

Digital Educational Platforms: An Emerging School-Family Communication Channel

Núria Llevot Calvet ¹, Olga Bernad Caveró ^{2*} and Gabriella Aleandri³

^{1,2} University of Lleida, Spain

³ Roma Tre University, Italy

ABSTRACT

The establishment of effective communication channels is the basis of building good relations and encourages the participation and involvement of families. In primary schools, there is an increasing need to implement new channels of information and communication with families, as new technologies are a fundamental tool. Furthermore, if we consider the presence of foreign students in the center, this need is even more pressing. A new emerging channel is educational platforms. The focus is on their use as an innovative element in school-family communication and on how to improve family involvement in the school. This paper is framed in the project "cultural diversity and equal opportunities at school" (recercaixa2015 call) and the perceptions and attitudes of teachers and families on educational platforms were explored as a tool for information and communication between school and family. It is based on the results of an ethnography (in-depth interviews and observations) carried out in ten schools in Catalonia with a high percentage of immigration, during the 2017-18 school year. Among the main results, accessibility and ease of use, digital literacy, aptitude, speed of communication, information control, are both weak and strengths points, highlighted by both interlocutors (teachers and family members). In all the schools studied some actions have been implemented to favour their use and eliminate some identified barriers.

Keywords: school-family relationship, school-family communication channels, educational platform, ICT, primary education.

1. Introduction

The research project "Cultural diversity and equal opportunities at school" won Recercaixa 2015 call. One of the main objectives was to promote positive relations between school and families. Some of the results of this project are presented in this paper. Currently, a positive relationship between schools and families is a need shared by all the stakeholders and benefits the school, the students and the families themselves (Llevot & Bernad, 2015; Andrés & Giró, 2015; Aleandri, 2011; Epstein, 1992). Undoubtedly, the establishment of effective communication channels is the basis of building good relations and encourages the participation and involvement of families in the school (Bernad and Llevot, 2018, 2016a).

The main channels of communication with families are (Bernad, 2018; Garreta & Llevot, 2015): personal interviews and meetings at the beginning of the school year, personal contact at the time of arrival and departure, the school diary, circulars and informative notes, the telephone, etc. On the other hand, schools are immersed in the so-called society of information and science (Burch, 2005) and network society (Castells, 2006), and technological resources are part of its daily life. Regarding the school-family communication, new digital channels have gradually been implemented (Goodall, 2016; Sánchez-Garrote & Cortada-Puyol, 2015), with variable acceptance according to the school: websites and blogs, with a more informative than communicative function (Macià, 2016), e-mail, of limited use in schools with higher immigration percentages (Bernad, 2016), and the social networks (instagram, twitter, facebook, etc.).

However, several studies conducted by our research group confirm the persistence of barriers that hinder communication and therefore relationships, both on the part of schools and families. In this sense, there is a need to implement new information and communication channels with families, as new technologies are a fundamental tool (Aleandri & Refrigeri, 2014). Furthermore, if we consider the presence of foreign students in the center, this need is even more pressing. With the new migrations, the challenge of an inclusive education is extended to other cultures (Llevot, Bernad and Molet, 2016; Aleandri & Russo, 2015; Llevot, 2012) However, we must bear in mind that cultural diversity was not a new phenomenon and it has long been present in classrooms in a more or less visible way¹.

The introduction of Information and Knowledge Technologies (hereinafter, ICT) in school practices and teaching methodologies, is a clear need in all schools to respond to these new social demands and offer students efficient and enriching experiences that allow developing multiple intelligences and potentialities (Arroyo González, 2013). Some programs as the Program School 2.0 (2009-2012) were implemented in our country, especially in secondary education (Area *et al.*, 2014). An aspect also to be taken into account and perhaps as an echo of the implementation of these programs is the use of digital platforms in schools, as a tool for student work and management center, and also for informative and communicative use. On the other hand, the importance of

¹ Recall, for example, the case of the Roma students in Spain (Llevot, 2005; Garreta and Llevot, 2007)

forming a digitally competent citizenship was reflected in the proposal for the 2018-2019 course to include digital competence in the tests of basic competences for 12 aged pupils.

However, the methodological changes are still far from the expected results, and new technologies are still used in most cases as a instrument or material complementary to the traditional teaching methods implemented (Tirado *et al.*, 2014), without involving, in most cases, substantial changes in communication processes within the center and with the educational community, especially with the families (Bernad & Llevot, 2016b; Garreta & Llevot, 2015).

On the other hand, several authors point to a negative attitude towards ICT (Inan & Lowther, 2010) and the lack of teacher training in ICT and especially in its use as a pedagogical tool (Pérez & Rodríguez, 2016; Aleandri & Girotti, 2011; Marcellán & Aguirre, 2005), as explanatory factors for the scarce introduction of ICT in educational pedagogies. Almost partly, these factors also could explain the limited success of digital channels in school-family communication. Another factors as the lack of teacher time (Palomares, 2015) would have to be added. On the part of families, the lack of access (and connectivity) to technological resources (Heath *et al.*, 2015), lack of training² (Sánchez-Garrote & Cortada-Puyol, 2015), lack of time (difficulty reconciling work, family and school schedules) (Llevot & Bernad, 2015), lack of interest towards the schooling of their sons and daughters in general or by using alternative channels to the current ones. These elements are undoubtedly related to the digital divide (Macia & Garreta, 2018).

This paper focuses on educational platforms, as an innovative element in school-family communication in schools of primary education, of maximum and high complexity³, and its reflection in the improvement of family involvement in schools and in the children education, analysing the perceptions and attitudes of teachers and families. As a secondary objective, other functions of the educational platforms were also analysed, such as, for example, if they favour the effectiveness of the work of teachers and students and facilitate the management of the center.

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2. Methods

This research is framed in the third phase of the project “Cultural diversity and equal opportunities in school” (Recercaixa2015 call) and it was carried out using qualitative methodology; specifically, during the 2017-18 school year, an ethnography (Robertt & Lisdero, 2016; Serra, 2004) was carried out in ten primary schools, seven public schools and three private schools with a concert, with a percentage of pupils of foreign origin exceeding 50% and located in different parts of the territory of Catalonia (Spain). These centres were chosen since the results of a survey that had been carried out in a previous phase to 485 primary schools. Educational

² This barrier is related in some way to the socioeconomic difficulties that some families are going through.

³ The Department of Education classifies schools according to some context indicators, according to their degree of complexity: low, medium, high and maximum complexity, with the aim of providing high and maximum-complexity centers with the necessary resources to achieve their- educational objectives.

platforms were used in four of these centres and for the purposes of this study, we will focus on these schools.

Although for the ethnographic study, different techniques of information collection were used, this paper is based on the results of the observations (participant and non-participant) of different moments in the life of the centre and on in-depth interviews to teachers and families. Among other questions, the interview script investigated the communication channels, the advantages and disadvantages of each of them and the perceived barriers, and the actions implemented in the centres to correct them. This text emphasizes educational platforms, among other digital channels.

3. Results

Traditional channels, such as the school calendar, circulars and informative notes printed on paper, continue to be used, among others, in a variable percentage in the schools investigated. But the new (or not so new) digital channels (websites, blogs, Facebook, Instagram, Whatsapp, etc.) have been increased. In this context, educational platforms emerge as a new tool in the management of the school and at the same time as a channel of information and communication with families.

These school platforms are digital platforms in the cloud. They began to be implemented in secondary schools a few years ago, and they are currently being introduced in primary schools. These platforms, which have similar functions, could adopt different names: clickedu, moodle, educamos, etc. Except for some differences regarding the interface, ease of use and some functions, they all have as a common element four axes of action: the centre, the teaching staff, the pupils and the families.

Educational platform is an online platform that facilitates the academic and economic management of the center, for teachers it facilitates classroom management and tutorial action; and it also provides students with a personal learning, interaction and work environment. Finally, all of them are defined as a fluid and bidirectional channel of communication with families. Through an internal messaging service, it facilitates the sending of e-mails and SMS, news and notices, the justification of lack of assistance, authorizations, the consultation of the agenda, calendar of activities, etc.

Each member has a personal username and password, which gives access to their work space and active services, differentiated according to whether they are teachers, students or families. On the other hand, families can access their children's space to control the delivery of the activities requested by the teacher or exam notes, for example. This aspect is well valued by some of the mothers interviewed. Attendance control is another of the best valued aspects.

For their part, the directors point out the virtues of the incorporation of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), being an agile, efficient and effective tool in the management of the school and teachers, and in communicating with the families. They are convinced that educational platforms will also help improve teaching-learning processes in a short-term. In this

sense, in some of these centers, teaching innovation projects are also being implemented in which ICT are an important element.

3.1 Advantages

Regarding communication with families, teachers point out these advantages: saving paper by avoiding the printing of circulars and notes, the removal of temporary barriers, almost instantaneous contact through SMS and chats, speed and easy access to school information, facilitating the school follow-up for children and the involvement of parents in the education of their children (for example, some teacher / tutor incorporates complementary materials of the subjects and educational articles of interest to families, notes and comments on the school performance and attitudes of the students, the tasks to be carried out and even some photos about the activities carried out), the registration of the information (for example, it facilitates the transfer of information to the tutor of the following course), among other advantages.

On the part of the families, the speed in communication, which is sometimes instantaneous, the ease of use, intuitive navigation and organized content in a visual and practical way, are also highlighted. In this sense, it is noted that these platforms are accessible today from mobile devices such as tablets and smartphones, which facilitates access from various spatial and temporal environments, and they help eliminate the digital divide. As an example, some mothers comment that despite not being experienced in the use of new technologies and not using email in their daily lives, they find this tool very useful, which allows them instantaneously, as a group WhatsApp, get in touch with other mothers or with the teacher to answer questions when doing homework.

The agenda function is also indicated, both to control the duties and activities of the children and to arrange a tutoring or request information on any specific aspect. Being able to consult the activities of their children and the school or send a message to the tutor, at any time, is another aspect valued. As well as the fact of being able to process the application for grants online or the authorization to participate in school excursions.

3.2 Barriers

However, there are also some barriers, related to time, attitudes and training.

On the part of the teaching staff, the main drawbacks are: the "slavery" towards these tools, having to be aware of the messages received and answer them as soon as possible, as well as the personal time required to do so. Also, the time used to select and send informative notes, messages, photos, etc. Time that is often not counted within the hours of working.

Other barriers would be: lack of digital competence, insufficient training both in the management of ICT and in audiovisual culture. And above all, that although most of the families have a mobile phone, for different reasons, including lack of interest and low socio-cultural and economic level, only a small part assiduously accesses to the platform. In this line it is pointed out

that technological resources do not open new doors to the participation of families; The families farthest from the school and with which the traditional channels do not work, are also oblivious to these instruments.

On the part of the families, these main barriers are pointed out: the ignorance of the tools of the platform and the lack of training in ICT (digital illiteracy), the lack of access (either connectivity or lack of technological instruments), the lack of time for connect and the different attitudes of teachers. Some teachers are more likely than others to use digital media, it favours that the use of the messaging service could be more useful or less useful.

On the other hand, during the observation of some activities in a classroom of a high school, some students transmitted their complaints about the scarce and ineffective use of these technological tools in primary schools, compared to high schools. One of the reasons given was the limited digital competence of primary school teachers. They proposed to help primary school teachers, as volunteer trainers, in the implementation of these new instruments.

In summary, although these platforms by having an internal messaging service, favour the communication of families with the school and with the teaching staff, especially with tutors, and vice versa, it is also true that their use is restricted to a part of them. Some factors that come into play are the socio-cultural and socio-economic level of families, lack of training, and interest and attitudes, both by families and by teachers. The temporary space, which is adduced as an advantage by allowing to choose the moment of interaction, is in turn indicated as a barrier either because of the required dedication or because of social, labour and family obligations that hinder access to platforms. And in terms of access to the Internet and technological resources, it is pointed out that beyond the possible accessibility, it is a question of attitude and use of technology.

To overcome these detected barriers, the centres have implemented training and digital literacy actions aimed at families, to inform them about the platforms and resources available and how to use them. In this line, we highlight the initiative of one of the centers where students of higher levels taught a course for families, to overcome the barrier of lack of human resources to implement these courses.

We also highlight the fact that most families, although they do not have technological devices such as computers in their homes, have mobile phones with internet access and therefore other actions are designed in line to facilitate access and use of the platforms through the mobile phone.

4. Conclusion

Comparing the results of this study with those obtained in previous research (Garreta & Macià, 2017; Llevot & Bernad, 2016b; Bernad, 2016; Garreta & Llevot, 2015), a notable increase can be observed in the so-called new channels (which use digital tools such as websites, e-mail, blogs, etc.) to the detriment of the traditional ones (school diary, circulars, telephone, etc.).

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In a changing and diverse society (Redecker, 2011), these channels, which include educational platforms, are perceived as more effective than the traditional ones. Educational platforms are currently accessible from any digital device and usually have links to the centre's websites and blogs as well as the e-mail and sms service. They are perceived as effective due to their bidirectionality, the ease and speed of access to information, the removal of temporal and spatial barriers, as well as facilitating school follow-up and parental involvement and contributing to the formation of a digitally competent citizenry.

However, despite the actions implemented in schools, some challenges are also emerging, such as the involvement of families from different backgrounds, interculturally inclusive education, ICT training for both families and teachers, the elimination of stereotypes and cultural barriers and more proactive attitudes (both on the part of families and teachers), among others. It cannot be ignored that despite the rise of these new channels, direct contact continues to be, especially in highly complex schools, the main channel of family-school communication.

On the other hand, the type of communication established, the use of the platform's resources, the information and images available, draw in a certain way the construction of the centre's culture and of the relations between the centre, the teaching staff, the pupils and the families, and of mutual expectations. And latent functions such as control take on new forms.

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