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STUDENT TEACHERS VOLUNTEERING IN PRE-SERVICE PROGRAMMES IN SUCCESSFUL SCHOOLS: CONTRIBUTING TO THEIR SUCCESSFUL TRAINING

(CONSTRUYENDO UNA FORMACIÓN DEL PROFESORADO DE CALIDAD:
ESTUDIANTES DE GRADO DE EDUCACIÓN PARTICIPANDO EN PROGRAMAS
DE VOLUNTARIADO EN ESCUELAS DE ÉXITO)

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ABSTRACT

Following recent literature, the field of teacher education is considered as key factor in promoting school success. In this regard, this study is dedicated to clarifying which type of education is most effective to train successful teachers so that they can properly face the challenges of modern societies. This article contributes to this ongoing debate by providing the self-reported benefits among student teachers of the Rovira i Virgili University who have served as volunteers in Learning Communities where different Successful Educational Actions (SEAs) are executed. Learning Communities is an evidenced-based project which is widely implemented in schools

worldwide. This project is based on the development of SEAs that have been investigated by different European competitive projects. Findings illustrate that these actions are improving children's academic performance and school climate regardless of the context they are applied to. In the present study, based on a mixed-method approach, three different data collection techniques have performed with students teachers: group interviews, semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires. Results demonstrate the impact of being volunteers in these schools which are summarized on two main facts. First, the quality of the student teacher's training and professional experience improved through their involvement as volunteers in schools as Learning Communities. Second, this involvement in Successful Educational Actions has a great impact in the improvement of children's and families' learning. Drawing on these results, a reformulation of teacher education is openly discussed. In fact, research evidences the benefits of constructing teacher education programmes based on theories and practices that are scientifically effective to reduce educational inequalities.

KEYWORDS

Teacher education; Successful Educational Actions; student teachers; volunteers; pre-service teachers.

RESUMEN

Partiendo de la literatura científica la formación del profesorado se ha considerado como un factor clave para conseguir el éxito escolar. En este sentido, la investigación se ha centrado en aclarar qué tipo de educación es más efectiva para formar a las y los docentes para hacer frente de forma exitosa a los desafíos de la modernidad. Este artículo contribuye a este debate informando sobre los beneficios que aporta al alumnado de educación de la Universidad Rovira i Virgili su participación en calidad de voluntario/a en el proyecto Comunidades de Aprendizaje, en el cual se implementan Actuaciones Educativas de Éxito (AEE). Las Comunidades de Aprendizaje son un proyecto fundamentado en evidencias científicas que se lleva a cabo en diferentes escuelas de todo el mundo. Este proyecto se basa en el desarrollo de AEE que han sido investigadas por diferentes proyectos competitivos de la Comisión Europea. Los resultados de los análisis de las AEE ilustran que estas acciones están mejorando el rendimiento académico del alumnado y el clima escolar, independientemente del contexto en que se apliquen. En el presente estudio, forjado en una metodología mixta, se han realizado tres técnicas diferentes dirigidas a las y los estudiantes: entrevistas grupales, entrevistas semiestructuradas y cuestionarios abiertos.

Los resultados muestran el impacto del voluntariado ejercido por el alumnado universitario resumido en dos aspectos principales. En primer lugar, la calidad de la formación recibida por el alumnado universitario y su experiencia como futuros docentes mejoró a través de su voluntariado en las escuelas transformadas en Comunidades de Aprendizaje. Segundo, la participación en AEE tiene un gran impacto en la mejora del aprendizaje de los niños, niñas y familias. Finalmente, a partir de estos resultados, se profundiza sobre la necesidad de una reformulación de la formación del profesorado. De hecho, la investigación presentada en el artículo evidencia los beneficios de construir programas de formación docente basados en teorías y prácticas científicamente efectivas para reducir las desigualdades educativas.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Formación del profesorado; Actuaciones Educativas de Éxito; estudiantes de educación; voluntariado; futuros docentes.

INTRODUCTION

Teacher education is clearly a key factor in achieving school success. A wealth of research shows that teacher education influences student learning and academic performance (Baker, Johnson, Williams, Perkins & Rainey, 2008; Mutton, Burn, & Hagger, 2010; Herrera, 2018). Furthermore, research has suggested that teaching experience can have a stronger effect on a student's academic outcome than, for example, the student's socioeconomic status (Darling-Hammond, 2010). In addition, teacher education that is based on quality standards generates a higher sense of efficacy in student teachers, which can also have an impact on their professional experience (Moulding, Stewart, & Dunmeyer, 2014). Quality teaching is defined by the European Commission as enabling students to achieve: «successful learning outcomes by developing the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that learners need in order to realise their full potential both as individuals and as active members of society and the workforce» (Council of European Commission, 2014, p. 1). However, given the many components involved in quality teaching, there is still much more to be explored in terms of identifying which aspects of teacher education are effectively contributing to these successful learning outcomes.

The present article aims to contribute to this ongoing debate by providing insight into the benefits reported by student teachers and their supervisors in a volunteer in-service programme developed by the Rovira

i Virgili University (URV) (Spain). This programme places students in schools located in highly socio-economically deprived areas to implement Successful Educational Actions (SEA, hereinafter). The article has been structured into five sections. First, a research context on what makes initial teacher education excel, centred on the role played by volunteer in-service programmes, is presented. Second, an introduction to the programme studied in this paper is provided. Third, the communicative methodology used and data collection techniques in the research are explained. Fourth, the results are presented organised around the three reported benefits. Finally, the article ends with concluding remarks and expectations for the theory and practice of teachers' initial education.

RESEARCH CONTEXT ON IMPROVING TEACHER EDUCATION

In reviewing the scholarly literature, three main debates on the quality of teacher education were identified. First, there is a wealth of research based on the analysis of the requirements to access and finish an education degree. Organisations such as The Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (2013) and the National Council on Teacher Quality (Moulding, Stewart, & Dunmeyer, 2014) argue that the selection criteria for entering into an education programme should be high academic achievement and GPA (Grade Point Average). Both criteria are included in the admission requirements to guarantee that those who fulfil these requirements will be the most effective future teachers. These requirements introduce a filter that eliminates those students who are not considered to be excellent. This selection process is a procedure that facilitates selecting the best future professionals to perform a job that has a significant social impact (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2012).

The second debate concerning the quality of teacher education was the relevance of linking theory with practice. Paulo Freire (2000) believed that a close connection between theory and practice was a basic element for improving educational practice. In fact, the scientific literature stresses that this link between theory and practice is essential for different types of learning, particularly when the aim is to have teachers trained to practice in diverse schools (Paula, 2018; Darling-Hammond, 2010; OECD, 2011). However, despite the efforts of several universities, recent research highlights the existing gap between theory and practice in teacher education programmes (Hobjilă, 2012; Korthagen, Loughran, & Russell, 2006; Ryan, Carrington, Selva, & Healy, 2009). In this regard, Darling-Hammond (2010) stated that simply bringing future teachers in contact with the daily practices of a school did not ensure a training of excellence. This contact

must demonstrate positive outcomes in relation to the future teaching training and the students' outcomes.

The third body of literature emphasises the role of service-learning and volunteering programmes and their effects on student teachers' professional skills. The research on this topic primarily addresses the quality of teacher education through their involvement in experiences that provide a service to the community and have a direct impact on improving the lives of the people in that community (du Plessis & Sunde, 2017; Trevethan, 2017; Carrillo, Gírbés-Peco, De Botton, & Valls-Carol, 2017). In fact, there are pedagogical theories which consider teacher education as a service learning strategy strongly connected to community engagement (McDougle, McDonald, Li, Miller, & Xu, 2017). Similarly, Carrington and Sagers (2008) have shown how pre-service teacher experiences reinforce the connection between theory and practice and consolidate their abilities regarding inclusive education. Students become more informed about situations of inequality in different marginal environments; they break possible stereotypes and they are encouraged to increase their efforts to promote a more democratic society.

Volunteering and quality education

Experience as a volunteer in education has been identified as an element that reinforces university student training and their future professional skills (Baker *et al.*, 2008; Chamberlain, Slavin, & Madden 2001; Howlett & Cohan 2016). Most of the experiences reviewed in the literature are primarily concerned with two aspects of volunteering: community involvement and reading comprehension. There are some initiatives regarding community involvement that have achieved a large impact thanks to the volunteers, such as the Highlander Educational and Research Centre (Baker *et al.*, 2008) and the La Verneda-Sant Martí School (Sánchez, 1999; Aubert, Villarejo, Cabré, & Santos, 2016).

The Highlander Educational and Research Centre is an experience of adult education that has strong connections with a diverse number of community stakeholders, including students and staff from the University of Tennessee. Studies on the impact of this engagement show that participants' professional experiences are positively improved, particularly related to solving problematic situations that are connected to underprivileged social contexts (Baker *et al.*, 2008). Similar conclusions were reached in the investigation conducted at La Verneda-Sant Martí School, a popular education experience located in Spain (Sánchez 1999; Aubert *et al.*, 2016). La Verneda-Sant Martí School involves more than one thousand learners and

one hundred volunteers every year, the latter being primarily responsible for implementing the different courses. The volunteers contribute to increasing the students' educational attainment, predominantly among those with low literacy levels.

Regarding student teacher experiences with reading comprehension, the «Volunteering and Service Learning for Future Teachers» of the University Wisconsin-Madison and the «Successful for All (SFA)» projects have also obtained significant results (University of Wisconsin-Madison 2015; Chamberlain, Slavin, & Madden, 2001). The Wisconsin-Madison-based programme incorporates different sub-programmes that support the learning of the most disadvantaged students. Within this programme, the Schools of Hope Project provides a mentoring service whose objective is to improve kindergarten children's reading and math skills. In this project, different supporting programmes targeting children at risk of exclusion are implemented; one of which is focused on the implementation of after-school classes that are managed by volunteers. All of these experiences indicate the powerful effects of educational volunteering on different educational levels including adult and children education as well as in the creation of a positive state of mind (Harp, Scherer, & Allen, 2017).

Educational volunteering by pre-service teachers

Analyses on volunteering programmes developed by student teachers have shown evidence in the improvement of children's learning. These analyses demonstrate that undergraduates who volunteer in schools acquire relevant professional experience and that the students who receive these services progress academically. For instance, a study by Soong (2013) illustrates that teachers volunteering in multicultural schools enhance their comprehension of school community dynamics and, primarily, their cross-cultural skills. Similarly, Bochner's (2003) analysis, which explored the psychological elements of cultural encounters, found that meeting with people from different cultural backgrounds could positively help future teachers to strengthen their knowledge of different cultural groups. In a related study, Qiao and A'rong (2008) explored the beneficial effects of volunteering based on a broad exploration of the Western China University Graduates Volunteer Teaching Programme (VTP). In their study, they discovered that being involved with volunteer teaching contributed to the enhancement of volunteers' work experience, which helped them prepare for future jobs.

Research regarding the impact of these volunteer programmes on children's progress underlines the benefits in performance and community

participation. For instance, Ariza's (2003) study provided evidence that the volunteering services provided increased children's language and comprehension proficiency. Lazar (2007) conducted an exploration of the impact of student teachers' voluntary support in K-2 and intermediate grade literacy courses in urban low SES schools at Pennsylvania. In addition to being an excellent way of changing student teachers' expectations of children without an academic family background, the literacy courses directly influenced children's literacy potential. Finally, it should also be noted that an analysis by Butcher *et al.* (2003) on the effects of community service on teacher education found that university students' community engagement skills were drastically improved when serving as teachers of homeless persons.

The findings presented in this article are consistent with the contributions described above but also provide new elements that are primarily connected to volunteer achievements through interactions with non-academic individuals involved in the community. An interaction that shows both the improvement of children's learning and the improvement of the learning and values of the volunteer university students, (Villardón-Gallego *et al.*, 2018).

THE VOLUNTEERING PROGRAMME IN LEARNING COMMUNITIES AT THE URV

The volunteering programme in Learning Communities, which is a project that implies the transformation of schools implementing different SEAs, started in a 2012-2013 course in the Faculty of Education and Psychology at the Rovira i Virgili University (hereinafter URV). Since its inception, more than 129 students have been involved in the programme. This programme was designed by a team of teachers of the same university which is also the promoter of the Learning Communities project in the region to be an educational innovation project.

The programme aims to facilitate student teacher involvement with SEAs, which are being developed in schools that have been transformed into Learning Communities (Flecha & Buslon, 2016) in Tarragona (Spain). SEAs are defined as educational practices that are effectively promoting learning for all students regardless of their background or history. Showing that, unlike theories that suggest that schools cannot transform the educative situation of groups who are excluded, it is possible for schools to become a driving force for change in children's life (Coleman *et al.*, 1966; Flecha & Buslon, 2016). They are distinct from best practices because they are obtaining school success and reaching social cohesion in each context they

are applied to. Based on the results identified in the FP6 large-scale project INCLUD-ED, SEAs obtain the best achievements independently of the context they are performed in (Flecha *et al.*, 2015). In fact, an INCLUD-ED project report, based on the knowledge accumulated throughout a longitudinal study of 26 successful schools in 14 different European countries, provided a list of SEAs that are universal and transferrable.

METHODS OF RESEARCH

Drawing on the aim to identify the benefits of student teacher involvement in an educational volunteer in-service programme, this research was conducted using communicative methodology. It addresses growing societal demands for more dialogue whereby individuals adopt more reflective and critical views on our environment (Gómez, Puigvert & Flecha, 2011). Under this methodology, the interpretation of reality is a product of intersubjective agreements among subjects and researchers. The communicative methodology has an egalitarian orientation aimed at the creation of knowledge that arises from the dialogue between researchers and subjects to identify ways to overcome inequalities; it is clearly oriented toward social transformation. The researchers are responsible for providing scientific evidence and the subjects are responsible for contributing reflections on their own life (Gómez, Puigvert & Flecha, 2011).

The research has followed a mixed methods approach, mainly based on qualitative data collection techniques, but also using an open-ended questionnaire. The questionnaire has been exploited to support the qualitative data and was administrated independently from the qualitative techniques (semi-structured interviews and group interviews) (Gomez, 2014).

First, the group interview was applied with the volunteers at the University. Second, the questionnaire was applied when student volunteers were in the schools, also at the beginning of the year, followed by the semi-structured interviews. At the end of the year the second group interview was applied at the University. This scheme was repeated during the three years of study.

Participants

During the three years of the volunteering programme, a total of 129 student teachers, 20 school teachers and 3 principals were involved. The students participated in three schools in the area of Tarragona (Spain) including pre-primary and primary education. All of these schools fulfilled

four criteria in order to be selected: a) part of the Learning Communities project, b) high percentage of migrant and Roma students, c) low socio-economic status, and d) located in urban areas.

One school is located in the outskirts of a large city, in a very poor and deprived area. Around 70% of the population is of Roma origin, with an increased Moroccan population in recent years. The second one is located in a medium sized city of the same region. In the past, the neighbourhood of the school was in the outskirts of the city, it was a working-class area; but nowadays, it is integrated in the city and middle class and migrant families coexist. The last one is located in a small town. The school is located in the outskirts of the town, with a high percentage of Moroccan population.

The selection of the participants was developed in two steps. First of all, three schools were selected following the last criteria, and secondly, the participants in each of these schools were selected. From 3 principals, 2 of them were selected (the two from the schools located in the big cities, with a more similar profile); from 20 schoolteachers, 5 were selected belonging to said 3 schools, taking into account the high rate of participation in applying the SEAs, and finally the 18 student teachers were selected according to their high rate of participation in different SEAs during the 3 years of study. The student teachers were first-year students at teachers' college. They were mainly females between 18 and 20 years old. The teachers and principals were all female and experienced teachers, and applying SEAs in learning communities.

Communicative data collection techniques

Data collection was conducted using three different strategies, which enabled the triangulation of the extracted results. The first strategy utilised was semi-structured interviews with a communicative orientation. These interviews were conducted with teachers of the schools and student teachers who participated as volunteers. In total, 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted, 18 with student teachers, 5 with teachers and 2 with principals (both with more than 15 years of expertise in their position). All participants filled in the corresponding Informed Consent Forms. The second strategy was group interviews, which were performed in each academic year of project implementation. A total of six group interviews were applied in the university, two per year (at the beginning and at the end of the academic year). In the first meeting, volunteers mentioned the difficulties, challenges and learning experiences that they were facing, and in the second meeting, a general evaluation of their participation was conducted. Finally, the third strategy used open-ended questionnaires, which were circulated to several student teachers and requested their feedback and suggestions regarding the

programme. A total of 56 questionnaires were collected which were analysed following a qualitative approach, focusing on the reflections that student teachers made in the open-ended questions. It is relevant to point out that all participants signed an agreement in which they accepted to participate in the research under clear conditions of anonymity, confidentiality and privacy.

Communicative data analysis

The communicative data analysis is oriented to detect barriers and mainly ways to transform these barriers into possibilities. All qualitative information has been analysed using a communicative approach, which means establishing two main dimensions, exclusionary dimension and transformative dimension to present the data. The exclusionary is all information provided by the participants which exemplifies barriers or problems. The transformative one is the possible way to overcome these barriers, drawing on the participants voices. In the context of our research this transformative dimension concerns the positive effects that volunteer involvement in SEAs had in their university education, professional development and in children's learning.

Aimed at classifying the information obtained from the fieldwork, we conducted a codification process where we distributed the quotes of the three data-collection instruments. Thus, we elaborated an analytical grid where the two abovementioned communicative-oriented categories were included with a code: (1) exclusionary and (2) transformative. The research team was very familiar with this communicative approach because they have participated in other competitive research projects where it has been employed and they have also read the theoretical basis of this methodological paradigm. Drawing on this previous knowledge, a procedure to decide where each quote from the fieldwork needed to be categorised was established. This procedure was based on a discussion within the research team members aimed at reaching a consensus about which was the most suitable category. Once the analytical grid included all the quotes —divided into exclusionary and transformative dimensions— the key issues that emerge on the grid that respond to the two main objectives of our research were decided upon.

Furthermore, it is important to add to this analysis process the fact that the rigour criteria from Lincoln and Guba (1985) was considered but emphasising the communicative rationality. Thus, the research team, following the communicative approach, incorporated the voices of the people studied in the analysis. Therefore, the research team presented the issues selected in the codification to studied subjects to contrast the findings achieved with them. Considering the communicative perspective, this is

an adequate strategy which guarantees the rigour of the research because participants can validate, modify or refute the arguments of the researchers.

RESULTS

The results are presented according to the two main objectives of the research. First, our data show how the quality of student teacher training and professional experience improved; second, it describes how student teacher participation in SEAs contributed to the progress of the children's learning. Results also show how student teachers learned from the experience of being exposed to different educational actors as family members or other members of the community.

«This is exactly what I learned the other day in my theory class.»

Previous research has underlined the gap between theory and practice in current teacher education (Hobjilă, 2012; Korthagen *et al.*, 2006; Ryan *et al.*, 2009). Our findings stress that this gap can be reduced when student teachers are involved in schools where evidence-based practices are performed. The experience of being placed in schools implementing SEAs exposed the student teachers to how educational practices rooted in the theory learned at the university can translate to the school setting:

I fully agree with the opinion that we have to have the best, and if it has been demonstrated that this practice works, then you better see first-hand how it works, because it is very clear that the activity is good because you are there and you can see if the activity is going well or not. You can know if a child is learning more or less, if the child is improving... So I think it's very important that we get to know what the successful actions are, because this is the only way we can move beyond the stage where we are.

Volunteers said that their participation in SEAs, such as tutored library, was strongly linked to the theoretical concepts they learned at the university. They learned these concepts with scientific articles that explained how SEAs must be implemented. A volunteer who studied pedagogy described this situation:

For instance, when you implement a tutored library, I organised the classroom into heterogeneous groups and I arranged the tables in a square, practicing what I had previously learned at the university. Thus, I was more aware of the benefits of applying SEAs because I could read about it in several scientific articles.

Another two contributions by two volunteers show how this fact of being so close to the practice make theoretical learning acquired at the university stronger:

It allows you to know in depth this educative method and to subjectively appreciate it through our experience. Therefore, it is not only a concept that they have taught us in a theoretical way at the university, but also we have learned it by ourselves.

I think that applying any action to practice helps and enriches the person so much. Having been part of one SEA from within did not only help me to understand the theory of the subject itself, but also to clearly see why very relevant authors proposed and defended SEAs as a method of improving education in many ways.

The student teacher volunteering in Learning Communities shaped their educational practices from a scientific perspective, and this particularly helped them contrast their previous assumptions, such as the idea that migrant students should be placed in remedial groups. Consequently, the SEAs radically changed the students' approach towards the children and became a key element in their first steps in a school classroom.

I had an idea about how I should teach mathematics, how to teach Catalan, how to teach whatever, which was that, well, I'll have to go in the classroom and explain it simply and explain it in the best way possible. However, knowing that scientifically-speaking this is the best way, the best way is to talk to everyone, this experience has completely changed the concept of the education that I had. I really do think about it and I hope when I finish my degree to have the opportunity to work in this kind of school.

As explained by most of the volunteers, SEAs were definitively an excellent training strategy to prepare student teachers for their future challenges in the schools, that is, to employ effective strategies: «Being in a classroom and observing how a teacher is performing SEAs helps you acquire new knowledge for the future and also to solve problems and manage successful alternatives for your future job.»

Witnessing How Children's and Families' Learning Improves

Student teachers reported improvements in children's and families' learning in the schools where they were volunteering. When reflecting on this improvement, they argued that participation linked to SEAs helped to

improve academic skills, which was one of the major objectives for more efficient teacher training (Darling-Hammond, 2010). One of the changes noted by the interviewees was the children's excitement for learning. Because of the volunteers' participation in interactive groups and dialogic literary gatherings, children performed class activities with much more enthusiasm, and consequently their learning ability increased as they better understood the lessons. This is how this finding was expressed by a principal who faced difficult situations in her school but witnessed an important transformation in the children's attitudes towards learning as a result of the volunteers' involvement: «A child that was bored and had no enthusiasm for learning and now has hope, this I have seen.» It is necessary to highlight that in the case of the three selected centres, the results of the basic competence tests in lecture and mathematics increased through the incorporation of the SEAs and the volunteers.

These developments were essential to student teacher training because the children's success was the main purpose of their teaching. This improvement emerged in particular when student teachers observed the differences between their experiences in Learning Communities and in other schools they had visited. They saw first-hand the improved performance in schools where SEAs were implemented.

It works because since the first day we visited the school, the children argue in a way that for someone who is five years old is amazing. Once, I went to another school that did not have interactive groups. I was with five-year-old children and we did similar activities and it was different, these children have an amazing potential.

Another lesson reported to be acquired was the relevant role that volunteers have when

SEAs are implemented in highly disadvantaged schools or in classrooms with heterogeneous ability levels. In this regard, they identified how any difficulty connected with cultural origin or disability can be overcome when the support of volunteers is in place. An interviewed volunteer narrated this powerful scenario with the example of Miguel's story, a 7-year-old child who has learning difficulties. The student teachers' words exemplify his astonishment regarding the progress that Miguel achieved because of the implementation of SEAs with the support of volunteers:

Yes, just today we were doing the tens, units etc. There was a child who was also quite active, named Miguel, who initially had many problems focusing and doing the work because he is clever, but, well, he rather prefers playing or spinning or doing anything but work. Between two

weeks prior to the holiday and today, I noticed a radical change; he is super focused, working, willing to participate, and today, there was a girl who had not come to the course the whole year and she came today, and she clearly was a little lost and I said, «Miguel would you explain?», and he explained super well, and I was surprised because I thought about how much he has changed.

One volunteer explained a similar perception in his answers to the questionnaires:

In addition, as with interactive groups, you have 4 or 5 students per activity, you can realise the level of understanding in the activity of each one and also the attention that they are paying to them. Thus, I would affirm that their (children) learning improves over the traditional class, while their attention is more focused on the task itself.

Learning from all, not only from the Teachers

The previous quotes from the volunteers describe their impressions about the children's progress. They illustrate how this improvement is also extremely connected to the involvement of other social actors, such as families and people from the neighbourhood and specially with non-academic members, because they contribute to other very positive aspects, for instance being a reference person for children of their same ethnicity or socioeconomic situation (Villardón-Gallego *et al.*, 2018). This positive dynamic also had a significant impact on their training from another point of view. The student teachers became more familiar with their profession from the daily interactions they had with children's relatives and volunteers from the community. These findings illustrate that this change happens in particular in the shared spaces between student teachers and parents and non-academic members of the community. For instance, a second-generation immigrant student teacher, who was responsible for teaching Spanish to Moroccan mothers in one of the schools, affirmed how these mothers also taught her relevant lessons, such as having a positive attitude in facing difficulties and being motivated to learn. In the family education programme, the school offers the opportunity for family and community members to engage in learning processes for themselves:

I am feeling that not only have I helped them in their learning, but they have also provided me with knowledge, and especially positivity and motivation to continue with my studies. It also motivated me to continue contributing with my involvement in different areas in which I am sure I will work in the future.

Another volunteer, who also participated in the aforementioned family education programme, stressed the impact that the supportive atmosphere that emerged during the sessions had in her own learning. She emphasised how she learned from mothers coping, particularly when they tried to improve their educational background to help their children with homework. This experience also changed her mind and taught her not to undervalue these mothers: «I reacted and asked myself why I undervalue them if they are working so hard.» Similar conclusions were reached by another volunteer who also taught Moroccan women, as can be observed in her words:

Especially when you can see people's prejudices, you know. I explained very happily how my volunteering works, that I was teaching Moroccan women, and this helps to change other people's minds. It also helps others perceive this group differently.

In one of the questionnaires, a volunteer in interactive groups where she shared a classroom with family members (also volunteers), explained how their learning has improved thanks to the interactions with different profiles of participants.

I have also talked with family volunteers and they have told me many things about activities in the centre that I did not know and I have found it very interesting and they have given me many ideas for the future.

These quotes exemplify the impact that families' every-day skills, particularly those families with low education, had on student teacher education. Therefore, throughout the different experiences they shared with family members, student teachers acquired valuable knowledge to better address current educational challenges.

Finally, it is important to highlight how during the whole process, a team of teachers (the ones coordinating the Learning Communities Project in the area of Tarragona) has been the link between schools and university students. A monthly monitoring follow-up was set up with the students and centres. When the course finished, the schools had evaluated each volunteer student through items such as implication, punctuality, responsibility and learning processes among others. The contact between the university teachers with schools and projects, as for instance Learning Communities, is basic to bringing to academia successful project results that are contributing towards generating a greater social impact on the lives of many children (Flecha, Soler & Sordé, 2015).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Our research explored the ways in which a volunteer programme contributed towards improving teacher education. Our findings were consistent with previous analyses in this field, but they also shed light on elements that have not been considered before. The volunteers and teachers interviewed corroborated the benefits of connecting theory with practice (Hobjilă, 2012; Korthagen *et al.*, 2006). They also confirmed the positive effects of volunteering with children and family learning processes that have previously been found (Ariza, 2003; Lazar, 2007; Butcher *et al.*, 2010). In this regard, teachers and pre-service teachers, starting from their knowledge on children's results in the official tests designed by the Catalan Government to measure advances on basic skills, confirmed the important improvements achieved on instrumental learnings such as language or maths. In addition, they also corroborated the relevant impact of being volunteers in family education courses because it is contributing towards getting official certifications such as the Secondary Education Certificate.

Our research also contributes to the discussions about quality teacher education. First, evidence about how SEAs foster student teachers' critical capacity through their exposure to interventions that are strongly informed by theory and research are provided. Second, the volunteer programme, managed by a university teacher's team which link the schools and the university students, means an appealing opportunity to begin a professional career where teachers see how students were positively progressing. Finally, and beyond the two main objectives of the research, this study showed how student teachers transformed their prejudices against families from diverse cultural backgrounds thanks to the feeling of solidarity that emerged from the SEAs. This supportive environment is particularly important because it fostered profound learning in volunteers that came from family members (Villardón *et al.*, 2018; García-Carrión, Molina-Luque, & Molina-Roldan, 2018). Furthermore, the student teachers also shaped the educational strategies that helped children with special difficulties the most.

Regarding teacher education, our analysis suggests the design of teachers' curriculum at the theoretical and practical level should be reconsidered. The results support the construction of teacher education programmes to include theories and practices that have been shown to be scientifically effective for reducing educational inequalities. For instance, the curriculum may include subjects that more deeply consider interventions that have been internationally contrasted. On this matter, drawing on an important amount of research (Epstein, 1995;

Diez, Gatt & Racionero, 2011; Harvard Family Research Project, 2006) the implementation of family education courses is robustly improving children's learning, particularly in neighbourhoods with low SES and academic backgrounds. Thus, the creation of subjects centred on understanding the functioning of programmes addressing families will be very useful for pre-teachers' training. Additionally, as was stated across the findings, the possibility of involving early stage students in educative activities inside the classroom accelerates their teaching skills. Consequently, it could be very effective to plan volunteering programs in the first stages of student teachers' degrees.

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