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4-13-2020

## Transforming Difficulties into Possibilities: Family Training as an Action for Educational Success in Contexts of Poverty

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### Recommended APA Citation

Segovia-Aguilar, B., García-Cabrera, M., & Hinojosa-Pareja, E. (2020). Transforming Difficulties into Possibilities: Family Training as an Action for Educational Success in Contexts of Poverty. *The Qualitative Report*, 25(4), 975-998. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2020.4236>

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## Transforming Difficulties into Possibilities: Family Training as an Action for Educational Success in Contexts of Poverty

### Abstract

This research focuses on the implementation of a series of actions and training workshops with families of a school located in a socially excluded area in the city of Cordoba, Spain. The study explores how the participants perceived the experience and the educational and social benefits of this formative process. The research methodology was based on a participatory action research approach, which involved successive cycles of research and action in different phases: planning and analysis of the problem, action, observation and reflection. Five key informants, selected according to the criterion of structural heterogeneity, participated in the research. Semi-structured interviews and field journals were used as research instruments and content analysis was the technique of choice to analyse the information. The results reveal that the participants found the workshops to be highly beneficial both personally and in terms of the image they project to their children. They also faced challenges regarding their continuity in the activity, such as prejudices or different communication codes. The discussion underlines the importance of conducting training activities with families in contexts of poverty as an educational action that can increase their interest and motivation towards the school and hence enhance their participation in school life.

### Keywords

Participatory Action Research, Poverty, Primary Education, Learning communities, Family education

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### Acknowledgements

We thank the Universidad de Córdoba (Spain), which supported this project under the I Plan Propio Galileo, in the Proyectos UCO-Social- Innova section (June, 2015). We also greatly appreciate the participation and dedication of everyone involved in the project.

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### Introduction

The relationship between education and poverty is of growing concern among international bodies and the scientific community (AERA, 2013; European Commission, 2010; European Union Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA, 2018; Gobierno de España, 2012; Tierney, 2015; Unterhalter, 2012). In particular, the scientific literature calls for caution regarding two circumstances that increase vulnerability to poverty: the lack of skills and qualifications and the impossibility of accessing the labour market (Bloom, 2009; European Council, 2010; European Parliament, 2008; FRA, 2009; Macías, Valls Carol, Aróstegui, & Segovia Aguilar, 2014; Sen, 2000). This inextricable link between education and poverty results from the correlation between level of educational attainment and the ease or difficulty of labour insertion. This issue is of particularly worrisome in the European Union, as approximately 80 million people across Europe are estimated to have low or basic skills. Moreover, by 2020 it is expected that there will be 16 million additional jobs requiring high qualifications, while 12 million jobs for low-skilled workers will disappear (European Union, 2010).

Some Schools as Learning Communities<sup>1</sup> are located in areas with a high risk of social exclusion are addressing these problems (Flecha & Soler, 2013; Girbés, Macías, & Álvarez,

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<sup>1</sup> Schools as Learning Communities is a project grounded in a set of evidence based Successful Educational Accions (SEAs) aimed at fostering social and educational transformation. Combining science and utopian dreams,

2015). These schools, which form an extensive network in several European and Latin American countries, are based on a model of dialogic learning, effective community engagement and the implementation of actions for educational success (AES) (Included Consortium, 2011).

### **Family Participation and Training in Learning Communities**

Schools as Learning Communities (Flecha & Soler, 2013; Garcia-Carrion, Gomez, Molina & Ionescu, 2017) are internationally recognised for contributing to social cohesion, improving educational outcomes and reducing early school leaving. In Andalusia (southern Spain), these educational programmes have become a priority of the Regional Ministry of Education (Consejería de Educación, 2012). They have also been recognised by the European Union as a model that contributes to school success and overcoming inequalities (European Commission, 2011).

The education literature has shown strong evidence of a close link between family and community involvement and school improvement (Bolívar, 2006; Epstein, 2011; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Glasgow & Whitney, 2009; Gordon & Cui, 2012; Powell, Son, File, & Froiland, 2012; Sarramona & Roca, 2007). In the same lines, the INCLUD-ED<sup>2</sup> research project (Included Ed Consortium, 2011) established a clear correlation between family-school participation and educational success in Europe. The INCLUD-ED project concluded (García & Rios, 2014) that family participation in decision making, evaluating or collaborating in classroom activities (educational participation) have a positive impact on the improvement of children's learning. However, informative or advisory participation has little influence. In Schools as Learning Communities, the participatory educational model is the most widely implemented and entails engaging families in a variety of learning scenarios such as the classroom or other school spaces to promote educational success through an equity-based approach (Martínez Gutiérrez & Niemelä, 2010).

For educational involvement to be effective, it is important that families make a commitment to the school and its educational project. In contexts of poverty and social exclusion, however, certain socioeconomic factors hinder family-school cooperation, among them unemployment or precarious employment, the parents' own school experiences or the low academic qualifications of the family. For this reason, it is important to create educational spaces and develop strategies to train family members, which is one of the AES recommended in the literature (Elboj Saso & Serrano, 2016).

The main purpose of this research project was to implement and analyze, following a Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology (McKernan, 1999), a series of actions to promote multiple types of literacy among families of students in Learning Communities of the city of Cordoba, Spain. The schools are located in areas at risk of social exclusion in three spheres (UNESCO, 2011): reading and writing literacy, digital and media literacy, and health literacy. This article examines the processes and actions carried out in one of the participating schools, a public pre-primary and primary education school that is a Learning Community.

The goals of this Participatory Action Research (PAR) (McKernan, 1999) project were the following:

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the project improves the academic achievement of all students and develops a better coexistence and attitudes towards social solidarity.<sup>[1]</sup> Its key features are efficiency, equity and social cohesion.

<sup>2</sup> INCLUD-ED: Strategies for inclusion and social cohesion in Europe from education (2006-2011) was an integrated research project under thematic priority 7 of the European Commission's 6<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme. The ultimate goal of the project was to identify concrete actions that contribute to promoting educational success and social inclusion throughout the different stages of compulsory education.

1. Increase family involvement in the learning community to achieve a model of educational participation.
2. Promote literacy among the participating families to improve their reading, writing, digital and health skills.
3. Analyse the effects of the actions from the perspective of the stakeholders involved.
4. Create a collaborative space to carry out cyclical activities with families supported by the Educational Improvement Seminar at the University of Cordoba, Spain.
5. Coordinate socio-educational actions with neighbourhood social organisations to foster participation in the learning community.

In line with the above objectives, the following questions were formulated to guide the research:

- How did the research participants perceive their experiences in the project?
- What are the perceived benefits of training family members in contexts of poverty?
- What challenges do we face to ensure the sustainability of the project?
- What strategies for improvement do the people involved in the family training suggest?

### **Description of Research Site**

The learning community is located in the city of Cordoba, Spain, between the Guadalquivir Industrial Estate and the upper area of Sector Sur, a district of the city impacted by socio-cultural problems and economic hardship. The neighbourhood has been designated a disadvantaged area by the Regional Government of Andalusia<sup>3</sup> (Gobierno de Andalusia, 2017) due to the serious structural poverty and social marginalisation of its population, which suffers from poor quality housing and a lack of urban infrastructure, facilities, and public services. Moreover, the area is characterised by high absenteeism and school failure rates, high levels of unemployment, a lack of professional training opportunities, poor health and hygiene, and social exclusion.

For this reason, the participating school was designated as a “special difficulty” school and included in the Compensatory Education Programme in 2003. In spite of the measures set out under the Educational Compensation Plan, the educational outcomes and school environment did not improve, which led the school’s management team and the educational community to implement the learning communities’ model in the 2011–2012 school year.

According to data reported in the school’s educational project (Contexto de investigación, 2012), the majority of the students’ families experience social and cultural exclusion. Specifically, 36% of women are illiterate and 75% have not completed primary

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<sup>3</sup> The unemployment rate for all identified disadvantaged areas (*Zonas Desfavorecidas Identificadas* or ZDI in Spanish) is almost 6% higher than the regional average (26.61% for men and 28.84% for women in 2017). In these ZDI, there are 346,667 unemployed persons, more than 20% of the total number of unemployed in the region. Of these, approximately 92,700 are between 16 and 64 years of age and have no schooling (25.5% of the total). As regards dwellings, 51,127 (34.4% of the total) are in a dilapidated, bad or deficient state, with significant differences with respect to the regional average for dwellings without sewage disposal, small dwellings or in buildings with four or more floors without a lift (Gobierno de Andalusia, 2016, p. 29).

school, while the percentage of illiterate men is somewhat lower (26%). In the Guadalquivir Industrial Estate as a whole, 35% of the population has completed secondary education and 16% is illiterate. These low schooling and literacy rates may explain, in part, the fact that the families have no educational expectations for their children and little motivation to participate in the activities organised by the school (Gobierno de Andalucía, 2016).

An additional factor is that more than 85% of the students are of Roma ethnicity. This influences the socio-educational characteristics of the students' families, which have significant illiteracy rates, as recognised by the Andalusian Ministry of Equality and Social Policy with respect to this population group:

Compared to 99.9% of the general population, 96.7% of Roma children of compulsory school age attend school; a figure which is set to rise to 99% by 2020. However, the high rate of schooling contrasts with other data: only 1.6% of the adult Roma population has completed non-compulsory secondary education compared to 19.5% of the general population, and the level of absolute illiteracy stands at 13.5% in this group, while the average in Spain is 2.19%. As regards functional illiteracy, the figure ranges from 7% to 9.7% among the general population and is 30.6% (58% according to the Fundación Secretariado Gitano) among the Roma community. (Consejería de Igualdad y Políticas Sociales, 2017, p. 22)

This is, therefore, a very complex context that has an enormous impact on educational culture, educational expectations, and family-school relations.

Regarding to the research team in charge of this project, we are members of the Educational Improvement Seminar at the University of Cordoba. The seminar provides consultancy services and advice to schools that have decided to become Learning Communities. For this reason, we are particularly interested in helping to improve schools located in different areas of the city. We have been working since 2011 with the school under study by supporting its actions from the Faculty of Education Sciences. Specifically, we participate in the recruitment and training of student volunteers, who work at the school throughout the year. We also hold an "Excellence for All" training seminar where we review, together with the teachers, the successful educational actions being carried out in the school. Our interest in the project stems from our responsibility towards and commitment to an area of the city facing enormous difficulties, which requires the engagement of various social agents to transform its reality. Our intention is to disseminate and provide evidence of how educational research can contribute to transforming schools.

## **Materials and Methods**

### **Design**

We have used a PAR design (McKernan, 1999) as the method of this study. Although PAR does not necessarily involve the use of quantitative or qualitative techniques, this research design usually depends on an interpretative rather than a positivist approach and is therefore framed within the qualitative research paradigm. We have chosen this paradigm based on our own logic as researchers who undertake research processes seeking to study subjective meanings drawn from the experience and practice of a particular formative process (through participants' reconstruction of a concrete reality via the narratives and discourses they produce) rather than to empirically verify hypotheses derived from a previously defined theoretical model (Flick, 2018). Because this type of research is not conducted on but with the participants,

the information produced is not independent of the context, experiences, and personal circumstances of the participants and the process requires flexible research designs (Abraham & Purkayastha, 2012).

Among the various qualitative research designs, we have opted for a PAR design due to its critical stance and democratising and emancipatory potential that enables more horizontal relations to be built between schools and local communities (Anderson, 2017), thus empowering families and communities. We believe that both of these PAR capacities (facilitate more horizontal relationships and empower families and communities) are necessary to strengthen family-school relations and engagement, central objectives of this action research process. For this reason, we deemed PAR to be the most coherent and consistent option for conducting the project.

We understand PAR as a transformative research approach in which the aim is not only to generate and disseminate knowledge but to effect practical change as a path to creating knowledge (Bradbury, 2010). In our particular case, this involves a proposal to provide training for family members in order to facilitate parental involvement in the school. In this regard, PAR has brought together understanding and action by combining theory and practice.

Throughout this research, people involved in a concrete reality (educational processes in a specific school) developed a systematic intervention (the design and implementation of a family training scheme) to transform and improve that reality (Sepúlveda-Ruiz, Calderón Almendros, & Torres Moya, 2012). In doing so, some stakeholders in the educational community who have traditionally been more passive and had less decision-making power, such as families or neighbourhood social organisations, play a more active role in the school's future. In this line, Anderson (2017) describes PAR as democratic disruption within usually technocratic schools and universities.

We implemented the PAR methodology conducting cyclical processes of research and action over different phases as described in more detail below: planning and analysis of the problem, action, observation, and reflection (Elliott, 1993; Kemmis & MacTaggart, 1988). In each of these cycles, we developed a critical action plan to improve a situation or overcome challenges, reach agreements to put the design into practice, analyse the effects of the action and finally, reflect on the effects designing a new plan. Thus, following this initial study, a new cycle begins again with the aim of improving the difficulties identified in the first cycle.

Over the course of these phases, we used the techniques of critical communicative methodology (Gómez, Latorre, & Flecha García, 2006) to establish a constructive dialogue with the social actors of the researched scenario. In this way, dynamics are created that seek to understand daily situations that occur in the school, that is, to interpret these phenomena in natural settings where they occur according to the meanings the people involved attach to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2012). In our specific case, these situations are related to family training and family involvement in the ASEs with a view to solving any problems that may arise.

## **Procedure and Participants**

Consistent with the above, this research was conducted in line with the PAR phases. As Melero-Aguilar (2012) pointed out, given the special features of this methodological approach, it is important that members of the research team facilitate the processes, build links with the participants in a horizontal manner and contribute their experience and research techniques in a committed and confidential manner that is respectful of the school's and families' decisions.

### *Phase 1: Action plan*

This first phase corresponds to the steps described by Ander-Egg (2003): defining needs and demands, getting to know the stakeholders, and forming the work team. With this aim, several meetings were with the school's management team to analyse the suitability of the project and determine whether it was coherent with the objectives of the learning community.

In addition, two assemblies were held with the students' families to explain the project and identify their interests and needs. A total of 12 to 15 mothers, volunteers from the University of Cordoba, a social educator, two collaborators from an important non-governmental social organisation (NGO) in the neighbourhood and the research professors involved in the project took part in the assemblies. In both assemblies, the mothers' interests and concerns emerged, as well as their desire to commit themselves to the activity. Three priority themes were addressed during the meetings: (a) learning to read and write; (b) preparation for the test for driving a car, and (c) educational guidelines for their children. Following the families' proposals, the project was then redefined and adapted to their interests and needs accordingly. This process consisted in redesigning the initially planned training actions in line with the three aspects indicated by the families, which were finally defined as follows: a reading and writing literacy workshop, a family health literacy workshop, and a computer workshop to prepare the participants to sit for the theory test for car drivers (digital and media literacy area).

In this first phase, the work team was also formed. The team was comprised of one research professor, a collaborating teacher from the school, two social mediators from the NGO, and three students enrolled in the bachelor's degree programmes in primary education and social education who had previous experience as volunteers and collaborators in the Educational Improvement Seminar of the University of Cordoba. The students were responsible for carrying out the training actions.

Once the work team was set up, the activities were planned and organised. One person was responsible for the overall coordination, while the other members were in charge of conducting the workshops.

### *Phase 2: Action*

The training workshops for the families began in this phase. As mentioned above, three learning spaces were set up: a reading and writing workshop, a family health and education workshop, and a computer workshop to prepare the participants for the theory test for car drivers. The workshop schedules and the people involved were decided upon by consensus at the first assembly. It was agreed that a morning session would be held weekly in a space at the school to address each of the themes. Volunteers (teachers and students) from the Faculty of Education at the University of Cordoba were in charge of each of the activities.

As regards the duration of the workshops, the reading and writing workshop continued until the end of the school year, and at the request of family members, has been repeated in successive years. The other two workshops continued for less than 3 months and were finally suspended as the family members gradually stopped attending.

### *Phase 3: Observation of the action: information production*

Over the course of the activities, the research team, those responsible for the training actions, and the participating families systematically produced information. The complexity of the investigated reality requires, therefore, an in-depth approach capable of addressing different subjectivities by means of qualitative techniques and tools.

Field journals and semi-structured interviews were used as research instruments. Those in charge of the training activities and the collaborating teacher of the Educational Improvement Seminar of the University of Cordoba used the field journals to collect the participants' observations and reflections on the workshops.

The purpose of the semi-structured interviews was to learn more about the participants' perception of the activities and the impact of the training on the families by reconstructing the lived experiences with them and interpreting the meaning they attached to these experiences. At the end of the training process, five key informants were interviewed: a participating mother, the school principal, a social educator, an educator from the NGO, and the literacy workshop facilitator. The interviewees were selected according to the criterion of structural heterogeneity (Vallés, 2007) with the intention of producing information and meanings from potentially different viewpoints and discourses.

Once selected, the space and time of the interview was negotiated with all of the participants, who gave their informed consent. At the time of the research, the body in charge of financing and supervising the project did not require a statement of third-party approval. However, to ensure ethical research practices and protect the participants' safety, privacy, and confidentiality, we requested their informed consent. As suggested by Rapley (2012), this consisted in asking participants for their voluntary consent to participate in the research and permission to make audio recordings of the interviews after informing them of the following aspects:

- the research objectives and procedures in general and of the interviews in particular;
- the possibility of withdrawing from the study at any time, not responding to the questions or withdrawing their data;
- the confidentiality of the information provided;
- and the use of the information solely for non-commercial, academic and scientific purposes.

#### *Phase 4: Reflection on and analysis of information*

This last phase was dedicated to analysing the information produced in the field journals and interviews. Following Bardín (1986), content analysis was the technique of choice to analyse the information. The interviews, which were recorded in audio, were transcribed and examined together with the field journals using an inductive strategy. Once all the information was converted into text, the analysis was carried out according to the following steps (García-Vargas & Ballesteros, 2019; Rapley, 2012):

- The texts were codified as hermeneutic units by the three authors of the article individually. To this end, fragments of text were grouped together and assigned different codes or labels (categories) depending on the idea, theme, or concept that best summarised their meaning. The following example illustrates the coding procedure (García-Vargas & Ballesteros, 2019; Rapley, 2012):

**Interviewer: How do you think the children benefit from their families attending this workshop? Does it have an effect on their academic achievement?**

**Participant:** I think [they benefit] tremendously, the testimonies are incredible . . . the fact that the mothers attend the workshops so their children can see them and say, “this is important.” The boys and girls in this neighbourhood and in any neighbourhood view their families as models and they like the same kind of music that their mothers like, they dress the same way. In other words, their mothers and fathers are their role models and if the mothers are going to school, the children realise the value they attach to it.

Role models -  
Benefits

Figure 1. Coding process example

- A series of categories emerged from the texts, which were then discussed and agreed upon by the research team. This discussion and agreement process reflects the iterative nature of content analysis itself, in which coding is not a linear process but successive cycles through which categories are defined and refined through constant comparisons between units that share similar meanings.
- Given that the categories were defined in teams, once the categories were established and their meaning agreed upon, a second coding was performed. This second moment was axial rather than emergent (García-Vargas & Ballesteros, 2019), which produced a hierarchical system of three categories that included 14 subcategories.
- Finally, the categories and subcategories were analysed considering both the regularity and variability of the information, and the findings were interpreted as they were obtained.

The three categories (and 14 subcategories) were identified as follows:

- Benefits: this category refers to the contributions of the experience for all the participants involved, including the mothers, volunteers, or members of the educational community in general.
- Challenges: this category comprises factors that had a negative impact on achieving the initial goals or desires that emerged in the first meetings with the mothers and the problems that arose during the workshop.
- Future perspectives: this category includes contributions made by the different groups to issues that, based on the participants' own experience and viewpoints, could improve the workshops and help to achieve the training objectives.

These three categories and their corresponding subcategories served as the basis for structuring, organising and interpreting the results. Following the analysis of the information and once the final results were obtained, the main aspects were discussed with all the participants to draw conclusions and begin a new PAR cycle.

At the request of the educational community, a second family training activity was organised during the 2017/2018 school year. A total of 17 women from the neighbourhood participated in this activity, which lasted 7 months. In the 2018/2019 school year the third edition of the activity was held. A total of 8 women from the neighbourhood participated and

it took place over a period of 4 months. In both cases, volunteers from the University of Cordoba were in charge of leading the activities and the NGO and the school aided in coordinating them.

### **Research Reliability**

In qualitative research, the quality and reliability of the study (Goetz & LeCompte, 1982; Ruiz Olabuénaga, 2012) does not lie in obtaining the same data if the study is replicated. For this reason, we have paid special attention throughout the entire process—from the data production to the analysis—to maintaining the maximum interpretative concordance of the results. The following measures were taken to ensure the reliability and trustworthiness of the study:

- All members of the research team were present in the processes to obtain and analyse information.
- Various procedures were used to record information when all the researchers were present, namely field notes, the recording of interviews and photographs. Additionally, the triangulation of information was ensured through the inclusion of the different voices of those participants involved in the project.
- The results of the study have been shared with the educational community for discussion.
- For the analysis, the first step was to create very descriptive categories, so that the team could organise it according to the same criteria. Inferential analysis was performed only when these categories were agreed upon.

### **Results**

In what follows, the results for each of the three categories described above are presented.

#### **Benefits**

The interviews revealed that the training provided benefits of different types: affective, formative, and relational.

On the affective level, the participants agreed that one of the most important contributions was enhanced self-esteem. Indeed, as one of the interviewees suggests, there appears to be a link between training and better self-esteem:

When you acquire knowledge, you feel a little more empowered, don't you? Their self-esteem also improves (...) they also feel less ridiculed. Why? Because if they have training, when they go to certain places people don't look down on them or single them out. (INT6\_NGO)

Enthusiasm, understood as an intrinsic motivation to learn, trust in one's own possibilities and take advantage of opportunities, is another of the benefits related to the affective aspects of the experience mentioned by one of the participants:

[One of] the benefits for the mothers who participated in this workshop is that they were enthusiastic during the process. I'm thinking right now, for example,

about one of the moms who attended and who'd already made the commitment a few years back to get her school certificate and I think that she still hasn't totally given up on the idea but, in some way, she's [more] enthusiastic about it and has said that it's possible. (INT1\_SOCIALED)

The mothers' enthusiasm was shared by the monitors who volunteered to run the workshops, which one interviewee described as being "prepared, committed, and motivated" (INT1\_SOCIALED).

Another of the benefits the participating mothers referred to in the interviews was greater autonomy. In this case, autonomy is linked to empowerment and independence, which are key factors in overcoming situations of social exclusion and discrimination.

Now they [the mothers] are freer... That's right, independence (...) If you don't have a school certificate, you can't work... as happens in many cases. Like in SADECO [the city's waste management and recycling company]. Of course, it's clear, people who have no training somehow also feel more discriminated against. And if you are already discriminated against because of your social situation, you have to add that too. (INT6\_NGO)

These affective or emotional benefits derived from other contributions of a formative nature, which constitute the second group of benefits. In this sense, the training was not only beneficial for the mothers who attended the workshops, but also had a positive effect on their children. As regards the mothers, the benefits have to do with the fact that they improved their reading and writing skills (an explicit element of the training) and the general training they received to find employment and gain access to the labour market. Paradoxically, although this was the main objective of the workshops, the mothers mentioned the benefits of the training less frequently in the interviews and when they did, attached less importance to them than the affective benefits mentioned above. This could be due to the importance of emotional well-being for these women, as they experience very stressful situations every day. Being in a relaxed environment in which to engage in other types of relationships may explain why they perceived greater benefits in affective terms than in the training itself.

In the interviews, the participants also remarked on the fact that new role models had been created for the children and that the mothers are now better prepared to help them with their schoolwork.

The mothers can be more attentive because if they're also receiving training and have some time and start doing something... well the children see them and, hey, if my mother can do it, so can I. (INT6\_NGO)

Moreover, the fact that the role models which emerged over the course of the process were linked to the training the families received and one of the aims of the schools is to promote learning in both the home and the school, these processes served to build stronger school-family relationships and ensure that the children receive a more coherent education.

We're role models for the children. We, the educators, the monitors, are role models for the children here. But the parents are the children's role model at home. So, if I see that my mother is interested in learning, that she's reading, that she's... I will be too. Now, of course, if I see my mother lying on the sofa all day, watching TV, I'm going to do the same thing. So if we all convey the same message, what happens? Well, as you get more training, we can all convey

the same message. They'll see it and realise it's necessary. That's good for the children. (INT6\_NGO)

As the social educator stated in the interview, because of these good relationships, the mothers and families involved came to view the schools in a more positive light, which in turn influenced the children's perception of the school and the utility of going:

I think that the main thing children see in the parents who attend the workshop is a role model, an example to follow. "Well, look, my parents are also going to school, since it might be important for my future. Because my parents also go to school." And so they will come to see the school as a place that is helping me and preparing me for a better future. (INT4\_SOCIALED)

The participating mother is also aware of the positive influence they can have on their children as role models. In this regard, one mother stated, "when they see that their mother is making an effort, the kids make more effort as if saying to their fathers 'if my mother comes and she's older, this school must be really good'" (INT2\_MOTHER).

The third group of benefits has to do with relational aspects. In this sense, having a point of encounter, a meeting place where the mothers could talk and feel supported by each other and the voluntary monitors was viewed as a beneficial transformative element by both the staff and the mothers involved in the experience. As one of the monitors in charge of the literacy workshop said, "I think that they also saw us as someone they could let off steam with, someone who they could talk to and who they could learn from and with at the same time" (INT4\_MONITOR).

The NGO also observed this benefit. As a member of NGO explained, "It's not just about more mothers coming, it's already a point of encounter for them and a place where they can talk, especially if they have time" (INT6\_NGO). Moreover, the fact that the volunteer staff did not live in the neighbourhood also seems to have reinforced this perception, as it enabled the mothers to relate "to different people from outside the neighbourhood, who are not from the school, but who want to help them to be better and more trained" (INT4\_MONITOR).

## **Challenges**

The interviews with the participants revealed different opinions regarding the difficulties and challenges that arose during the workshop. Some were related to subjective aspects, such as the lack of commitment or prejudices, while others had to do with the social context, such as situations of poverty or lack of institutional support. Between these two extremes, another difficulty was identified in relation to communication. Specifically, we observed that the mothers and volunteers found it difficult to establish open and honest communication and thus engage ineffective and egalitarian dialogue.

Moreover, there seemed to be a lack of commitment on the part of the participants as attendance was low, they failed to do the activities at home or they withdrew from the project. According to the social educator, the NGO educators, and the director, this lack of commitment was due to the participants' urgent material needs given the context of poverty in which they live. As the social educator explained,

These families have many needs and although it's true that they've expressed a desire to be trained, they have to deal with lots of things and then can't fulfil their commitment to the workshop. I think it's a question of priorities. I mean,

they understand that they need training but they have all these everyday needs they have to deal with on a daily basis. (INT1\_SOCIALED)

However, when analysing this issue from the viewpoint and voices of the participants themselves, revealing nuances come to light. The contributions of the Roma educators from the NGO, whose main function is to mediate between the families and the school, are very important. According to them, the lack of commitment is due to three interdependent factors. The first is related to the fact that immediate rewards such as a snack or breakfast were provided to garner the participants' interest and engage them, as one of the educators remarked:

That's what we told you, if they do come, they'll come for 10 minutes one day, have breakfast, and leave... [they say] I'm leaving because I have to... they aren't reliable. I repeat, because they don't see it as being necessary (INT6\_NGO)

In the opinion of the Karima educators, this lack of commitment is perpetuated through the family role models. This means that both the children and the mothers would need to be re-educated, participate regularly in the activities and set attainable goals for themselves. Finally, this low level of commitment may also be due to the fact that some of the activities were not meaningful for the participants.

Other factors are related to how the activity was organised. Several participants remarked that the schedule was inconvenient (early afternoons) and that the activity was unrelated to the school project. However, decisions regarding the timing of the workshop were made at the assembly held at the beginning of the activity. On several occasions, the school administrators mentioned that they could not give their opinion about the benefits or difficulties of the activity because they did not have sufficient knowledge about it. Indeed, a mixed committee was not set up in the school to follow up the activity, nor was the learning community's management committee consulted about the workshop.

As a resistance factor, the mothers also remarked on the young age of the university volunteers in charge of the activity and the opinions of other people in the neighbourhood:

The same women always come here because the worst thing is that the first time maybe 7, 8, or 10, let's say 10, come, but then, as soon as they step out the door and go out they start talking... telling the other women... because it's clear they've stopped coming because you're such young girls and me, for example, I don't see you like that. You've helped me with some things, not others because I already knew about them... but the people here have very strange ways. (INT2\_MOTHER)

As regards the influence of the context outside the school on the activity, we observed that several interviewees referred to the fact that public institutions do not provide resources or support for educational initiatives aimed at training families. The often extreme poverty that obligates mothers to prioritise precarious economic activities over educational ones is a salient factor since it is the mothers who are the heads of the household. Thus, they are forced to change their priorities, and activities, such as this one, are secondary in their lives.

If I've got a good-for-nothing and I'm the one in my house who has to make a living, what do you expect? I don't need to know how to read and write, I need to grab my bag and go out and get myself selling. (INT6\_NGO)

Finally, another significant aspect that emerged is what we have categorised as communication codes. This aspect refers to the difficulties the participants encountered in understanding some of the issues that arose in the workshop and the discussions about them, which were often misinterpreted. For example, as one mother stated,

Another important thing is that you can't be paying for that "cake" to make mothers come. I'm telling you this because then they come for the cake, not because of you. We're here because we're interested, okay so one day there was cake... that's a very different thing or because we all decided to have one. But we're here to study, not to have cake. And if you say something about bringing cake you're going to have to bring a cake every week and I don't think you're here to be paying for cake. (INT2\_MOTHER)

The above comment reveals how certain actions that are not strictly educational and seek to increase motivation can have counterproductive effects if their meaning is not clearly understood. As regards this issue, the school principal stated that,

Well, the families also give us the answers we want to hear. And this happens more often than we think. When the families started out, you had breakfast with them, the families who were interested came and discussed their needs. (...) And it's true that the mothers come, and I'll tell you something, it's not that they lie, they say what we want to hear because they have a very tough reality. (INT3\_PRINCIPAL)

Again, mention is made of the need for communicative acts to be understood by everyone in all their complexity, otherwise, they become an obstacle to the continuity of the action. The mediator from the NGO is even more explicit about the risks of unclear communication:

I think it was well organised. By saying we're going to do a coffee chat, we're going to inform people... lots of people came, but the people misinterpreted the information we gave... or that you gave. Because the people, what they assumed, is that helping them to get a driving licence meant that they would get their driving licence here... so that didn't work out. As for computer science, very good. What happens is that when these people come to a meeting they tell you what you want to hear, understand? They commit in some way, but without any commitment at all. (INT6\_NGO)

Here the mediator refers to the difficulty of engaging in honest, open communication, especially when explaining one's particular interests to the educators or volunteers.

You're all just young kids, you don't know the reality of these neighbourhoods, you have good intentions, and are totally devoted, but you have to know how to set limits because if you don't, many times people and life will get the better of you, do you understand? And people can confuse situations... I mean, I'm the volunteer, I come to help you and listen to you, but that's it, you know? I can't... I can accompany you home, but I won't meet you for a coffee as if you were a friend of mine, which we can do someday, but at first? We have to establish a hierarchy, and though it's not nice to say, it's clear that we have to know what our role is here. (INT7\_NGO)

In short, discussing and reflecting on communicative processes are important aspects that must be taken into account from the beginning to the end of the activity, since they influence the participants' motivation and help to build ties among them.

### **Future Perspectives**

In the interviews, the participants highlighted the need for some type of external recognition to improve attendance, motivate the families to participate, and enable them to receive benefits of different kinds. In the opinion of the social educator, institutions need to be involved and should make training a requirement for the participants to receive benefits and improve their living conditions:

If, in addition to all this, there were some kind of benefits or if some institution was involved. For example, if we could say: if you do this training you could have access to this job or opt for this type of scholarship or something like that. (INT1\_SOCIALED)

Economic incentives are not considered a priority, but are instead viewed as a way to employ the available resources in a better manner and commit the participants to the training: "give the family aid for 6 months, but with the commitment that they will attend the training sessions during these 6 months, that way there would be no need to spend more money" (INT3\_PRINCIPAL).

These contributions reveal another issue of importance to ensure the success of the workshops: involving and coordinating different institutions. The groups interviewed consider the neighbourhood synergies to be a crucial aspect in this regard and mentioned inter-institutional networks as a way of promoting the project and highlighting its potentialities. The social educator explains this very clearly:

Well, if we could talk to some kind of public body and sign some kind of agreement or something and be able to get the social services, the City Hall, the Office of Equality involved, for example, because there are many women who, I don't know if you know that a network of parents' associations has been created in the neighbourhood and right now a total of 45 women are involved. So, if the economics don't work out to anchor this project in the school, it might be possible, perhaps as an alternative, to propose that the training be given through the parent's network, there's a large group of people in the neighbourhood and even if this would be the place, it could be open to more families and that could help the project. (INT1\_SOCIALED)

In this same line, the mediators of the NGO highlight the inter-institutional actions that are already being implemented to increase participation in the training workshops:

Right now, a lot of people are intervening here. Let me explain. We, for example, bring people from outside the neighbourhood, who are not strangers to them but come here. With the cooking workshops, the social services also come here. So, we're seeing more people and the mother who was not very sure about coming joins too and if not, then someone who lives on such and such a street says I am doing this in such and such a place, ah, well I also want to and that's it. (INT6\_NGO)

However, the NGO mediators are wary of this proposal, as they are aware that the people in the neighbourhood do not have a very positive image of the school, which is difficult to change: “When you tell people in the neighbourhood, now less so, that we are working on (...), they say ‘huh’” (INT6\_NGO).

In the opinion of the school principal, it is crucial that different institutions intervene in order to improve the workshops. As the principal states, the training needs to be coordinated and have an emphasis on educational action as a means to transform the social situation:

Well, I propose that the educational project and all the necessary institutions participate to do a good job. Integrate the school. Otherwise, we will repeat the same format that we have been doing for 40 years and that means handing out alms when there’s money. (INT3\_PRINCIPAL)

On the other hand, the members of the discussion groups refer to organisational aspects of the workshops which they believe could be improved. In this regard, the volunteer monitor in charge of the training remarked on the possibility of offering a schedule more in line with the families’ needs: “Well, the schedule, make it accessible for the families, but then if something unexpected arises. . .well nothing can be done to prevent that” (INT4\_MONITOR).

Those in charge of the NGO also believe that fewer workshops should be offered to more effectively meet the training needs of the families in this context. In other words, the workshops need to be aligned with the families’ needs and interests:

That’s right, let’s give good quality. Let’s say, we’re not going to offer three or four workshops, we’re going to offer two that we think are necessary and essential (...). So, let’s say, we’re going to teach literacy and we’re going to help them get their school certificate. To sit the exam in May, June, or September; I think there are three exams, for the certificate, okay? Right now I think those are the first needs they have. And that’s what we should do. Because if we don’t, then it’s going to be frustrating... you’re going to say, loads of great, marvellous workshops... and then nobody comes or you only get one or two. In the end you’re the one who gets frustrated. (INT6\_NGO)

It is important that the training workshops be organised in such a way as to facilitate attendance, because the mothers’ priority is to look after and support their families, as we have already mentioned. While their desire for training is important, the objectives must be attainable and progressive.

The following table provides a summary of the three categories analysed with their respective subcategories and literal fragments to exemplify their interpretation.

Table 1. Summary of categories, sub-categories, and examples

| <b>Benefits</b>                                                                                                                                           | <b>Challenges</b>                                                                                                                                       | <b>Future perspectives</b>                                                                                                                                     |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Self-esteem                                                                                                                                               | Lack of commitment                                                                                                                                      | External recognition                                                                                                                                           |
| <i>when you acquire knowledge, you feel a little more empowered, don’t you? Their self-esteem also improves (...) they also feel less ridiculed. Why?</i> | <i>These families have many needs and although it’s true that they have expressed a desire to be trained, they have to deal with lots of things and</i> | <i>If, in addition to all this, there was some kind of benefits or if some institution was involved. For example, if we could say: if you do this training</i> |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Because if they have training, when they go to certain places people don't look down on them or single them out</i>                                                                                                                                                       | <i>then can't fulfil their commitment to the workshop.</i>                                                                                                                                                                                  | <i>you could have access to this job or opt for this type of scholarship or something like that</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| Enthusiasm                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Organisation                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Synergies                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <i>one of the moms who attended and who'd already made the commitment a few years back to get her school certificate and I think that she still hasn't totally given up on the idea but, in some way, she's [more] enthusiastic about it and has said that it's possible</i> | <i>because of the monitors' availability it had to be changed to the afternoons and not at a very good time</i>                                                                                                                             | <i>if we could talk to some kind of public body and sign some kind of agreement or something and be able to involve the social services, the City Hall, the Office of Equality, for example, because there are many women who, I don't know if you know that a network of parents' associations has been created in the neighbourhood and right now a total of 45 women are involved.</i> |
| Training                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Prejudices                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Organisation                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <i>The mothers can be more attentive because if they're also receiving training and have some time and start doing something . . .</i>                                                                                                                                       | <i>The same women always come here because the worst thing is that the first time maybe 7, 8, or 10, let's say 10, always come, but then, as soon as they step out the door and go out they start talking... telling the other women...</i> | <i>the schedule, make it accessible for the families, but then if something unexpected arises... well nothing can be done to prevent that</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Role models                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Lack of institutional support                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <i>when they see that their mother is making an effort, the kids make more effort as if saying to their fathers 'if my mother comes and she's older, this school must be really good'</i>                                                                                    | <i>I can't say anything about the benefits because for that there'd have to be a follow-up on the workshop, okay? So I can't give an opinion, I can't say if it's been beneficial or not... I don't know</i>                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Relationships                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Poverty                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <i>it's not just about more mothers coming, it's already a point of encounter for them and a place where they can talk, especially if they have time</i>                                                                                                                     | <i>If I've got a good-for-nothing and I'm the one in my house who has to make a living, what do you expect? I don't need to know how to read and write, I need to grab my bag</i>                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |

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*and go out and get myself  
selling*

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Communication codes

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## Discussion

In the discussion, we will examine both the transformative and exclusionary elements within the framework of critical communicative methodology (Gómez et al., 2006).

The transformative elements are explored from the perspective of both observed benefits and future perspectives, while the dynamics of exclusion are associated with the resistances affecting the participants, the school as an engaged educational and cultural space, and the neighbourhood context, which is characterised by poverty and the risk of social exclusion.

The activity had a transformative impact on the participating mothers as it took place in an educational space that allowed them to build relationships and engage in dialogue. This also provided them with the opportunity to learn and overcome their own educational disadvantages resulting from school failure in their childhood and youth and brought clear benefits in many respects. Some of the benefits were more specific, such as improved reading and writing skills, while others were of a more personal but no less important nature. As several participants acknowledged, feelings of enthusiasm and intrinsic motivation had a positive effect on their self-esteem, and in the medium term, on their autonomy and capacity to seek labour opportunities. In addition, this experience in emotional improvement had a positive effect on the mothers' relationships with their children as it enabled them to take a more active role in their schooling. In the same line, García-Bacete (2003) highlighted that family involvement in school can enhance parents' sense of self-efficacy, increase their understanding of school programmes and improve communication with their children, among others. Participatory experiences, therefore, become a process of personal empowerment with respect to school culture and result in a better understanding between the family and the school, thus giving parents the confidence they need to participate and cooperate in actions for educational success and school management committees. And, most importantly, they receive positive feedback from their children.

This last aspect is of particular importance for the school itself since it is a difficult task to motivate families in socially excluded neighbourhoods to become actively involved in schools. In this regard, the literature has shown the clear benefits of family participation in improving schools (Bolívar, 2006; Epstein, 2011; Gordon & Cui, 2012; Includ-Ed Consortium, 2011; Powell, Son, File, & Froiland, 2012).

Future perspectives also have a transformative effect from the moment they are viewed as an opportunity for the continuity of family training, as in fact occurred in successive school years. Such activities also contribute to improving the school's image as a "ghetto school" and making it more attractive for those living in the neighbourhood. In doing so, not only do enrolment numbers increase, but also the heterogeneity of the student body, as at present most of the children attending the school come from Roma families. It is also important to emphasise

the need for better planning and organisation to maximise the effectiveness of the activity. This can be done by offering more accessible schedules and providing more realistic training in line with the mothers' needs and demands. Although our aim was to cover a wide range of topics during the training, it was often difficult for the mothers to attend as their main priority was to support and care for their families. To ensure a successful PAR experience, it is crucial that the researchers' and the school's expectations adjust to the participants' training motivations and needs. Depending on the educational and contextual requirements, this entails a significant effort to re-evaluate the activity in the framework of a flexible, dynamic, and changing organisation (Smith, Bratini, Chambers, Vance-Jensen, & Romero, 2010).

Support is also needed from the institutions working in the area, such as the City Council's Social Services Department, the Women's Institute of Andalusia of the Regional Ministry of Equality and Social Policy, and the Regional Ministry of Education. All of them have undertaken initiatives and interventions in the neighbourhood and the common synergies among them could ensure the continuity of this family training activity. In this line, the provision of economic incentives or aid for the families has been proposed to increase participants' motivation to attend and discourage them from withdrawing to work in precarious jobs that are essential for supporting their families.

The exclusionary aspects are related to the social context, the activity itself, and personal issues. With regard to the context, we cannot overlook the effects of poverty, marginalisation, and the presence of minorities, such as the Roma, or other indicators relating to personal issues. Such issues can be understood when analysed from a contextual and intersectional perspective; for example, how the family's educational culture affects their relationship with the school when it is based on the parents' experiences of school failure in exclusive rather than inclusive educational models (Booth & Ainscow, 2011). In this line, Parra, Álvarez-Roldán, and Gamella (2017) have argued that school failure is influenced by factors such as the ethnic segregation experienced by the Roma community (both in the cities and the schools themselves) and the educational disadvantages of the families, who must adapt to cultural and curricular models that differ greatly from their own. School failure exacerbates situations of economic dependence and political subordination that, in the opinion of Parra, Álvarez-Roldán, and Gamella (2017), could jeopardise the rights this ethnic group has acquired in the past decades as citizens. Indeed, the "lack of commitment" to the family training cannot be attributed solely to personal issues but must be seen in the light of these contextual and cultural factors characteristic of poor or socially excluded neighbourhoods and areas.

With respect to the activity itself, two aspects emerge in the form of resistances. On the one hand, family training was disconnected from the school's educational project. While it is true that the school provided spaces to carry out the activity, coordination between the participants and the school's teaching staff and management team was weak or non-existent. A clear indicator of this lack of coordination is the fact that a mixed commission was not set up to plan and organise the AES and no representative was appointed to the school's management committee. This is surprising given that, in the learning community model, such initiatives are decided upon and monitored through these organisational structures. In fact, we believe that this could be hindering the development of decision-making and educational participation models (Includ-Ed Consortium, 2011) that bring greater benefits for schools and improve student learning (Aróstegui, Darretxe, & Beloki, 2013).

The second issue is more subtle, as it reveals the difficulty of harmonising communicative codes to ensure a meaningful and genuinely egalitarian dialogue between those involved in the activity: the mothers, the voluntary university students, the NGO collaborators, and the school directors. This is a key issue to promote family training in the future and has also been highlighted in other research as a determining factor in family participation and the school-family relationship (Llevot & Bernad, 2015). All those involved must analyse and

reflect on the communicative processes that arise over the course of the activity in order to transform the often not so visible privileges and hierarchical power structures that operate in communication and decision-making processes (Janes, 2016) into opportunities that enable a more horizontal and egalitarian dialogue which respects the cultural diversity of all the participants. As Aubert, García, and Racionero (2009) have argued, if this does not occur, communication will act as a barrier to actions for educational success.

The results of this study have implications at various levels. On the one hand, as academics, we consider it our duty to conduct projects such as these that involve the transfer of knowledge from academia to the school setting. Schools located in contexts of poverty and exclusion need research support to improve their academic outcomes (Paik, Mamaril Choe, Gozali, Kang, & Janyan, 2019). On the other hand, it is also important to prepare future teachers to understand the importance of working with families as key to children's school success (Epstein, 2018). Likewise, we think that this research enhances community engagement in contexts of risk (Flecha & Soler, 2013) and offers a possible model of action for educational administrators to consider. Therefore, the contributions of this research can be useful for both the participants and the contexts involved as it provides keys to overcome the main obstacles and develop new and more successful strategies for future training initiatives and PAR cycles. Our findings can also be of use to other educational communities that wish to implement family training activities in their schools.

As a research process, we are aware that the study has some limitations, such as the number of participants interviewed. Although a heterogeneous group of stakeholders participated in the experience, it would have been desirable to increase the number of interviews (by including, for example, initial interviews or interviews during the process to learn more about how the experience is progressing) and gather more observations in the field journals. However, the participants and sources of information were selected in this manner because we placed more importance on the representativity of the group to which they belonged and the participants' own discourse than the number of interviews. Our intention was not to generalise the results to other contexts, but to describe and interpret a local, subjective reality through the discourses and narratives of the people involved. This in-depth understanding provides us clues about facilitating, transforming, and excluding elements. These elements can be useful in developing PAR processes in other contexts or similar family training proposals, albeit with the necessary precautions and contextualisation.

As future lines of research, we are currently conducting a new PAR cycle, which is now in phase 2 (action). For the first phase, we have already taken into account the considerations analysed in this article. In the coming months, we intend to move forward with the next phases and produce and analyse information that will help us to determine the progress, limitations, and challenges of the action. In short, the in-depth analysis of this educational experience has allowed us to advance in our knowledge of these complex interventions to break the spiral of poverty, and in line with Paulo Freire (1970), to transform difficulties into possibilities.

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Acknowledgements: We thank the Universidad de Córdoba (Spain), which supported this project under the I Plan Propio Galileo, in the Proyectos UCO-Social- Innova section (June, 2015). We also greatly appreciate the participation and dedication of everyone involved in the project.

Declaration of Interest Statement: No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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### Article Citation

Segovia-Aguilar, B., García-Cabrera, M. del M., & Hinojosa-Pareja, E. F. (2020). Transforming difficulties into possibilities: Family training as action for educational success in contexts of poverty. *The Qualitative Report*, 25(6), 975-998. <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol25/iss4/7>

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