational or general upper secondary qualification that enables participation in the labour market (FRA 2014). The gap between the Roma and non-Roma in terms of completion of upper secondary education is similarly wide in most countries, ranging from 74 percentage points in Slovakia to less than 50 percentage points in Hungary, Romania, Spain and Portugal – in these cases, the smaller gap is due to low upper secondary completion rates for non-Roma (FRA, 2014). Lack of education has an impact on unemployment rates, which are three

times higher for the Roma than for non-Roma, although most unemployed Roma (74%) state that they are looking for a job (FRA 2014). This is a serious situation if the objectives for the EU2020 strategy are to be achieved. Consequently, the EU has established as a goal to ensure that all Roma children complete at least primary school and stated the need to encourage Roma youth to also participate in secondary education and tertiary education (European Commission 2011b).

Accordingly, the European Commission and the European Council have published recommendations to address early school leaving. One of these recommendations (European Commission 2011a) entails fostering desegregation in education based on students' social and educational background. Another recommended measure is transforming schools into learning communities (European Commission 2010b, 2011a; European Council 2011). These types of schools use the experience, knowledge and commitment of the entire community to improve school quality and encourage students to continue their education. Research has demonstrated that schools as learning communities contribute to the educational success of vulnerable students in primary education (Flecha and Soler 2013); however, less is known about the benefits of learning communities in secondary education for vulnerable students. The case study presented in this article focuses on one of these schools which is located in a poor neighbourhood, inhabited mainly by people from cultural minorities, primarily Roma people, with low educational levels – most of the adults have not completed basic or primary education – and precarious labour conditions; consequently, more than 30% of the working-age people in this neighbourhood are social welfare recipients (Brown, Gómez, and Munté 2013). In this context, we explore how a particular form of family and community participation –participation in decision-making processes– may reduce early school leaving among a vulnerable youth population and therefore contribute to

achieving the European priorities of inclusion for all. To frame this contribution, the next section reviews the status of vulnerable youth and the barriers they face in achieving success in secondary education.

Barriers to the success of vulnerable youth in secondary education

Previous research has identified factors contributing to youth vulnerability in education, and secondary education is one stage in which a variety of such factors coincide. The transition from primary to secondary school has already been identified as a period entailing anxiety, distress and lack of motivation for youth, which impacts students' subsequent wellbeing and school attainment (Hung 2014; West, Sweeting, and Young 2010). According to this research, students of lower ability were among those experiencing poorer school transitions.

Some studies have deeply explored the factors related to poor transitions to secondary education and school dropout among vulnerable youth. Among those factors, students' background has been examined. For example, research has shown that families' socioeconomic status (unemployment, low income and low education levels) is related to a higher risk of dropping out (Gibbs and Heaton 2014; Newcomb, Abbott, Catalano, Hawkins, Battin-Pearson and Hill. 2002; Serbin, Stack and Kingdon 2013; Winding, Nohr, Labriola, Biering and Andersen 2013). Attending schools with a high concentration of low-SES households has also been studied as a risk factor, and students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds have lower academic attainment in high school and are more likely to be excluded from postsecondary education (Frempong, Ma, and Mensah 2012). In addition to socioeconomic status, family process factors, such as parental support (Serbin, Stack and Kingdon 2013), and school related factors, such as retention (Gibbs and Heaton 2014) and low grades when completing

compulsory school (Markussen, Frøseth and Sandberg 2011; Winding, Nohr, Labriola, Biering and Andersen 2013), have also been highlighted.

Other studies have analysed the educational paths that exist both during and before secondary education as main components that may affect educational inclusion or exclusion (Molina and Casado, 2014; Flecha 2015; Oakes 1995, 2005). Tracking is defined as the separation of students into different schools depending on their ability, often involving a choice between academic and vocational tracks (European Commission 2006). It is one particular practice in secondary education that has been identified to have an impact on students' subsequent educational and labour opportunities (Moller and Stearns 2012; Hanushek and Wößmann 2006; Santa Cruz, Siles, and Vrecer 2011). In addition, it is a socially selective process that affects vulnerable youth in particular, including poor students, cultural minorities and immigrants (Hallinan 1994; Tieben and Wolbers 2010).

Additionally, there is evidence that primary schools have an impact on students' track choice and subsequent success in completing it; this impact is in addition to the effect of prior achievement, ability, effort, and student aspirations (Pustjens et al. 2008). This effect of primary schools relates to evidence regarding segregation practices based on ability levels prior to tracking. Streaming practices, which are defined as tailoring the curriculum to different groups of children based on ability within one school (Wößmann and Schütz 2006), have been demonstrated not to contribute to improving the results of low achievers but instead to increasing inequalities among groups of students. Specific vulnerable groups of students, such as migrants, cultural minorities, and students with a low-SES background, achieve poorer results and unequal further educational opportunities through streaming (Flecha 2015). Indeed, research (Oakes 1995, 2005) has demonstrated that low streams contain not only students with low levels of

achievement but also students from cultural minorities and poor students, which reflects socio-economic segregation. In addition, teachers with the least experience are often in charge of these groups (Ball 2009). Consequently, ability grouping discriminates against vulnerable students by reducing their learning opportunities and outcomes while also tending to reflect and perpetuate the social and cultural inequalities of the broader society.

Therefore, segregating and selective practices based on students' social and cultural background explains part of the impact that SES has on secondary students' achievement. However, students' social and cultural contexts can have a transformative impact on students' school trajectories when schools take advantage of those 'funds of knowledge' accumulated in their families and communities (Moll 2005). This challenges the deficit thinking approach by using them as resources for learning. The replacement of power relations between teachers and the communities, that block the participation of the most vulnerable, by genuine discussions that joint multiple perspectives into collaborative action (Agbo 2007) is another premise of school-community partnerships that enhance vulnerable students' opportunities of academic achievement.

In the following, a case study is presented of a school in which a specific egalitarian participatory process involving Roma families was implemented, and the impact that the participation of these families had on students' educational trajectory throughout secondary education is analysed, showing the transformative role that families with low-SES and minority backgrounds can have in preventing school dropout.

The context of the research

With the Spanish school reform of 1990 (Gobierno de España 1990), the beginning of secondary education was advanced from age 14 to age 12, meaning that students had to change from primary schools to secondary schools two years earlier. This change has been maintained in the subsequent laws until now. When this change was announced, the Roma community immediately envisioned the consequence, that separating children from their primary school at the age of 12 would cause the dropout rate among the Roma to increase, especially among Roma girls. However, their voices were not taken into account when the decision was finally made, and the measure ultimately had negative consequences for this community (CREA 2010).

La Paz is one of the schools affected by this policy. This school is located in La Milagrosa neighbourhood in an inner city in Spain. The neighbourhood was built in the 1980s to house families with few resources, mostly of Roma origin, who until that time were living in shanty towns. Problems related to social marginalisation and educational exclusion were present from the creation of the neighbourhood and have increased through the years. According to the Plan for Social Integration in the municipality of Albacete (Ayuntamiento de Albacete 2012), La Estrella and La Milagrosa are the neighbourhoods with the highest levels of social exclusion in Albacete. Some figures that exemplify this situation refer to employment and education. These neighbourhoods have the lowest employment rates (16% and 27%, respectively) and unemployment rates that are 4 times and 2.5 times, respectively, higher than the town average. These neighbourhoods also have the highest percentages of people living in households where none of the members work. They also have the lowest salaries: 30% below the town average. In regards to the level of education, in La Milagrosa, 77.4% of people have not completed basic education. La Milagrosa is the neighbourhood in Albacete with the

highest percentage of Roma population (28.75%), followed by La Estrella (23.92%). In Albacete, 70% of the Roma adult population (older than 15) is illiterate (purely or functionally), and the percentage reaches the 80% in the case of women (Ayuntamiento de Albacete 2012).

In this context of social deprivation, the primary school in the neighbourhood, which had been transformed into a learning community in 2006, was achieving a remarkable improvement in the students' learning results. Until 2006, educational attainment in the school was very poor, and most of the students left school not having acquired basic competencies, including literacy (Aubert 2011). Following the transition to a learning community, academic results improved steadily and absenteeism rates dropped considerably (Girbés-Peco, Macías-Aranda, and Álvarez Cifuentes 2015).

Due to this improvement, the 6th Framework Programme project, *INCLUD-ED: Strategies for inclusion and social cohesion in Europe from education* (Flecha 2015), selected the school as one of its case studies of successful schools across Europe containing students with migrant or minority backgrounds and low SES. These case studies had the objective to identify Successful Educational Actions that were leading to success in disadvantaged contexts. Subsequently, the R+D project *Socio-educational Successful Actions to Overcome Poverty* (Valls 2012-2014) explored the mid-term impact that the school had on the youth in the neighbourhood in order to assess whether educational improvements affected youth after primary education and to determine which particular actions led to such improvements.

Method

Qualitative and quantitative data were collected in the school through the INCLUD-ED project in order to analyse the educational actions behind improvements in primary

education throughout a four-year period (2007-2010), and additional qualitative data were collected regarding the impacts on secondary education through the *Socio-educational Successful Actions to Overcome Poverty* project in 2013 and 2014. For the purpose of this paper, we used data collected with the following techniques:

[Table 1 near here]

The evidence collected through this case study aimed to respond to the following research questions: What role did family participation in the school have in students' absenteeism or attendance in primary education? Which role did it have, if any, in the students' enrolment and retention in secondary education? Which type/s of family participation was/were effective in overcoming youth school dropout and preventing early school leaving?

Both the data collection and analyses were performed based on the Communicative Methodology of research (Sorde Marti and Mertens 2014). This methodology was used to enable the end-users' (teachers, students, relatives, etc.) participation in the research based on egalitarian dialogue with the researchers. The intersubjective creation of knowledge enabled by this methodology has already been demonstrated to contribute to overcoming inequalities. Open-ended interviews were conducted with a communicative orientation, which entailed sharing knowledge and interpretations to reach a shared understanding of the reality studied. Communicative daily life stories (Ramis, Martin and Iñiguez 2014) enabled a cooperative process of understanding and reflection between the researchers and the research participants in which a joint interpretation was created about the participants' lives in relation to the

object of study. The communicative focus group (Rue, Martínez, Flecha and Álvarez 2014) was organised to obtain a collective interpretation of reality through dialogue in a natural group.

The analysis was conducted according to three categories:

1) Impact of family and community participation on preventing dropout before secondary education

2) Impact of family and community participation on preventing dropout during secondary education

3) Impact of family and community participation on preventing dropout in the neighbourhood in the long term

The first and second categories emerged from the research questions, while the third category emerged inductively from the data. In addition, and according to the analysis of the communicative research, the data were analysed based on the transformative and exclusionary dimensions. While the exclusionary dimension refers to the social benefits or opportunities from which some people or groups are excluded – in this case, factors leading to school failure and dropout among youth in La Milagrosa – the transformative dimension includes the conditions that allow people to overcome those factors, that is, the factors preventing them from dropping out of school and completing secondary education. Therefore, each of the three categories of analysis was divided into two subcategories that respond to the exclusionary and transformative dimensions. This analysis facilitates not only the explanation of social reality but also its transformation by bringing to light the elements of the exclusionary dimension and the possibility of strengthening those of the transformative dimension. Consequently, the data analysis grid is as follows:

[Table 2 near here]

Results

Families' contribution to preventing dropout rates in primary education

Family and community participation in decision-making processes started in the framework of the transformation of the school into a learning community, since it is one of the educational actions that are implemented as a part of the project (Racionero-Plaza and Puig 2017). Families and community participation in decision-making in La Paz entailed their participation was not limited to consultation or approval of agreements previously made by the professionals; instead, it involved actual participation in deciding core aspects of the educational project, such as the learning and educational activities organised in the school. Araceli, a primary teacher in the school, described this relationship between the families and the school, synthesising the fact that the families did not come to school just to be recipients of information regarding how their children were doing in the school; they contributed proposals to improve the education of all children and this opportunity to make a difference was crucial to motivate their participation:

> (…) they feel confident enough to come into the school as if it were their home.
> (…) mothers come in, they act as volunteers, they prepare festivities, make
> decisions, and are listened to, at the end of the day. They are listened to and are
> able to decide.

Two structures were created in the school to channel participation in decision-making processes: mixed committees and assemblies. Both structures are forms of democratic

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organisation, which provide an opportunity for the entire community to participate, and both are based on egalitarian dialogue (Flecha 2000), following validity claims and not power claims (Habermas 1984). This means that all contributions are taken into account based on the strength of the arguments provided and not on the speaker's status as a teacher or as a parent. In La Paz, this occurs with non-academic families with very low educational levels. The mixed committees were composed of teachers, family members and other members of the community who organised themselves around specific topics that were necessary to address; for instance, committees were created for learning, coexistence, absenteeism, library, volunteers or IT. Assemblies were meetings held at least once a year, and the whole community was invited to participate in them to debate and decide about the school goals, difficulties and actions to address them. Great participation was achieved in these meetings. According to the inspector in regards to one assembly, 'No-one could remember so many people getting together in the school (...) perhaps 80 or 90% of the families were represented, as well as neighbourhood associations'. The mixed composition of the committees and the assemblies allow the gathering of different information and points of view on a given topic and expands the possibilities to identify solutions to the difficulties that may be found in the school.

During the first two years that relatives and community members participated in decision-making processes, an improvement in school attendance was documented. Absenteeism for the 2006-2007 school year was 30%, it was reduced to 10% in 2007-2008, and it occurred only occasionally in 2008-2009. According to the explanations of professionals working in the school, such as the psychologist of the city council for educational programmes, this improvement is associated with the families' participation, including participation in the assemblies and mixed committees, as well as their participation in the students' learning activities in the classrooms, which was one

of the first decisions taken:

> Bringing their children to school and coming as volunteers in the school and to the
> parental meetings (…). Five years ago this did not exist, now it exists and it has
> been a fundamental change, above all in regular attendance at the school.

The families' participation has contributed to demonstrating the families' interest in improving their children's education, which has increased students' motivation for school and therefore their attendance. Professionals working in the community acknowledge this positive influence, as a technical staff person of community services working in the school reflected:

> Participation has a very significant influence. For instance, there are children who,
> before their mother came to the school, escaped from class, fell asleep in the
> classroom... and now I don't know if it is because of having their example here or
> because their mothers are also interested in education… is like "look mum, I have
> done this!" "have you seen that I have behaved well?" (...) then, it has really
> changed.

In this way, with the introduction of family participation in decision-making, dropout was already being prevented before students finished primary education. After these two years, the problem of school dropout in the transition between primary and secondary education was addressed, and the democratic processes of decision-making were then transferred to focus on improving secondary education in the neighbourhood.

A dream achieved: compulsory secondary education in the school and the first generation of graduates

La Paz was a primary school in which all children finished their studies at age 12 – once they completed their primary education. Subsequently, they faced many obstacles to continuing their education in secondary school. First, they could not attend a secondary

school in their neighbourhood, so the transition from primary to secondary was even harder for them because they had to move to another neighbourhood far away from their community. Furthermore, La Milagrosa is also physically isolated from the rest of the town, which was an additional barrier, and children ended up leaving education. Manuel, a 20-year-old boy, former student of La Paz before the process of transformation into a learning community, explained that he dropped out at fifteen when he finished the second year of compulsory secondary education. He remembers that no one at that time finished secondary education because they had to move to another school and they felt strange and lonely there, far from the people they knew and their friends. This situation specially affected girls. Marta, a 17-year-old girl, explained that her parents were afraid that she went to high school; having secondary education in the school gave them the opportunity to continue studying not having to leave the neighbourhood.

The transformation of the school into a learning community opened up new opportunities to make decisions that would respond to the students' needs. It entailed taking into account the families' opinion that studying secondary compulsory education was a priority for their children. They had been insisting for so long that sending them outside the neighbourhood would not work and claiming that it was their right to have a quality secondary education offered along with primary school.

Creating dialogic and democratic structures for families and communities to contribute their knowledge in deciding about the school's operation and the educational future of their children empowered those who had been traditionally excluded and silenced by the establishment (McLaren and Kincheloe 2007). As a result, Roma families and their community organised themselves and asked the educational administration to provide compulsory secondary education in their neighbourhood,

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actually in La Paz school. Despite the barriers to continuing education and the exclusion their young people had been suffering for so long, the recent transformation the families experienced in the primary school by reducing absenteeism turned despair into hope. This transformative experience enabled the families to consider this solution to help their youngsters remain in education longer and complete secondary education successfully.

The families gained the support of the school board and the educational inspector of the region to start the implementation of secondary education in La Paz school in the 2008/2009 school year, and in 2010, a local government resolution was published that created a section for the secondary school within La Paz primary school (Viceconsejería de Educación y Cultura 2010). Consequently, school attendance after primary education started to increase, changing the dynamics of the youth in the neighbourhood, and in June 2012, after four years, the first generation of students successfully completed compulsory secondary education.

Mercedes, an illiterate grandmother who participates as a volunteer in learning activities – interactive groups and dialogic literary gatherings – in the secondary classrooms was part of this process. She explained how a group of family members organised themselves within the structure of the mixed committees and brought the demand to the educational administration at the city council. Collective action, the confidence that they could make a difference in their children's education, and the existence of space in the school that enabled their participation in decision-making made possible this dialogue with the educational administration, which led to establishing secondary education in the school.

The teachers acknowledge the key role that families had in introducing secondary education in the school. Patricia, a teacher in the third grade of compulsory secondary

education in the school, placed special emphasis on the determination and effort of the families to make their children study secondary education and not leave school. She recognised that, although it was difficult for them and required many visits to the local education office, they fought until they finally achieved their goal. Although the school professionals cooperated actively with them, it was the tenacity of those parents with low education levels and few resources that finally made it possible to achieve their purpose.

Consequently, truancy and dropping out are prevented, and now youth in the neighbourhood have more opportunities to stay and complete compulsory secondary education. Since beginning to offer compulsory secondary education in the school, the size of the graduating classes in the 2011-2012, 2012-2013, 2013-2014, 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 academic years was 8, 11, 4, 9 and 8, respectively. This represents between 33% and 58% of the students who finished the first year of secondary education and shows clear progress in a neighbourhood where very few students had access to secondary education before. The youth themselves reflected on the change in the completion rate for secondary education. This is the case of Marta, who moved to another school when she had to begin secondary education and later moved back to La Paz when secondary education was introduced there. As she explained before, being able to study in the neighbourhood gave confidence to her parents, which probably had a positive influence on her ability to finish compulsory secondary education. Manuel, three years older, did not have the opportunity to study secondary education in the school, and, although he started to study in another school, he dropped out before finishing. While in Marta's class in La Paz all but one girl finished, in Manuel's no one finished their secondary education, although he reflects that he would do it now in La Paz.

Broadening expectations and plans for all and for the next generations after secondary

Having secondary education in the school has made it possible for many students to not only access and complete compulsory secondary education but also to continue studying after leaving secondary education. For instance, Ramón (aged 17) is in his second year of vocational training and says he would like to work as a mechanic; Francisca (aged 17) is studying vocational training related to care for dependent people and plans to study the higher grade next year. Marta (aged 17) remembers that she used to say that she was not good at studying; meanwhile, she explains proudly that she earned an average score of 7 (of 10) and has applied to 5 vocational training programmes, including pharmacy, nurse aide, and mechanics.

Javier, an adult responsible for the youth centre, reflected on current youth enrolment in education and their plans, explaining that this has changed the educational situation in the neighbourhood: for the first time, he had heard the youth talking about studying vocational training, and he thought all of them had in mind to continue studying. The youth perceive a change in themselves, as exemplified by Lara's reflection, who remembers that when she was in primary school she thought she would not finish, but later changed her opinion and now she thinks she will continue.

However, they also perceive that this change has extended beyond them and has spread to the broader community. Youth and adults express the importance of education and acknowledge that finishing compulsory secondary education has become a priority. In fact, the process of including secondary education in the school showed that education was always a priority for these families, but now it has become feasible, and both adults and youth expect younger boys and girls in the neighbourhood to complete secondary education.

In this way, the possibility of having secondary education in the neighbourhood has changed not only youth educational prospects but also the prospects of children who are already in primary education. Some of the youth who are studying secondary education in the neighbourhood or who have already finished it are volunteering in interactive groups in the primary or even pre-primary education classes. This is the case for José (17 years old), who volunteers in a class for 5-year-old children, and for Francisca and Marta (both aged 17), who collaborate in other groups. These youth know that their participation is important to helping teachers and to acting as role models for the youngest students; as Marta said, the oldest are an example for the youngest, they will do what they see. Therefore, while helping children to learn during particular class activities, they also help them change their ideas about education and the meaning it has for their future. Ramon (also 17 years old) explained this type of interaction with 12-year-old children. These children thought they did not need to study because they would stay in the market for picking scrap metal. Ramon and other youth like him told them that they should not think they will stay in the market, but they should stay in school and they should think further. Seeing that these youth were studying made the 12-year-olds think they would study too.

In this way, they are changing expectations and stereotypes in the entire neighbourhood and especially among the youngest generations. With their example, they are contributing to preventing school dropout for the youngest children and placing them on the pathway to secondary education from an early age.

Conclusions

This article shows how one particular form of family and community involvement in

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school –participation in decision-making processes – helps to reduce school dropout and prevent early school leaving. Participation in decision-making made it possible for La Paz school to increase the academic level and reduce absenteeism among students already in primary education, ease their transition to secondary education, reduce school dropout and achieve the first generation of graduates in compulsory secondary education in the neighbourhood. These results are consistent with previous research that identified the importance of family involvement in school education to improve the educational prospects of students with disadvantaged backgrounds (Hidalgo, Epstein and Siu, 2002), the positive impact of parental involvement in secondary school on adolescents' attainment and on reducing the achievement gap between white students and some minorities (Jeynes, 2007), and the role of parental involvement in dropout prevention (De Witte and Rogge, 2013). With this case study, we show how a particular type of family participation –participation in decision-making processes – contributes to such improvements. Families participation in decision-making has made it possible to have students in the neighbourhood who have not only finished compulsory secondary education but also entered post-compulsory education. Further, these students have become real-life examples for other teenagers in the neighbourhood by showing that school success beyond primary education is within their reach.

Changing the educational and social prospects of the young people in La Milagrosa contributes to overcoming 'deficit thinking' (Valencia 2010), which tends to assume that students from disadvantaged environments are destined to fail in school. Similarly, the deficit thinking approach still prevails among many of the Roma families. This stereotyping perspective has shadowed their knowledge and experiences for so long, which were accumulated throughout centuries of exclusion. However, including

their voices through egalitarian and equitable participation processes has made a tremendous difference in their community and in mainstream education.

The case study was conducted in a school and neighbourhood fulfilling all the characteristics that previous research had connected to youth school dropout: living in marginalised areas, having low-SES and minority ethnic backgrounds, and having low academic aspirations (Frempong, Ma, and Mensah 2012). However, this case demonstrates that this connection can be overcome when Successful Educational Actions are implemented. These are actions that have been implemented in schools in different contexts and that have been shown to contribute to the best educational results in all these different contexts (Aubert 2015; Flecha 2015; Flecha and Buslón 2016). For this reason, the research that led to the identification of these Successful Educational Actions has been included in the Social Impact Open Repository (Flecha, Soler-Gallart & Sordé, 2015). Family and community participation in decision-making processes, interactive groups and dialogic literary gatherings are examples of Successful Educational Actions. In La Paz, it was due to families' participation in relevant decisions in the school, which considers all contributions, including those of low-SES families, based on egalitarian dialogue (Flecha 2000) and validity claims (Habermas 1984), that the decision to implement secondary education in the primary school was made. Consequently, opportunities for school success were broadened, helping to break the cycle of educational inequality and poverty, as reflected in the described results.

This type of participation is taking place in schools that are learning communities, which is leading to tremendous improvements and to overcoming inequalities in even the most difficult contexts (Ruiz and Valls 2016). For this reason, the transformation of schools into learning communities has been proposed as a measure to address early school leaving in Europe and to therefore contribute to

reaching the EU2020 target of reducing school dropout rates below 10%. These schools illustrate that effective responses to the challenge of educational inequalities depend not on the context but on the actions that schools implement, thereby demonstrating that there are avenues to improve the life of youth and their future prospects.

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Table 1. Data collection techniques

Data collection technique	Profile	Pseudonym
Open-ended interview	inspector	Jorge
Open-ended interview	primary teacher	Araceli
Open-ended interview	secondary teacher	Patricia
Open-ended interview	professional working in the school: psychologist of the city council	Tomas
Open-ended interview	professional working in the school: community services staff	Susana
Communicative daily life story	father	Juan
Communicative daily life story	illiterate grandmother	Mercedes
Communicative focus group	10 boys and girls aged 12 to 20	Ramon, Manuel, Marta, Francisca, Lara, José, Lucas, Toni, Toño, Noelia
	responsible for the youth centre	Javier

Table 2. Categories of analysis

		Dimensions	
		Exclusionary	Transformative
Categories	dropout prevention before secondary education	1	2
	dropout prevention in secondary education	3	4
	dropout prevention in the long term	5	6