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## **E-STEP – SUPPORTING TEACHERS’ AND PARENTS’ PARTNERSHIPS SOCIAL-NETWORKING TECHNOLOGIES**

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### **Abstract**

The E-STEP Project ([www.estep-project.eu](http://www.estep-project.eu)) supports the collaboration of schools and parents through social-networking technologies. Teachers and school managers skills to collaborate with pupils parents have been identified as one of the priorities that EU Member States should promote both in initial teacher training, as well as in teachers ongoing professional support, in order to achieve high quality of teaching. Schools are viewed as learning communities, where pupils, parents and teachers commit to a common vision about the values and objectives of schooling. Effective school leadership is also associated with building active partnerships with parents so as to foster higher achievement levels as well as to support pupils overall cognitive and social development.

The final outcome of the project is a specialized training framework and supportive materials for teachers around Europe on:

- How to support, engage and motivate parents to utilize social networking systems in order to collaborate with teachers.
- Developing strategies and initiatives that teachers and school managers could use to communicate effectively with parents and to engage them in support of their children’s learning at home and at school.
- Specific approaches for school leaders on how to support their school teachers on designing and effectively implementing parental engagements activities.

## **Introduction**

Teachers’ and school managers’ skills to collaborate with pupils’ parents have been identified as one of the priorities that EU Member States should promote both in initial teacher training, as well as in teacher’s ongoing professional support, in order to achieve high quality of teaching<sup>1</sup>. Since 2000, parental participation has been identified by the EU Ministries Working Committee as one of the 16 quality indicators of school education<sup>2</sup> and schools are viewed as ‘learning communities’, where pupils, parents and teachers commit to a common vision about the values and objectives of schooling<sup>3</sup>. Effective school leadership is also associated with building active partnerships with parents so as to foster higher achievement levels<sup>4</sup> as well as to support pupils’ overall cognitive and social development.

The project E-STEP is a transnational cooperative European project funded by the Comenius program (539498-LLP-1-2013-1-GR-COMENIUS-CMP) to help teachers and school managers acquire and reinforce such attitudes, skills, knowledge and qualifications that will enable to effectively engage parents in schools and interact with them through social networking technologies. The project consortium consist of several high quality organisations like universities, Federal Ministries, international companies and national associations dealing with ICT in teaching and learning. More particularly, three of the partners represent Ministries of Education (CTI/EL, BMBF/AT, NRN/BG), while the entire consortium demonstrates extensive practical engagement with the school sector. All partners have long experience in working with European and national school networks and teacher training programmes e.g. the Open Discovery Space pan-European school community (CTI/EL, EA/EL, NRN/BG, ULS/IE), eLSA schools (BMBF/AT), Digital Schools (ULS/IE), universities (BCU/UK) and ‘Rural Wings’ European Schools’ Network (EA/EL) and the Greek Network for School Innovation (EA/EL). The European Union supports the E-STEP project within the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP).

## **Parental Engagement**

Parental engagement is a powerful lever for improving pupils’ cognitive and social development, as well as their learning outcomes (Howland et al., 2006). Despite the varying perceptions, types and degrees of parental involvement, there is consensus that it is associated

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<sup>1</sup> Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the EU Member States, meeting within the Council of 15 November 2007, on improving the quality of teacher training- Official Journal of the European Union, 12.12.2007, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2007:300:0006:0009:EN:PDF>.

<sup>2</sup> The quality of School Education – Sixteen quality indicators, Report based on the work of the Working Committee on Quality Indicators, May 2000, [http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/key\\_data\\_series/134en.pdf](http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/key_data_series/134en.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS Tackling early school leaving: A key contribution to the Europe 2020 Agenda, [http://ec.europa.eu/education/school-education/doc/earlycom\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/school-education/doc/earlycom_en.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Council conclusions of 26 November 2009 on the professional development of teachers and school leaders – Official Journal of the European Union, 12.12.2009 <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2009:302:0006:0009:EN:PDF>

with a range of positive indicators, including attainment (from early childhood until adolescence and even adulthood) (DCSF, 2008), school dropout reduction and fewer behaviour problems (Stevenson & Baker, 1987). Partnerships between schools and families can also enhance social integration, i.e. for children with migrant backgrounds<sup>5</sup>. It is important, thus, that schools create an inviting climate and maintain parents’ involvement (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). Teachers, as key-agents, will need to develop positive attitudes and particular skills in order to invite, motivate, support parents and collaborate with them and to deal with the barriers. This can be particularly challenging (Honfield et al., 2009), as most University and other training courses do not prepare teachers for engaging parents in a thorough and systematic way. Moreover, initiatives such as the EPA-parents<sup>6</sup> focus on parents’ involvement in educational policies around Europe, but do not provide training for teachers.

Schools in reality also face certain barriers in engaging parents, i.e. organization issues, such as big numbers of students and teachers (especially in Secondary Education, where each child is taught by various teachers). They also have to deal with practical issues, e.g. social and economic factors, language barriers, child care commitments and practical skills such as literacy and parents’ ability to understand and negotiate the school system (Harris & Goodall, 2007). Studies suggest that in order to make a sustainable difference and to optimize the positive impact of parental engagement – among others – there has to be strategic planning, sustained support, training and resourcing, as well as a supportive networked system that promotes sharing of experiences, development and assessment (ibid.).

In view of these barriers, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and tools can serve as important means to support teachers’ and parents’ collaboration. State-of-the-art ICT networking tools and platforms have the potential to enable individuals to enhance their social networking and, thus, to enhance their learning (Garofalakis et al., 2010). For example, evidence from the EPRA project in the UK showed that the use of web based reporting tools that were provided through schools’ portals to connect schools and parents, improved students’ attendance (Harris & Goodall, 2007). Web tools are also employed by individual schools in order to create partnerships among teachers, parents and students (i.e. August Senoa Elementary School in Zagreb<sup>7</sup>). Such initiatives are, however, sporadic and the potentials of new technologies have not yet been fully explored, understood and exploited. Also an additional need that emerges is that teachers should be trained in order to use such tools and lead a change in schools’ and families’ interactions.

Based on these considerations, E-STEP project sets out to enforce teachers’ and school managers’ awareness, motivation, knowledge and skills that will enable them to strengthen parents’ roles in schooling. This is planned to be implemented by utilising state-of-the-art ICT

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<sup>5</sup> European Commission “Integrating Immigrant Children into Schools in Europe- Measures to foster 1) Communication with immigrant families, 2) Heritage language teaching for immigrant children”, April 2009, Source: Eurydice, [http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/thematic\\_reports/101EN.pdf](http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/thematic_reports/101EN.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> European Parents Association <http://www.epa-parents.eu/News/Newsflash/ParentsPivotInLifelongLearning.aspx>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.elearningeuropa.info/en/article/Website-%E2%80%93-A-Partnership-between-Parents%2C-Students-and-Schools>

networking tools (Garofalakis et al., 2010). Teachers and parents will benefit from such technologies by getting the means for connecting themselves to education services, resources and collaborative learning support opportunities. An example of such technologies that will be used to this end is the recently launched European collaborative and multilingual open learning infrastructure designed to boost demand for Europe-wide eLearning resources ([www.opendiscoveryspace.eu](http://www.opendiscoveryspace.eu)) – funded by the EC ICT/PSP programme. Such tools will provide online facilities for

- networking among schools, teachers and parents,
- training for teachers in order to
  - acquire the necessary skills for effective collaboration and engagement of parents,
  - ICT digital skills in order to use social networking tools efficiently in order to engage parents,
- access to digital resources that will help teachers and parents to collaborate effectively.

The training framework will be sustained in the future through the use of an online training process along with toolkits and guidelines for school staff. This process will enable teachers to be familiarized with the empirical knowledge about parents’ engagement, and to directly apply this knowledge base in real-life situations in selected pilot schools around Europe.

### **The pedagogical framework**

The main result of E-STEP project is the training framework curriculum in order to achieve the benefits of parental engagement in schooling. The design of the training framework was implemented along the guidelines for teachers, school managers and school ICT staff on how to collaborate effectively with parents through social networking technologies. The training framework (Kendall, Kanira & Taylor, 2014) enables trainees to:

- **explore** key issues and debates in parental engagement
- **engage** with the wider school community to better understand parental engagement and the existing and potential roles of social media in their own context
- **create** new meanings, identities and roles in relation to parental engagement
- **experiment** with social media as a tool to support effective parental engagement
- **collaborate** with parents, teachers and the wider school community
- **drive** innovation and implement change

The framework design is underpinned by an enquiry-based approach, participatory action research (PAR), that encourages inclusive, collaborative and co-constructionist approaches to institutional growth and development. PAR is process orientated and starts with reflexive engagement with the everyday experiences of participants in the school/college community enabling trainees to develop, in collaboration with others, grounded descriptions of how parental engagement ‘currently works’ in their particular context. This then allows the community to ‘work towards change’, the next stage of the PAR process, that is distinctive, highly differentiated and tailored very particularly to the needs and aspirations of the institution and the community it serves.

This generative approach, where course participants are most often in production rather than consumption mode, will ensure that the framework generates outcomes that meet the needs of a broad spectrum of institutions and promotes trainee learning that is responsive to the diverse student, parent and community groups that schools and colleges work with. As such it is ‘future-proof’, sustainable and highly relevant to a wide range of institutions across Europe that is concerned with young people’s learning.

Throughout their learning participants will explore social media in two ways; as a context for stimulating and sharing their own thinking, learning and collaboration; and as potential tools to support and facilitate new ways of working and interacting with parents. As such they will be immersed in an experiential learning programme through which they will learn about the potential of social media through ‘real-life’ engagement and participation in a learning context.

The framework comprises three modules that, taken together, train participants to work competently and confidently with the PAR learning cycle, each module representing a stage in the classic PAR process: documenting and contextualising the current situation; working towards change; and understanding impact, affect and influence.

Module one, ‘**Understanding Parental Engagement in Context**’, will introduce action research methodologies, modes and strategies and open up exploration of key concepts and definitions. Participants will be encouraged to experiment with social media (mainly using communities on the ODS platform) and engage in reflexive evaluation of existing practice, cultures, attitudes and values. These will include collection of pre-existing empirical material as well as generation of new data through implementation of more creative, experimental approaches such as story-telling and artefact production. A range of conceptual lenses will then be used to critique, analyse and make sense of this material so as to establish starting points for working towards change.

Module two, ‘**Working towards change: planning and implementing context specific parental engagement**’, will facilitate a series of interventions derived directly from the close examination of the school/college context undertaken in module one. Participants will agree strategic priorities for their own institution alongside a bespoke, context specific, ‘road map’ for change that will identify the key actions and dependencies (resources, roles, responsibilities, training needs) that will be required to realise the aspirations articulated in module one.

Module three, ‘**Parental Engagement in practice: understanding outcomes, impact and influence**’, will explore a range of strategies for documenting, describing and evaluating the outcomes of parental engagement in practice. It will support design, development and implementation of robust and rigorous evaluation tools that draw on a range of qualitative and quantitative traditions. This will enable institutions and communities to understand the outcomes, impact and influence of their parental engagement work through a range of lenses and to pay attention to anticipated, as well as the contingent and serendipitous, change and or

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development. This module will also explore strategies for sustaining momentum and enthusiasm for ongoing collaborative development in this key area of work.

Through participation in the E-STEP programme trainees will develop, extend and practice a range of skills in relation to:

- use of digital and social media;
- communication skills;
- community engagement;
- project management,
- reflective practice;
- enquiry and research;
- project management, planning and target setting;
- data collection;
- team working;
- collaborating with others.

The programme of study will engage participants in the following modes of study:

- face to face, synchronous and asynchronous online activity;
- analysis and synthesis of a range of texts in different formats;
- participation in a range of learning activities including mini-lectures (synchronous, asynchronous or both) and workshops;
- participate in digitally mediated interaction and learning;
- research and data collection;
- discussion and debate with peers;
- discussion and debate with a wider range of stakeholders in the school community including trainees, young people, parents, other teacher and wider representatives of the local community that the school/college serves,
- elicitation and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data.

As an example an introductory video available at the E-STEP community on the ODS platform (<http://portal.opendiscoveryspace.eu/edu-object/e-step-introductory-video-774735>) shows practitioners from UK exploring the use of technology in schools for parental engagement.

### **Evaluation Results**

In order to test the efficiency of the developed training framework, teachers, school managers and ICT school staff/experts who work at schools, involved in a series of training activities in two phases. 25 pilot schools from five European countries (Austria, Bulgaria, Greece, Ireland and UK) have participated to the E-STEP workshops during Phase A and 200 schools are intended to be trained in phase B. The participating schools get trained based on training framework and then implement their action plans engaging parents with the use of ODS or other social networking tools. During the implementation phase of the training framework an evaluation process is undertaken in order to assess the E-STEP effort. Specific evaluation

questionnaires and interviews addressed to teachers and parents have been spread in participating schools. Up to now 44 evaluation questionnaires have been filled teachers who participated in the seminars as trainees. In order to evaluate the developed trainees and trainers guides the pilot schools have been invited to attend the workshops during which the training framework has been introduced. The results of the evaluation questionnaires are used to further improve the training framework (Chelioti et al., 2014; Koskeris & Boufardea, 2014).

The high percentage of positive replies implies clearly that the training framework is innovative and provides useful knowledge to trainees. The trainees rated very highly the educational techniques used. Undoubtedly the implementation plan was very well organized proposing attractive and effective techniques. The main concern of trainees is the willingness of parents to participate in activities promoting parental engagement. This concern reveals one of the main problems of effective parental engagement which is the “parents”. It is the opportunity to try the proposed techniques which will confirm or negate this concern. In many cases teachers informed the organizers of the workshops that they already use Facebook and other social media to communicate with parents.

The teachers seemed rather uncertain about their ability to convince and engage the parents in a way that would not interfere in their teaching. They expected more concrete instructions and detailed support how to develop the school action plan for the implementation of the approach in the specific school settings.

In most workshops the parents were reported as very open to get engaged, but there were differences not only among countries, but also among different school settings within the same country. Some parents were highly involved in all aspects of school life, others only in those academic subject-specific areas where their children were involved.

## **Conclusions**

The project results and outputs are based on different inputs from different individual strengths of all participants (partners, teachers, parents, etc.). The E-STEP researches elicited and mapped the national needs of each partner country. The developed training framework took into consideration all the essential strategies and concepts that found in the respective European countries. From the implementation of the training framework significant findings were emerged about the use of social networking technologies in promotion of the parental engagement.

Overall, despite the general use of ICT it seems that the importance of face-to-face contact was valued by both parents and teachers and there was a mutual stated need for to increase in the frequency of such meetings on a regular basis, including one-to-one sessions in schools where this did not yet happen. There was a general reservation from both sides about the potential of digital tools, to substitute face-to-face contact.

The developed training framework improves the methodological approaches on how teachers can effectively motivate and engage parents and will also target the necessary ICT skills for making effective use of social networking tools for this purpose.

The resulting set of innovative scenarios of interaction and collaboration between teachers/school managers taking place through social networking tools developed in phase A serves as the groundwork for the upcoming phase B which embed schools covering large areas of the partner countries. The training framework will be further improved after the end of the phase B when 225 schools in total will have trained and use its guidelines.

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