Vincular x educar' project

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'Vincular x educar' is a community project set up to further children's education processes by improving the link families have with schools and leisure associations in the community.

For the children, this is an opportunity to establish good links with their neighbourhood. For the families, it means a possibility to have closer ties with the school and leisure associations in their area. For the school, it can facilitate a more overall connection with the pupils and establish educational continuities between the various stakeholders in the area. For all of them, as a whole, it means participating in a proactive way in children's education.

That is done by schools and Social Services working together to identify areas where first-year primary school students will be able to develop their potential better and compensate for any shortcomings, and by establishing links between children and their families and the neighbourhood recreation centres and Scout groups (*esplais* and *caus)*.

Introduction

The 'Vincular x educar' project understands the right to global education as one of the fundamental rights of childhood and a strategic element in the development and improvement of all societies. The education sphere, what we understand as education, covers a field with a much broader scope enriched by the concurrence of multiple disciplines, stakeholders and activities.

From the outset, schooling has always been a basic element in the development of human beings and even more so in modern societies, where a sound basic education followed by an ongoing, up-to-date education are an indispensable condition for work and social inclusion. But, besides that, there is leisure or free-time education as a pedagogical tool that participates in the general process and which is a key element in initiatives which aim to combat poverty and inequality. Very often good schooling is guaranteed but there are notable differences in other spheres, such as access to leisure, connection with local networks and participation.

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The idea of the 'Vincular x educar' project started to take shape in 2010, drawing on the experience of joint work in Social Services, specifically between the Numància and Cotxeres de Sants centres, as well as the ongoing work of local schools through the social commissions and territorial networking.

This collaboration gradually gave rise to a number of ideas that needed thinking about. If, instead of waiting to identify serious difficulties in children, generally in the later years, it was possible to plan a preventive task at a younger age, we could proactively look for the necessary complements and boost children's education with the support of leisure associations.

We believe that fostering the links children and their families have with school and the neighbourhood, as well as between associations, can enhance the educational process. And, if we start to link children with free-time education from the first year of primary school, that can have an effect on the entire education community through systemic irradiation, as leisure activities are based on values, expectations, links and practices that gradually spread as pupils go up through the school years and leisure groups, as well as on the families and communities.

1. 'Vincular x educar' and public space
This initial hypothesis for our project fits in with a much broader concept of public space that includes various dimensions (physical, social and educational) and which refers to streets and squares, transport, civic and cultural centres and lots of other places where life that is not strictly private takes place. We need to keep the social and educational dimension of public space in mind.

As Richard Sennet puts it, it is the place where two strangers meet (Sennet, 2014). It is the framework where 'Vincular x educar' and public space join hands, because it is in the public space that we can identify, get to know and understand other people, exchange information, do activities and so on. The most important thing is what happens in that public space. It is the framework where the interactions between social players take place outside the purely private sphere. It is where the city, the community, is built, where the wealth of diversity and the freedom of anonymity meet.

Access to that public space, where social life goes on with all its potential and all its conflicts too, is not guaranteed. It needs to be inclusive, as far as its structure and dynamics are concerned, but learning, attitudes and aptitudes are also necessary to be able to access and fully develop there.

In that sense, educational institutions, such as school, but also free-time education associations, such as *esplais* and *caus*, act as intermediaries: they facilitate 'the transition between public space and the private sphere through the cross-cutting construction of these spaces and time by pupils and educators, though pupils must not be given this public world, which they will eventually inhabit as fully-fledged citizens, already formed and finished. They must be offered tools so the day after tomorrow they can also co-construct it with their own contributions, so they can be active subjects in this public space they cohabit, and not just passive subjects in a space they would simply wander around in'. (Lemkow, 2017).

These educational services therefore provide learning, attitudes and values that serve as the necessary tools for creative, effective and solidary participation in public space, and so this public space takes shape as a suitable place for identification and social cohesion, with the confluence of differences in an inclusive space.

The 'Vincular x educar' project, as a community project where links between people, groups and institutions are fostered, plays an active part in creating and developing this public space in the sense of boosting relationship networks and, above all, facilitating the fluid access of more participants to these networks. The participation of children in *esplais* and *caus*, when, in theory, they were not expected to be part of that, is an opportunity to invite and help those children to enter

the public space, and equip them with more elements that will enable them to participate in better conditions.

2. Goals

The general goal would be to enhance the educational process of children through the joint efforts of school, the family, leisure groups and Social Services, to weave shared involvement in a cohesive educational community.

How? By identifying development opportunities and detecting risk situations in a first-year primary class. That would mean doing a study of the protection factors (individual, family, group and institutional resilience, etc.) and the risk factors (isolation, language, etc.) and then reducing the latter while boosting the former by creating multiple links: family-school, children-leisure groups and between the various stakeholders.

Participating stakeholders:

- Social Services
- Schools
- *Esplais* and *caus*
- Children and families

The basic principles of our intervention are as follows:

- Complementing the development model (providing the things a child needs to develop before any problem arises) with the deficit model (attending to shortcomings and problems as they arise).

- The confluence of the three spheres of education: family, school and informal education.

- Education is the sum of everything a child does and happens to them. The links can be creative and protective.

- Prevention, beginning at the earliest ages at school, with proactive action.

- Compensating for deficits in disadvantaged families and social environments.

- Systemic irradiation: improvements in specific pupils at an early stage can avoid difficulties later on, and the improvements can have an effect on the class system, the overall school system and the whole of the education network.

- Resilience, as individuals, families, groups and institutions have the capacity to respond through working on their capacities.

- Participation in building networks as opposed to being in a state of exclusion. Children, families, leisure associations and institutions establish relationship networks and participate in the neighbourhood networks.

- Working on improving expectations. As professionals, we foster the habit in families and ourselves of looking for skills and interests, as well as shortcomings. Education has to focus on developing students' abilities, not on 'fixing' their deficiencies. Training and participation based on the modelling of monitors and other participants.

- Fostering multiple identities that facilitate relationships and prevent ghettoisation.

- Creating proactive contexts: in the classroom itself, in the families-school or esplai-cau relationships, in the neighbourhood, etc.
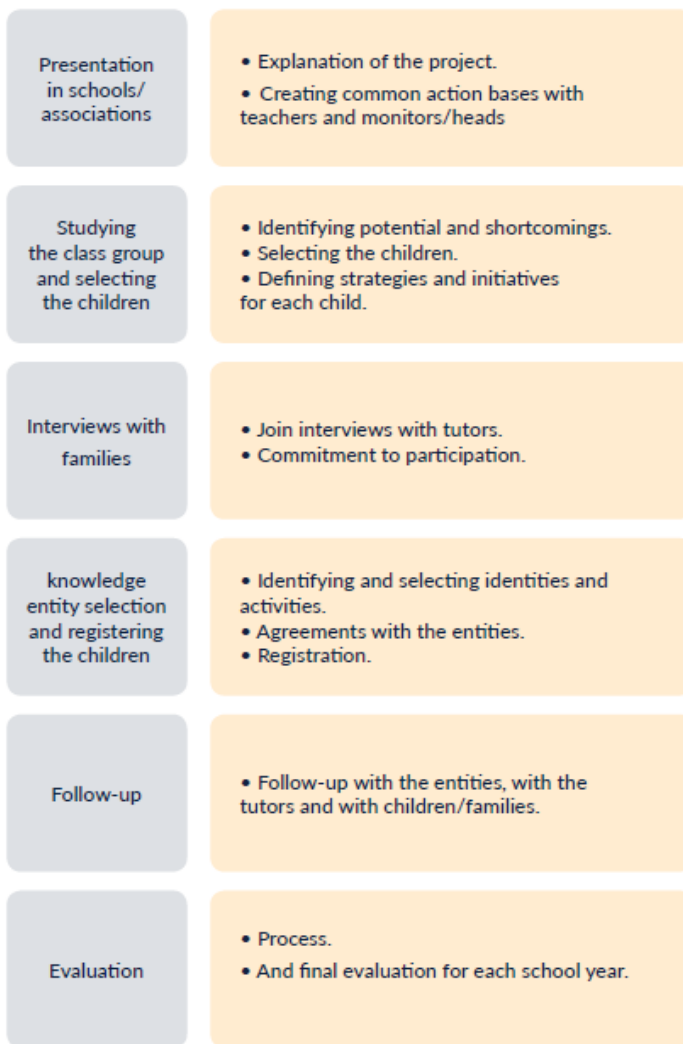
- Making the most of the tutor's knowledge of the pupils to do a review following a guide by areas that would enable aspects that need improving in some way to be spotted.

- Developing the informal education network in the neighbourhood. In Sants, and Barcelona in general, free-time education is a very important asset with a long tradition behind it which must not be wasted but fostered.

- Intensive action, given priority over one or two school years, so as to be able to adequately manage the project and so most of the children all go through the same course.

3. Methodology

As a community project, we start from a perspective of participatory and preventive work. The methodology, in this context, has to be flexible so it can be adapted to the diversity and complexity of the participants: parents, teachers, the team of monitors and Social Services staff.

The current participants include two schools (Escola Francesc Macià and Escola Cavall Bernat), ten recreation centres and Scout groups (Esplai La Lluna, Esplai Xiroia, Esplai Sant Medir, Esplai Turons, Esplai Totikap, Esplai Espurna, Agrupament Skues, Agrupament Sant Ferran, Agrupament Montserrat-Xavier, Agrupament Estrella de Mar), and two Social Service centres (CSS Numància i CSS Cotxeres de Sants).

Figure 5. Methodological process

Presentation in schools/ associations	• Explanation of the project. • Creating common action bases with teachers and monitors/heads
Studying the class group and selecting the children	• Identifying potential and shortcomings. • Selecting the children. • Defining strategies and initiatives for each child.
Interviews with families	• Join interviews with tutors. • Commitment to participation.
knowledge entity selection and registering the children	• Identifying and selecting identities and activities. • Agreements with the entities. • Registration.
Follow-up	• Follow-up with the entities, with the tutors and with children/families.
Evaluation	• Process. • And final evaluation for each school year.

As mentioned above, 'Vincular x educar' covers four broad areas: the family, school, informal education and the Social Services. The sum of their knowledge and the methodological process seek to achieve a broader education for our children that is integrated in the community.

3.1   In schools

The intervention in schools starts with a project presentation to the heads and teachers so the teaching staff can make it their project and adapt it as necessary to the situation in each school. The project focuses on the first year of primary school (though it intervenes in other years too) where the first-year tutors are the key piece in the process of proposing children.

These referrals are always based on the potential and shortcomings detected in the classroom: children who spend many hours on their own, who show a particular interest that will not be stimulated by their disadvantaged environment, who want to do activities or establish relationships, and the need for a support network or working relationship between the family and the school, etc.

Once the children have been selected, a joint interview takes place between the school, the family and Social Services. This is always in the school environment, as this is the most valued context and the closest one to the families. The main aim of the joint interview is to establish a close link with the family, to transmit to the parents the abilities to be developed that the children have and

they do too, as parents, and the idea that we as the school and the community can help them in this development.

Even when the link with the leisure association has been established, the school and the tutor continue to have an important role to play. It is in the tutorials, the day-to-day contact with the pupils and meetings with parents that we can detect participation and involvement in the resources. Similarly, the school is often the communication channel between recreation centres and Scout groups and families when contact, either direct, by phone or by email, is impossible. That way, they can get information to families on activities they are organising (camps, outings, gatherings, parents' meetings, etc.)

3.2   In families

Families become part of the project on the basis of this interview, which is sometimes received with concern (requests to attend an interview are often to talk about problems). The fact that the tutor might want to talk to them about their children's qualities and that, given their potential, what is being proposed is to offer them a resource, it is received with a great deal of interest.

A considerable number of the families are newcomers and that makes it difficult to explain the project. In such cases, we work with intercultural mediators, who facilitate understanding not only of the language but also the concepts: what an *esplai* or *cau* is, what informal education is, what going away to a *colònia* means, and so on. This cultural distance sometimes means that families need a slower linking process between their child and the *esplai* or *cau*.

When a family accepts the idea of their son or daughter taking part in 'Vincular x educar', they are asked to sign a participation commitment, whereby the parents undertake to ensure their children attend the *esplai* or *cau* in exchange for the right to receive a project grant.

Finally, once the recreation centre or Scout group that will take the children has been assigned, the parents must go there to formally register the children in person, taking the documentation that each centre requests.

3.3   In educational leisure centres

These are formed by youth volunteers who dedicate part of their time to doing some free-time education work at weekends or during school holidays.
Based on each referral, we search for the *esplai* centre or *cau* Scout group best suited to the characteristics of the child: proximity to the family home, availability of places, times, etc. The centre or group contact person is then contacted to draw up a plan of action. After the link is agreed, the information is conveyed to the family.
Once the child has been registered, a follow-up procedure is established with each centre or group. In theory, contact between the family and the centre or group is fluid and Social Services only directly intervene again with the family at the request of the respective *esplai* or *cau*.

A joint follow-up of the children linked with each one is carried out periodically as well as a joint evaluation.

3.4   In Social Services

The role of Social Services staff taking part in the project is to propose and animate schools, families, recreation centres and Scout groups. It is necessary to create an educational network and ensure all the stakeholders interact, each with their own characteristics. These diverse components form living, changing relationships that require a lot of adaptability to facilitate communication, meeting times and so on.

There are a variety of specific actions. We collaborate with the schools in selecting the participating children and the presentation to the families. With the *esplais* and *caus*, we work on the links. With

the schools and these associations, we monitor the children. And with the families, schools, centres, groups and other stakeholders, we organise joint activities: the project party, painting a mural in the school playground, etc.

Another important aspect of the work is managing the grants through an agreement with Barcelona City Council and the federations of associations, or other budget allocations, to ensure the participation of all children.

4. Evaluation

In order to evaluate the project, we have taken various aspects into account to give us an overall view of our intervention: the goals set, their indicators and the project process itself. The result is a quantitative but, above all, a qualitative evaluation that allows us to give more information on how the participating children experience the project.

'Vincular x educar' got off the ground in the 2011-2012 school year at a school in the Hostafrancs neighbourhood and five *esplais* and *caus* in the area. In that first year, 10 children were linked to them. Currently, 85 boys and girls have been linked to these groups, of whom 78 are students of Escola Francesc Macià, a school we have been working with since the start of the project, and 7 are from Escola Cavall Bernat, who we started working with this year. Over the years, these children have been linked with 13 *esplais* and *caus*, and there are currently active links with 10.

Escola Francesc Macià has gone from being a school with no children taking part in leisure education activities (*esplais* and *caus*) to having 55% of primary students taking part in one of these groups. Quantitatively speaking, it is clear that the project has had a very important impact on the school but it is on a qualitative level that the teachers highlight and value the changes most, in terms of expectations and improvements in the curriculum. Monitoring the children and their participation in these groups, we can confirm, along with the teachers, families and teams of monitors and leaders, the improvements in areas like written and oral comprehension and communication, the acquisition of social habits and the impact this learning has on other academic subjects (maths, social and natural sciences, etc.). A broader network of relationships and better knowledge of the neighbourhood and the surroundings are other aspects that should be mentioned.

By way of example, we could highlight the evaluation of some families, according to Catalina Arenas (Arenas, 2017): 'The mothers agree there have been clear changes in the children in relation to their social skills, which the mothers describe as an increase in the children's ability to make new friends and interact with them. In addition to the above, the mothers highlight an obvious development in their motor skills and in their skills for doing physical activities. Another thing the mothers agree on is that once the children are home, they look for spaces to share the activities they have done and share information with their parents, which could undoubtedly be a door leading to new dialogue spaces in the family'.

Participation in the project could mean new communication spaces are established in the family and in the relationship they establish with their immediate circle. Thus the links are very well received by both the children and their families, who often bring a brother or sister to the project. It is also worth commenting that some families have acquired an important role as facilitators between new families and leisure groups, resulting in a flow of entries into leisure groups parallel to the project.

The schools value highly the opportunity it represents for the children to establish a link with the neighbourhood, as well as the educational improvements in every area, and they acknowledge the pedagogical work that the *esplais* and *caus* do.
Participating in these activities empowers schools to plan new types of action, as well as to change the kind of relationship they have with Social Services and the community itself. They gradually

incorporate the project as an important part of their work: tutorials, the teachers' assembly, the social commission and now, as well, the participation of *esplais* and *caus* in school activities. With every school year, the leisure groups are more enthusiastic about receiving new children, thanks to the experience of these years and because they are also aware of the social and educational work they are doing, something they had already planned but often without finding the appropriate channels. They see participating in the project as a rewarding experience that allows them to reach a more diverse public and make a more inclusive intervention. It has helped them to interact with different families and open up their activity to diversity. As a result of our joint work, the *esplais* and *caus* we work with have incorporated the project as their own and see it as a reference when it comes to strengthening their groups with new incorporations. They have frequently asked us about the possibility of opening the project up to other areas.

From Social Services, there has been a move and intensification towards more preventive action in the work with children and families. As regards the network, it has meant the consolidation of a space of trust, where social and educational stakeholders can be identified and they can work on the basis of mutual respect and opportunities.

The overall evaluation is that, thanks to the joint educational action (interconnected community: families, schools, leisure, etc.), the educational process has improved and helped to broaden the vision to the whole environment. Not only are there leisure associations that educational links can be built with, but there are other associations too. These new dynamics have led us to put forward new ideas, such as the mural painting in the Escola Francesc Macià playground, with the active participation of the whole educational community plus the Col·lectiu d'Artistes de Sants and the Secretariat d'Entitats de Sants.

In the last school year, we were able to celebrate the sixth anniversary party of 'Vincular x educar' with all the stakeholders involved in the project. This party involved work throughout the year which, besides increasing the interaction between the stakeholders (schools, families, *esplais*, *caus* and social services), served to establish new relations with other players active in the community: musicians, the Sants giants, etc.

In addition, the whole process of ongoing work was documented with the production of a documentary video designed to promote the project from the perspective of all those involved and explain its development.

Of course, the very development of the project and the particular characteristics of its components give rise to difficulties that need to be borne in mind. On the one hand, the diverse organisational cultures that have to reach an agreement requires a leadership that can enable incidents to be resolved and promote a way of doing things in common that is adapted to the needs of each moment. On the other hand, while the interculturality that has characterised the population that attend these schools is a value, at the same time it is a challenge as far as social inclusion is concerned and the practical difficulties that come with it, basically communication and understanding (e.g. language and cultural norms). The possibility of including the participation of intercultural mediators in the project has been a big help in that aspect.

Another aspect that needs to be borne in mind is that any project with multiple participants from diverse associations and services has to adapt to the reality of constant changes in the reference figures (teachers, monitors, etc.), which requires an agile and flexible methodological model.

5. Conclusions and future challenges

The 'Vincular x educar' community project has been a very effective tool for shaking many inertias and creating new, innovative dynamics for change in relation to school, families, leisure associations and Social Services themselves, with the aim of generating its own collective culture. It works on the basis of the relational capacity of people, groups and associations, of the need people have to establish links in order to be able to develop themselves and the collaboration of all the social stakeholders in an area to take part in children's education.

During the years the project has been running, the necessary affinities between school, social services, leisure associations and families have gradually been strengthened so they can work on getting children with more needs as regards language, relational and other skills into educational leisure activity groups (*esplais* and *caus*) in their neighbourhood, with all that means for expanding their own and their families' relational network and supplementing their school education with free-time education from the first year of primary school.

Our experience confirms our belief that this is a living, organic, growing project, in terms of the number of linked children, participating schools and teachers, and monitors and leaders of the *esplais* and *caus* in the area. We have also been gradually developing methodologies agreed with the stakeholders involved that enable the project to be adapted to diverse realities (other schools, other neighbourhoods, etc.) depending on the needs. This design enables the project to be extended to other areas and other associational networks (children's choirs, human tower groups [*castellers*], etc.).

We think there are two main challenges that have to be tackled in this process of community development:

- Consolidating the project as an effective preventive tool for facilitating social inclusion and harmony in our city, bearing in mind the cultural diversity.

- Seeking to integrate the maximum number of schools and leisure groups into our project, so we can export it to other towns and cities.

And all that has to be done with the conviction that it is necessary to continue promoting this type of preventive community work from Social Services, for the following reasons:

- It promotes the participation of all social and cultural groups.

- It establishes cooperation and communication channels between the various social and cultural groups, schools and educational leisure groups.

- It facilitates a shared vision of reality, built thanks to the contribution of the social and cultural stakeholders.

- It allows for a future cohesive public space with coexistence models based on recognition of otherness, mutual respect and everyone's participation.

To sum up, it means moving towards a new culture based on the participation of the whole community, transforming social and educational communities into communities that learn together and collaborate in designing actions to bring about change and improvement, so education and society become more equitable. All of that will require the development of a new social and educational culture based on collective participation, on new ways of working and a different way of thinking about responsibility, and about individual and collective roles.
Let's all build the 'Vincular x educar' project together.

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