A HOLISTIC, INCLUSIVE LEARNING INTERVENTION FOR PREVENTING EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING AND FOSTERING FAMILY, SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

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Abstract

This paper presents the LINC intervention that aims at addressing Early School Leaving (ESL) before the ESL warning signs are already visible calling for mitigation measures. LINC suggests responses that can be better described as preventive. The focus is on early and continuous intervention for fighting ESL starting early on, in primary education, and continuing throughout lower secondary school. LINC intervention focuses on building a supportive school community environment for learners with the participation of teachers, parents, and families that enhances school community bonds, fosters engagement of all players, and links education to real-life. A set of ten learning activities that draw upon principles of inclusive learning and community-building approaches are also used to enhance the home-school partnership. Evaluation activities will take place in an on-going manner involving teachers, parents and students in several educational sites in Greece, France, Sweden and the Czech Republic.

Keywords: Early School Leaving, Social networking tools, community-building, inclusion in education, parent involvement, family-school interactions.

1   CONCEPT

Early School Leaving (ESL) is a term used to describe all forms of leaving educational system having completed only lower secondary education or even less. The last years an attempt is being made to understand the factors that lead to ESL [1]. However, given the nature of the problem, this is not a straightforward task. Elaborating on the 'nature of the problem', ESL is often described in the literature as a long term, multi-dimensional process that is influenced by a wide variety of 'school and out-of-school experiences with broad social and cultural implications' [2]. Dealing with ESL requires the cooperation of stakeholders at national, regional, local and school level [1]. An important element for cooperation within the ESL context is the family-school partnership. More precisely, there is a general consensus that meaningful family-school interactions can have a positive impact on students' success and personal growth and can drive forces towards understanding ESL processes [1][3].

The concept of family-school partnership is supported at European level from several European associations and it is also promoted through several European activities and initiatives. A noteworthy example is 'the declaration jointly signed in Copenhagen on 24th of November 1996 by the European Parents Association and the European Syndicate Committee of Education', which emphasized that good rapport and collaboration between parents and school staff can promote quality in education [4]. In this line, the international conference 'Parents and Partners' was organized in Edinburgh in 1998 aiming at raising awareness and dialogue about parent involvement in school community [4].Since that time a lot of progress has been made and many European countries have been established policies towards parent involvement in the school community. As Kakavoulis explains 'this is mainly illustrated by the creation of different representative bodies at school level' [4]. Several publications in conferences, journals and online thematic networks highlight the importance of parent involvement in the school community for achieving quality in education [3].

However, the establishment of a family-school partnership is a developing process that does not always lead to the required outcome. Institutional barriers, communication barriers, practical deterrents, personal fears, negative attitudes and more may obstruct the development of family-school interactions which are essential for the establishment of a successful partnership. Building a successful family-school partnership requires overcoming these barriers. As a matter of fact, many studies reveal not only the need for meaningful family-school interactions but also the challenges that emerge in making the partnership work efficiently [3]. Failure in overcoming these barriers results in a daunting situation where schools and families operate as two distinct units and links to the broader

context- within which the school operates- are loose or nonexistent. LINC intervention aims at strengthening the family-school partnership and setting up a collaborative network that discusses and critically reflects on ESL risks.

More precisely, LINC views school as a broad supportive community and aims to empower learners, parents, and teachers to better understand and project to others in their community the value of education; to raise the confidence of parents and teachers on their ability to help learners in their educational efforts by leveraging cultural and social capital and diversity; to provide opportunities to parents to become further involved in both schooling and learning and to empower teachers to develop innovative, inclusive learning activities that engage learners, parents, and families in the learning process. If this bid is successful, an auspicious start will be made towards engineering mechanisms to early fight ESL.

2 PEDAGOGICAL VIEWS IN RELATION TO INCLUSIVE LEARNING

LINC embraces the idea of 'inclusion as education for all' and assumes the definition provided by Fast Track Initiative and UN Girls' Education Initiative ([5], p.3) according to which inclusion requires 'responding to the diversity of needs among all learners, through increasing participation in learning, cultures, and communities, and reducing exclusion from and within education'. Addressing meaningfully inclusion in education can also have an impact on the empowerment of inclusion in the society. In other words, creating inclusive classrooms can be the key to the establishment of inclusive societies [6]. However, the creation of an inclusive educational environment is not a straightforward task. Careful planning based on the context of the school (legal, policy and funding environment) should be conducted.

In a community capacity-building context, 'inclusion' refers to the process of partnering with as many community members and organizations as possible to work together to achieve common goals [7]. Involving a broad range of relevant sectors and stakeholders aims to provide partners with access to resources and services and to stimulate further action on a community's behalf' [7]. However, it is the genuine participation of the members in the community activities and their sense of belonging and membership that breathe life into these initiatives [7][8].

Inclusive learning is key to LINC intervention and is directly related to the project's vision. The LINC intervention revolves around the basic concept that learners must be in the centre of the learning process and of a tight knit school community that offers enhanced support with the objective of promoting engagement in educational activities and, as a result, higher school completion rates. LINC intervention implements a holistic approach towards ESL prevention and empowerment of family-school partnership.

A core aspect of LINC holistic approach revolves around the enhancement of **learner and parent communication**. Open communication channels between parents and their children can have multiple positive effects. When communication is good learners are more likely to speak to their parents about issues in school or other life aspects; and parents may have elevated awareness of issues, academic or other, that their children face. In LINC enriched communication is pursued through learning activities designed for joint execution between parents and learners thus promoting collaboration in learning and, more generally, communication in relation to all life activities. Furthermore, learners and their parents can publish under teacher mediation the outcomes of the joint learning activities on which they work collaboratively promoting ownership and a sense of success, learning from others in the group, and possibly reusing results produced by others.

In addition, LINC aims at enhancing **parent and teacher communication**. This is promoted through the LINC virtual community of practice that promotes engagement in school life, information sharing, and knowledge building through gamification approaches. The LINC community introduces an additional channel through which parents can have a good picture of the performance of their child in school through learner profiles that are only sharable between the teacher and the parent and through which parents can see information on school performance as well as other aspects such as engagement in the learning process, enthusiasm, challenges faced, and more.

Another aspect of the LINC holistic approach is **the empowerment of parents to more effectively help their children in learning and schooling.** This is pursued by providing access to information related to lifelong skill development for parents through which they can improve their skills and build confidence on their ability to help with homework and other related activities. Gamification encourages production and consumption of learning content, i.e. publication, review, and reuse.

Similarly, LINC aims to **build teacher capacity to identify and address ESL contributing factors** in their classrooms. Towards this end the LINC community encourages the sharing of good practices among teachers on what works towards fighting ESL. This may include suggestions for class activities, results from the implementation of specific learning interventions, suggestions for resources that can help build teacher skills, and more.

Finally, inclusive learning in LINC is manifested through **the design of learning activities that are common for the entire class.** LINC does not aim to divide learners into groups such as learners that perform well and learners that are at risk of exclusion. Rather, LINC aims to promote engagement with the learning process of all students in in a single group leaving no-one behind and promoting peer learning. The use of the community as a resource for discovering content and for sharing outcomes promotes also peer and inclusive learning; as a matter of fact, learners have the opportunity to publish their work for the benefit of the class and gain access to knowledge built by others.

3   METHODOLOGICAL DESIGN

Tailoring the LINC intervention to learning needs for parents, learners, and teachers in primary and lower secondary schools is the primary focus of the LINC methodological design. For this reason, activities begin with the analysis of status quo in relation to early school leaving in the countries that participate in the LINC project, namely Greece, Sweden, France and Czech Republic. Field input was also gathered in regard to the use of communities in the context of school education in these countries. A big part of the documentation was based on literature review and existing research findings. This review allowed us to gain an insight into the existing situation, to ascertain the quality of home-school partnerships and to understand dynamics in relation to the ESL problem.

Coupled with this, it was considered important to understand specific requirements that may derive from end-users and are closely related to their needs, desires and requirements in relation to home-school communication and the threat of ESL. In order to generate feedback from the main target groups a small-scale study was designed. The study is qualitative in nature and targets teachers and parents in several evaluation sites in Greece, France, Czech Republic and Sweden.

The literature review findings and the input generated by the end users constitute the theoretical tangent of the LINC implementation plan, guides the development of the LINC pedagogical framework and informs decisions related to a) the design of the online LINC community and b) the design of the learning activities for joint execution by parents, teachers and students.

4   THE ONLINE LINC COMMUNITY

LINC assumes the broad and readily accessible definition of an online community as a 'developed activity system in which a group of learners, unified by a common cause and empowered by a supportive virtual environment, engage in collaborative learning within an atmosphere of trust and commitment' ([9], p.489). Communities often provide opportunities for collaboration, mutual learning, interaction, sharing of knowledge, experiences and resources. With the advance of new technologies and social networks, communities take a new online form. Often online communities are enriched with social networking tools which ease the diffusion of information and enhance the interaction among the participants. The 'social networking' aspect can offer an added- value strengthening the sense of community, motivating engagement and triggering mechanisms for mutual learning. As Wenger et al ([10], p.13) state usually 'social learning is enhanced by a dynamic interplay of both community and network processes'.

The LINC community [11] aims at strengthening the ties of the wider school community, which involves parents, teachers, learners, and other stakeholders. The on-line community does not aspire to become the only tool for supporting school ties. Rather, it aims at providing a complementary channel that supports existing off-line community building activities that already take place in the school. The LINC community aims to become an additional on-line "meeting point" that provides incentives for parents, teachers, and learners to become further engaged in the learning process.

An issue that emerged during the early stages of the LINC community design was related to the working language. Which language will be used for parents and teachers communication? In which language will resources be available? It was considered important that the information that is available in the community is presented in a language that participants feel comfortable in using. For this reason, technically, LINC community portal takes advantage of Wordpress network of sites feature.

With this feature activated, multiple websites have been created from the same WordPress installation. Essentially, one set of WordPress core files, powers many websites. Users can be shared across many websites. More precisely, rather than create users for two, three, or more websites administrators can assign a user to as many websites as they like. Plugins and themes are also shared, however each website has unique directories for media uploads. The same database is also used for all websites, however separate tables are created for each website. There is also an ability to use multisite for discussion forums, project workshops, media libraries, and more. Each area of the websites can be styled in a unique way that distinguishes it from the main website. Thus, the LINC community based on the Wordpress features is now accessible in English and **localized** to the national languages of the community members(Greek, Czech, Swedish, and French) as these are the languages in which the services will be used in pilot mode.

The community is also based on **social networking principles** that are applied towards meeting the LINC project objectives of mobilizing school community members against ESL. The fact that LINC recognizes the importance of social media as complementary tools that can enhance communication and strengthen community ties inevitably raises the question of whether popular social media services could be exploited in the same context. It would be an omission to not exploit these services for reaching widely the target groups of teachers and parents and raising awareness on the urgent issue of ESL. For this reason, LINC uses popular services including *Facebook ®, twitter®, YouTube®, and g+®* for more widely reaching target audiences.

Figure 1. View of the LINC community

A **file repository** has been also implemented with the objective of sharing learner projects in multimedia form. The content of the repository is accessible to community members only. Members have the opportunity to review the content generated by others as well as to download it, extend it, and publish it a new. This functionality not only promotes a sense of pride and achievement among learners who have the opportunity to showcase their work in a safe environment to their peers, but it further promotes collaboration and content reuse. Learners are also encouraged to build upon each other's outcomes promoting further a sense of class achievement, in addition to the personal achievement. Class achievement will foster community building and instill a sense of affiliation, support, and belonging among learners encouraging long-term engagement with the learning process.

An area for **resources** (links, articles, applications, multimedia content, and more) has been also implemented. The resources section is dynamic. Community members are given the opportunity to publish a resource in sections related to their role. For example, parents can publish information of interest in the related section; teachers can publish in the teacher section as well as the learner section.

A **discussion area** also exists providing opportunities to teachers and parents to share experiences and build on each other's knowledge in the wide area of schooling and learning as well as in

supporting learners to stay engaged in education. The discussion area provides sections that target: a) parents, to be also accessible by teachers and b) teachers, only accessible by educational staff. Additional areas may be added in the future when evaluation results on the actual use of the community services are generated that point to specific topics of interest that attract broad participation and thus may be better addressed in a dedicated section.

Noteworthy, training and lifelong skill development can play a key role in supporting parents and teachers to actively engage towards preventing ESL, to become more confident in their capacity to help learners in school activities, and to become more active in the school community in general. For this reason, **training and skill building events** will be published in a dedicated section that offers a single point of access to related information to members of the LINC community. Other events related to school activities or activities organized at local, regional, national or international level can also be published.

Last, the **LINC project Wiki** has been developed; the Wiki provides community members (teachers and parents) with the opportunity to create collaboratively content and to access information of interest parents on the subject of ESL. The information is presented in an easy to understand way that targets general audiences, as opposed to experts. It aims at raising awareness on the subject as well as providing insight on on-going activities towards preventing and mitigating ESL, educational methodologies that are under discussion as offering benefits on the fight against ESL, experiences on the deployment of LINC methodologies and tools in real-life contexts as part of LINC on-going project evaluation, and more.

5   LINC LEARNING ACTIVITIES

The LINC activities convey the LINC pedagogical ideas and aim at triggering meaningful parent-teacher-students interactions. They foster parent involvement in the school community and encourage reflection upon the value of education. Concurrently, an attempt is made to link the activities with real-life situations and to offer opportunities for interaction with intercultural content. Noteworthy, the activities have been designed by the participant teachers with the support of the LINC work group. The activities, the result of collaborative work and fruitful exchange of educational ideas, are 'blended' in nature and can take place in the school, outside of school and online. The LINC activities are briefly described below:

- **Stargazing activity:** The 'Star gazing' activity aims at enhancing the partnership between family and school. As a matter of fact, teachers, parents (including extended family members) and children are brought together in order to 'learn' and 'explore' the night sky. Experts (scientists and members of astronomy groups) help them observe the night sky and explore the universe.

- **Treasure hunting activity:** This activity aims at enhancing the partnership between family and school. As a matter of fact, parents (including extended family members) and children are brought together in order to 'decipher clues and to reach to the treasure'. Teachers hold the role of the designer of the treasure hunt game. However, teachers that have not been involved in the design phase can also take part in the game. Key individuals (i.e locals in the city) can also help them decipher the clues and reach their target.

- **Embracing cultural diversity activity:** The 'embracing cultural diversity' activity consists of a series of tasks that aim at enhancing the partnership between family and school and providing opportunities to the members of the school community to appreciate the diversity of cultures. Teachers, parents (including extended family members) and children are brought together through different tasks that move them to speak for themselves, to articulate their cultures and histories, to reflect upon cultural diversity and the concept of migration, to raise awareness on the varying worldviews and cultural expressions.

- **The career awareness activity:** The 'career awareness activity' aims at enhancing the partnership between family and school and providing opportunities to the members of the school community to openly discuss about careers and job roles. Parents share their career experiences with the students; students are encouraged to talk about their future ambitions; and teachers are responsible of linking the career discussion to educational requirements set by school curricula or educational system.

- **Self-discipline development activity:** This activity introduces an intervention that revolves around the value of self-discipline. The association Energie Jeunes [12] implements a number of training sessions that target teachers, parents and students. The sessions address the needs of each group. The primarily aim of this intervention is to raise awareness on the value of self-discipline in relation to academic achievement and goal fulfillment.

- **Organizing an event:** In this activity students work on a project and organize an event in order to present their work, to demonstrate their work plan and to share their outcomes with the audience. The audience consists of parents (including family members), teachers and other interested individuals. Topics can fall into different subject areas: Science, maths, history, technology, poetry, literature, biology and more. For example a project might be related to 'Water reservations', 'recycling', 'the biography and the work of a poet or writer', 'a historical event', 'a technological invention', 'a social issue' and more.

- **Engaging parents in school activities:** This activity aims at bringing parents closer to the school community through scheduled events (run by students), regular meetings with the teachers and stimulation of voluntary contributions. The suggested intervention focuses primarily on parent engagement in students' school life. In this regard, students are encouraged to reflect upon their learning and to find intriguing ways to present school activities to their parents.

- **Towards realizing the value of education:** This activity targets students 6 to 10 years old and aims at early helping them realizing the importance of education in their lives. The suggested intervention focuses primarily on exploring the value of education through real-life situations that challenge students' thinking. In this regard, students are encouraged to reflect upon different problems that appear in real-life contexts (i.e in a shop, in a park and more).

- **Reflecting upon career inspirations:** This activity aims at strengthening the link between schools and real- life as well as providing opportunities to the members of the school community to reflect upon the value of education in relation to professional prospects in life. Through authentic experiences students start building an understanding of the world of work and reflecting upon their own career aspirations. Their career aspiration are discussed and creatively given a structural form through the use of mind maps.

- **Understanding the human made world:** The activity aims at problematizing students upon the human made world through their exposure to robotic constructions. Students, teachers and parents will be encouraged to explore scientific concepts and to construct together robotic applications guided by a team of experts. An exhibition can be also organised to demonstrate in public the results of their collaboration.

The design of the learning activities for joint execution by parents and learners offers benefit for both. For parents, it promotes their engagement into their children's schooling, the development on their ability to positively influence their children's learning, and enhanced insight on school activities. For learners, it introduces opportunities for further support by their parents in their learning efforts, it contributes to the development of family ties, and encourages the sharing of school experiences with family. This process is aimed at strengthening the role of extended family networks in a child's school life enhancing the support a child receives, promoting engagement in the learning process, and creating a positive environment that can help prevent Early School Leaving contributing factors from developing or further developing.

6   EVALUATION OF THE LINC INTERVENTION

Evaluation activities take place in primary and lower secondary schools in Greece, Sweden, France and Czech Republic engaging teachers, parents and students. The LINC evaluation activities have an intense qualitative character which is engineered through a combination of case studies, 'teaching experiments' and a set of qualitative methods such as interviews, observation and analysis of personal documents. Two main components are under evaluation: the online LINC community and the learning activities. In parallel to that, participants' experiences are being gathered in an ongoing manner.

More precisely, site analytics, field observation, user interviews as well as use of personal documents (i.e logs, topic threads) will be used to gather data on the relevance, effectiveness, usability and implementation of the LINC community. Case studies that embody features of the 'teaching experiment' technique [13] will be used to explore the dynamic and unfolding interactions within LINC

activities. Participatory observation, individual and group interviews, think aloud practices and debriefing activities will be also deployed to explore participants' experiences.
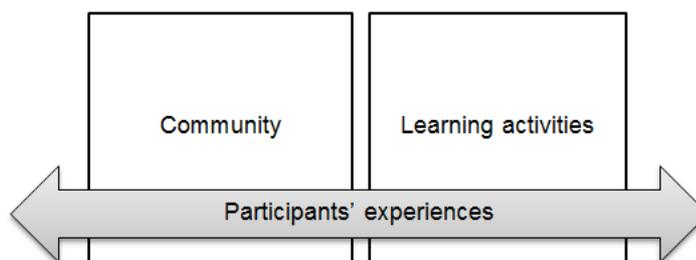

Figure 2. LINC Components under Evaluation.

Feedback generated through the on-going exploration of participants' experiences can be used to support claims related to the design of the community, the design of the activities, the interactions within the social networking community and more. Participants' feedback is also useful because it can also offer us an insight into participants' feelings, emotional situations, satisfaction, dilemmas, fears, changes in perspective and more.

At least 5 schools from 4 different European countries (Greece, Sweden, France, and the Czech Republic) are at the moment taking part in the evaluation study. Early evaluation results are expected in October 2014. Evaluation activities are being conducted with respect to the participants and the context within in which they act.

7   CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This paper presents the conceptual framework of LINC intervention. The LINC intervention is engineered through the design and development of a social networking community that acts a meeting point for teachers, parents and students. Specific features integrated in the LINC social networking community were discussed. A brief description of the selected learning activities also took place. The tools to work with are ready and available for use by teachers, parents and students. Future directions involve using extensively the LINC community and piloting the LINC activities with group of teachers, parents and students in Greece, France, Sweden and Czech Republic. The engagement of the teachers, parents and students is a critical step that will allow us to understand the dynamics among the participant groups, the way home-school partnership is being established and negotiated and the effectiveness of the dialogue in shedding light on the problem of ESL. The results of the pilot activities can be also used to inform associated community-building interventions for forging the link between home and school, endorsing the value of education and achieving higher sense of belonging and participation in the school community for all.

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