

The “Elele” Project: Parents and professionals as agents of change

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ABSTRACT

The presentation is based on the “Elele” intervention project materialised by the Centre for Artistic and Educational Training “Schedia” and funded by the Bernard van Leer Foundation. The project is taking place in the multicultural industrial city of Elefssina, Greece targeting younger minority (predominantly Greek Turkish-speaking) children and their families. It includes a short presentation of the project aims, the basic ideology, theoretical assumptions as well as methodology guiding the work of “Schedia”. The emphasis is limited to the experiences connected to reaching out and involving parents and local educators so that they eventually function as agents of change, multiplying the positive effects of the intervention. Experiences with “Elele” showed that artistic activities that unfold in a climate that supports freedom and encouragement of expression, cultivates respect for individual needs and diversities, and advocates the absence of criticism, provide a powerful tool for the promotion of communication and cooperation while bolstering self-esteem. We can be more effective if parents and local educators are first provided opportunities for experiencing support and encouragement in a safe context before moving to the next step of promoting the respectful collaboration between different groups. Having experienced the changes from the inside they were both the recipients and the mediators of change in their environment. Personal active involvement transformed the experience into a time of real personal growth and ownership of the learning process.

I. Project description

The overall goal of the “Elele” project has been to improve the quality of life and range of opportunities for Greek Turkish speaking minority children and their families living in Elefssina, an industrial multicultural city 23 km west of Athens. These families have migrated in the 1980’s and 1990’s from rural areas of Thrace in northern Greece. At the time our project started (2003) they lived in containers at specially designated areas since the earthquakes in 1999.

Our hypothesis was that the best way to approach and empower these families would be to proceed in two phases.

The **first phase** provided opportunities for experiencing support and encouragement in a safe context that focused on their needs while attending to the various interlocking levels i.e., children, mothers and families, local educators and local authorities. It materialised in the shape of a two year (2003-2005) intervention project based on findings of the development phase (2002-2003) and consisted of:

- a programme for children focused on artistic activities
- an empowerment/support programme for parents
- sensitisation and training of local educators to anti-bias education
- continuous contact and collaboration with local authorities and political networking
- networking at the national and European level

The project came to be named “Elele” meaning “hand in hand” in Turkish.

Currently we have moved on to the **second phase** and are in the midst of the first of three years of what we call “Elele II”.



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In this next step, we focus on the promotion of a respectful collaboration between children and families of different social, cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds, whether minorities or the dominant majority, cultivating mutual understanding by a number of activities taking place in the context of a pilot Centre created for fostering respect for diversity. The Centre is co-founded with the municipal authorities that provide the premises and cover the operational costs, while Bernard van Leer Foundation that also financed the previous phases of Elele funds the project activities.

II. Distinguishing characteristics of “Elele”

If we were to summarise what we believe to be the assets of the “Elele” project, that we would want others to consider when implementing similar programmes, then we would choose the following aspects:

- a. An emphasis on creating a climate that supports the freedom and encouragement of expression, cultivates respect for individual needs and diversities, and advocates the absence of criticism.
- b. The use of artistic activities (theatrical games, fine arts, music, puppets). Artistic activities facilitate communication and the sharing of experiences in an atmosphere that promotes cooperation rather than competition and bolsters self-esteem. Additionally they cultivate respect for diversity by encouraging a deeper acquaintance and emotional intimacy among the members of a group, where even delicate issues like religious or political differences can be dealt within a spirit of openness and conciliation, while they facilitate expression overcoming possible barriers due to language difficulties.
- c. the use of mediators in the “Elele” has proven to be a particularly effective tool. They have served as a vital liaison between the programme and a) the families, visiting them at home, listening and supporting and b) the principals and related educational authorities. Presently we are using mediators from the local population and all serve as a vital link between “Schedia” and the local community of Elefssina so that we can proceed ‘hand in hand’ manifesting in action the meaning of ‘elele’.
- d. finally, we believe that our working simultaneously on many different levels (children, parents, educators, local authorities) is another important defining feature of the “Elele” project, and an important ingredient to success. It was the simultaneous synergy between children, parents, educators and local authorities along with the “Elele” staff that strengthened all parties involved and contributed to a balanced outcome.

III. Dissemination

a. Change and principles of effectiveness

Out of the four complementary levels on which the “Elele” project focuses, we will limit the present discussion to two: **parents and educators**.

In Elele I work focused on transferring change from parents and local educators to their peers, that is, other families and fellow educators in the same institution and then institutions in the same community. Dissemination of good practices will be the main goal of the third year of Elele II.

In most areas we cannot be motivated to adopt new ways on the basis of logical evidence of better results or of charts or scientific arguments. Most of us are hesitant when it comes to experimentation, or we fear excursions into the unknown, since only the tried is known and safe.



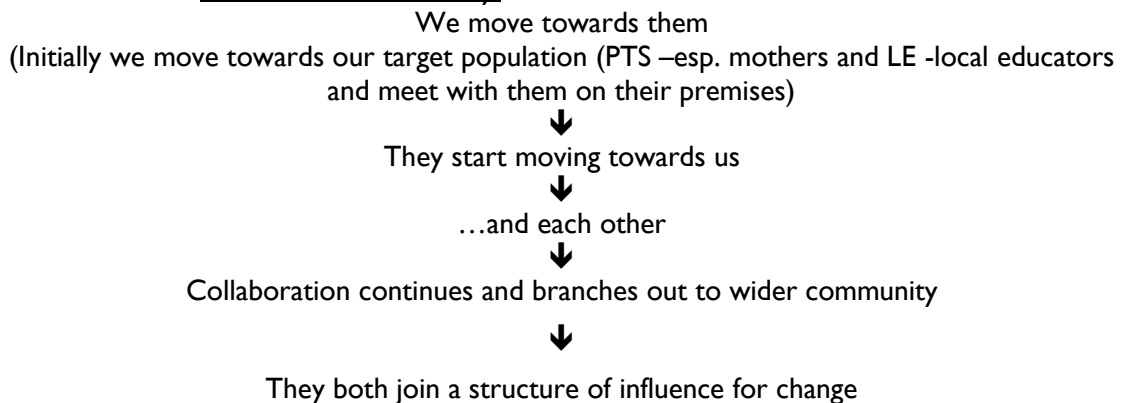
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Attempts to remedy conditions chiefly by knowledge and logic fail, in the same way that attempts to introduce change through centralized planning fail. Our experience with “Elele” has taught us that an effective way to encourage the learning of new behaviours and attitudes is by first experiencing them one’s self. We relied on the actual experience as being the best advocate for change.

Having experienced something that has caused us to change, we do not need to be convinced of the logic for change, or be forced to promote it. In that way we are both the recipient of change and the mediator or agent of change in our environment. Personal active involvement transforms the experience into a time of real personal growth and ownership of the learning process.

b. Sequence of events moving from inner circle of the project to the outer circles of the community.



[While taking these steps, interconnections are created within the program as well across the different dimensions/levels of our work.]

Project Objectives

1. PTS (parents) as agents of change
 - empower parents so that they can better support their children’s education;
 - support parents taking initiatives that would make them more visible to the community;
2. LE (local educators-in-training) as agents of change
 - train educators in innovative instructional techniques that focus on respect for diversity through artistic activities;
 - sensitise educators to the skills, aptitude and needs of children of diverse backgrounds, so that they come to question the assumed supremacy of one versus another background, cultivating a respect for the right to be different and an appreciation of the richness that diversity offers us;

c. Activities selected to meet objectives and implement goals of dissemination
SEQUENCE IN TIME

DEVELOPMENT PHASE

We move towards them

Actions we took:

- a) PTS: We work at the container parks and adjacent open squares.
- b) LE: We go to a local school and hold a workshop



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FIRST YEAR

They start moving towards us

Actions we took:

- a) *Supported mothers to self-organise so that on a rotating basis they would escort the children to the activities by a bus provided by the municipality.*
- b) *Involved mothers as assistants to the animators giving children a feeling of security, ensuring that their mother tongue would be respected and contributing to a direct dialogue on children's education and upbringing.*
- c) *Organised activities in common with local educators who attend sensitisation and training workshops on the premises of a municipal childcare-in-training*

The above events along with actions we took so that PTS and LE would approach each other contributed to the gradual de-mystification and de-mythologisation of schools and educators that started being less a place of estrangement

Thus, they came closer to each other and the community at large,

...and each other

Actions we took:

- a) *created opportunities for the LE to get to know the children and their families and the work we did with them.*
- b) *invited the LE to stage a theatrical happening for the children and their families at the place where they held their activities.*

That was a festive opportunity where parents and children who watched with respectful appreciation were also impressed that THE teachers bothered to play for them.

Given the opportunity to see what the children had created, educators became impressed and started seeing children in another light that did not focus exclusively on their limited language abilities and traditional indicators of classroom performance.

At that stage, we felt we had made a first step in showing local educators how "different" children could be included. They had first-hand experience that change **is** possible.

- a) *At the end of the first year mothers assisted in the materialization of a cultural open-air event, where along with other local groups they exhibited the work they had completed in the workshop. There, mothers distributed to fellow Elefssinians copies of selected articles of the Greek law ratifying UN Convention on Children's Rights.*
- b) *We fostered collaboration by inviting LE to participate and animate along with "Schedia" animators the cultural events open to the wider community providing the opportunity for warmer relations and closer collaboration between them and the parents*

SECOND YEAR

Collaboration continues and branches out to wider community

Actions we took with respect to parents:

- c) *In the second year, mothers participated in a creative workshop and then organised with "Schedia's" support three bazaars, one of them at the central square of Elefssina, where they sold their products.*



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- d) *Mothers started working as mediators between Schedia and the Turkish-speaking families organising and mobilising the families for the various events and recruiting them to the programme.*

These events provided the opportunity to develop new knowledge and exhibit self-management skills.

Considering LE as agents of change

Courses on professional development may unwillingly cultivate feelings of powerlessness arising out of being told what to do. Educators are not empowered by change efforts that remain decided by others and have an emphasis on “what” to learn. Instead it is always a challenge to link the new knowledge or “what” with educators’ concerns of daily practice in classrooms, i.e., the “how” In addition there is always the need to argue for the necessity of a convincing “why” one should bother to do that. In case educators experience the process themselves, they do not have to become convinced, and instead may become advocates for the change so that neither the “why” nor the “how” arouses feelings of insecurity.

We found that in addition to knowledge and skills gained, attitudes changed as a result of the experiential workshops. Most importantly, educators witnessed how the creative experience in a non-judgmental setting changed them, making them realize how the child has to experience the process in order to become creative as well. The insight they gained could not have occurred if they had just read or discussed the topic of using creative arts in facilitating children’s expression, building self confidence and establishing communication with others.

Collaboration continues and branches out to wider community for educators as well

Actions we took:

- c) *Run training workshops as authentic settings where participants experienced the ways that some of those activities based on free creative expression could affect children*
- d) *Provided support and guidance for their school projects.*
- e) *While schools tend to operate under “cultures of separation,” ‘Elele’ encourages “cultures of connection and integration’, welcoming opportunities for networking and sharing knowledge with colleagues defying isolation and privacy.*

PTS and LE join a structure of influence for change

Actions we take:

- a) *PTS assume a more active role in “Centre for the promotion of Respect for Diversity” that Schedia set up in collaboration with municipal authorities, where activities are organised for children and their families coming from various minorities and the majority.*
- b) *PTS act as mediators with local population and recruit new families*
- c) *Trained LE have joined Schedia staff in the new “Centre”*
- d) *LE is assisting children that need help with early literacy skills and acts as mediator with the children’s schoolteachers*

Up to now, we have focused through “Elele I” on encouragement, while in Elele II we are now turning to developing the skills needed for communication and collaboration between groups in ways that encourage a harmonious solidarity.

Dissemination outside the community is presently done through ongoing training workshops with educators, the website where the work accomplished that far is presented, and the participation at events attended by educators and policy makers.



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As a result of the “Elele I” experience four videos were produced that focused on how we can work with one minority group, encouraging and empowering children so that they can meet self-confidently with the dominant majority. The new material from Elele II will focus on elucidating factors that contribute to the cooperation between the different minority groups and the majority.

Dissemination of good practices will be the main goal of the third year of Elele II. During that year we will utilise the links we have established so as to reach a diversity of audiences, including, but not limited to, educators and policy makers.

IV. Accountability, monitoring and evaluation by

- Recording activities
- Reading and reflecting upon animators’ narrative diaries
- Holding regular meetings with
 - . Staff (plenaries as well separate meetings with each team working with different groups)
 - . Local authorities
- holding focus groups and evaluation meetings and interviews with
 - . Parents
 - . Local educators
- Materializing workshops with
 - . Parents
 - . Local educators

and analysing our data consisting mainly of

- animators’ diaries
- evaluation sheets completed by parents (who dictated the answers) and educators in training
- photos of activities and special events
- videos documenting aspects of the work
- artistic creations
- written summary evaluation reports
- interview protocols with parents and educators

we found that in relation to our stated goals regarding parents:

By the end of 1st year

Mothers

- ⇒ started feeling more self-confident and took initiatives for acting on their own, while they knew they could count on our support if needed. Frequently their mobilisation was for the benefit of their children’s welfare, as taking initiatives to take children them to the hospital, while earlier they procrastinated doing it.
- ⇒ reported that they were persuaded that their children if approached in a certain way were both willing and capable of performing. That realisation along with the experience they gained working as assistant animators empowered them to claim things for their children and assert their rights.

By the 2nd year

- ⇒ Parents became convinced of the value of preschool education and enrolled their children in childcare facilities and kindergartens, while they matriculated their children in schools without our getting involved in the process.



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- ⇒ Of those, 60 percent continued attending on a regular basis, while 40 percent attended on a more irregular basis. The same held for the first grades of primary school, where also 60 percent attended school on a more irregular basis.
- ⇒ Parents started overcoming the intimidation they experienced by the school system. Not only did they encourage their children to go to school, but also they started defending their children's rights, visiting the schools and standing up for them as was observed in some cases of bullying.
- ⇒ Mothers manifested organisational and self-management skills in the organisation and materialisation of events open to the wider community.
- ⇒ Some husbands, who did not want their women to participate in our project, came to the bazaars they held, were visibly proud of them and some last resistances were broken down. Both mothers, and fathers, evidenced the support of the local authorities that provided the space for the bazaars and bought some of the mothers' work.
- ⇒ Families' strenuous but eventually successful house-hunting gave them an unexpected opportunity to practice assertive skills also contributed to their getting out of isolation, as they no longer live in the containers' camp.
- ⇒ A delegation of the mothers' group went to the city hall where they met with the mayor informing him about their activities and giving paintings they made as presents to the municipality. Paintings are presently decorating the vice mayors' offices.

Parents have now stepped in as actors, not simply as victims, and this transformation is not easily reversible. They have forged new identities that carry beyond the scope of a particular program.

in relation to our stated goals regarding local educators:

By the end of 1st year

- ⇒ Our workshop observation field notes indicated that educators encouraged a positive atmosphere that recognised the value and respected the diversity of ideas of each educator.
- ⇒ As revealed in their evaluation comments, educators increased their sensitisation to issues concerning respect for diversity. Reflecting on what they themselves had experienced, they started to strive in their work to encourage all verbal and nonverbal expression, refrain from any critique and intervene only when they witnessed that a child showed lack of respect for another child. As one educator reported at the evaluation session:

The seminar taught me how to expose myself without becoming anxious about others' opinion. Thus I believe, that should it be needed, I will be able to stand by and support children and their families in the face of prejudice.

By the end of the 2nd year

- ⇒ In designing and materialising projects that focused on diversity issues, educators cooperated with others within the same setting and across childhood centres. Thus



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they eventually functioned as agents of change in their respective child-care centres, kindergartens and schools, focusing on respect of diversity.

- ⇒ The experiences of the educators corresponded well to our guiding hypotheses. They learned the importance of the presence of a supportive **network** that makes it safe to make mistakes when you create experimenting with new things.
- ⇒ A number of the “Schedia” trained Elefssina educators play the role of mediator with the local community and have been called to play an important role in the Centre that has been established this year within the context of “Elele II”
- ⇒ one of the trained educators is presently holding sessions once a week for children that need additional work with basic reading, writing and arithmetic skills and functions as mediator with the children’s school teachers.
- ⇒ the advocate educators act as change agents working to create flexible and innovative programs and materials, contributing to staff development. They are also empowered to make instrumental day-to-day decisions that are congruent with a shared vision that permeates every aspect of their pedagogical work.
- ⇒ It has always been an important ultimate goal for “Schedia” to enable educators make the passage from the status of a present learner, to that of a future trainer. Actually, a number of people that were trainees once are “Schedia’s” collaborators today forming an informal network that provides consulting for projects in the local schools.
- ⇒ It is increasingly apparent that respect for diversity constitutes the cornerstone of democracy and therefore the establishment of an anti-bias policy is not an “optional luxury” but a necessity. This is manifested in action by the establishment with the support of the municipal authorities of a community pilot Centre for fostering respect for diversity that has an anti-bias policy in its charter.

It is our belief that Elele constitutes an example of good practice in cultivating respect for diversity and in terms of strategies that can be used in order to change the living conditions of children and families in a deprived area, taking into account children's, parent's and municipalities' perspectives. It is therefore an example of "minor politics", or an example of the exercise of multivocal policy.



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