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From the education centre to community development: lessons from Spain

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Introduction

Over the first semester of 2009 I had the opportunity to do research at the University of Edinburgh, which allowed me to learn some of the characteristics of Community Education in Scotland. I have observed in Scotland the existence of a community development tradition and how, by means of Community Education it is possible to have an influence in different social situations. Roughly, it could be stated that in Scotland the general guidelines go from the Administration – with the educational and social services of different administrations - to the neighbourhood and the population, by means of institutional and social coordination, which is not always easy. In Spain, this same concept we call community development and more generally, social education. The organisation of the education services is also different.

In this article I will provide background information from my experience in adult education and learning communities in Spain. I will introduce the progression of social education that is community development, which has an inverse process to those in Scotland but has similar objectives. In this case starting from the schools it grows to affect the neighbourhood, in which social transformation takes place from the influence of the school. This is an inverse pathway for the same objectives.

Background

When in 1975 Franco's regime finished, the situation of adult education in Spain was limited in practice to several evening schools, which followed an old-fashioned methodology, doing basic education classes and little more. Several years before an official decree appeared stating that illiteracy had disappeared in Spain (Flecha, Lopez and Saco, 1988). On the contrary, the reality was completely different. For that reason many social initiatives started to appear in many neighbourhoods led by the neighbourhood associations, religious groups, by a diversity of social movements that promoted a specific adult education, updated and different to the education for children, plural, democratic and especially in the service of the working classes. To a certain degree it was connected to the workers and trade union tradition of the 30s, but with contributions and experiences among others of Paulo Freire as one of the main influences.

In that historical moment the citizens' movements appeared to claim their rights and the transformations were from the bottom up. The work of Ramón Flecha (2000), *Sharing words*, summarises the educational and basic didactics of this process of change in adult education with the theory of dialogical learning comprising seven

principles: egalitarian dialogue, cultural intelligence, instrumental dimension, transformation, meaning creation, solidarity and equality of differences.

A new phase appeared once specific centres for adult education were achieved, a specific methodology for adults was developed and specific books and materials were used through democratic implementation.

Another important element of the evolution of adult education was the change of relevance from the educators (teachers, collaborators and volunteers) to the central role of the learners in adult education. The aim was to deepen the democracy of adult education. The main protagonist should be the adult learners and not the educators. This started from the orientation of Habermas, based on his Theory of Communicative Action, from which reason should be derived from the value of the arguments and not by the power position of the individuals. One of the means to achieve this aim was to promote the creation of associations in the schools, reorganising the government and management bodies for the learners to have the power of decision and management in the schools. The school of La Verneda-Sant Martí (Sanchez, 1999) in Barcelona, can be considered the clearest example of this orientation. Originating from the neighbourhood associations and other community organisations, this school has always considered that its work was not only to conduct school activities and cultural activities within its walls but it should collaborate with other social initiatives of the community. In addition, this relationship with the environment was a guarantee for the same school in order for it not to become a closed space, far from the social and educational needs of the neighbourhood. It is true that the Educational Administration has not always seen this means of proceeding in a good way. The school has a broad schedule from 9 am to 10 pm (including Saturday and Sunday).

"The neighbours decided how we wanted the school to be and what to do to achieve it… We dreamt of a school that answered to our needs"

Other centres started to work like this one and together they created FACEPA (the Federation of Cultural and Educational Associations of Adults). Great initiatives appeared from this collective work, such as the Bill of Rights of Adult learners which was presented as good practice in adult education in CONFINTEA V in 1997 (UNESCO's Fifth International Conference on Adult Education). In addition, the learners became neighbourhood leaders and active participants in Adult Education. Later other organisations started to join this work from other parts of Spain to create CONFAPEA (the Confederation of Federations and Associations of Participants in Democratic Culture and Education for Adults). From this wider collaboration developed the Ethical Code for a democratic adult education in which there is collaboration between the adult learners, social movements, educators and university faculty involved in adult education. In those organisations the learners, participants in adult education, occupy leading positions and decision-making positions. They are legitimate speakers in front of local, national and international agents. They are leaders in the Democratic Adult Education movement and in promoting learners' participation in associative, academic and political forums.

Another example of the educational practices that take place in such schools and centres are the Dialogic Literary Gatherings, which breaks with cultural elitism. This reading experience allows people who have never read a book before to read, enjoy and have dialogue on books from the universal classics of literature such as Joyce, Shakespeare or Cervantes.

With all this background experience and facts I can state that transformation is possible and therefore that the transformation of a centre can turn into community development.

Dialogic model and the Learning Communities

The learning communities have become a wider representation of this way of working in early childhood education, primary and secondary education[i]. The idea is to take advantage of the adult education experience, from the most successful international experiences and from the dialogic learning perspective, and organise projects of schools and high school transformations to achieve "an informational society for all".

The Learning Communities' experience draws from the theories but also from practice, taking into account the internationally successful school experiences. Its development is based on science and scientific procedures not on beliefs or superstitions. Other school practices have been and are based on superstition like those based on structuralism, such as the reproduction theories. In the case of the Learning Communities their practices are based on science and are therefore successful, as is demonstrated with the more than 80 educational centres in Spain, 3 educational centres in Brazil and 2 educational centres in Chile. Those educational centres that carry out the Learning Communities' approach are from early childhood education up to adult education.

The success of Learning Communities lies in achieving the transformation of the educational centre into a learning community by connecting instrumental learning and the participation of the community.

The dialogical learning of the Learning Communities entails a new dimension of learning since it involves not only the student and the teacher but also the participation of many other adults of the community such as other professionals of education, grandparents, sisters and brothers, fathers and mothers, etc. "The Learning Communities have demonstrated that the increase of family participation within the school framework increases the learning of the children" (Elboj, Puigdellivol, Gallart and Valls, 2002 p.114).

In the Learning Communities, the participation of the family members is not only important for the education of the children but also it is indispensable family education. For example, family education contributes to the promotion of reading and the instrumental dimension. The participation of non academic families in literacy process creates new practices of reading and new cultural references in non school environments of children that will indirectly influence their learning.

Involving adult members in their children's school by means of participation but also family education not only benefits children but contributes to improve the adults

education as recognized by the European Community with the results of the project "Includ-Ed. Strategies for inclusion and social cohesion from education in Europe" which is an integrated project funded by the Sixth Framework Research Program of the European Commission. This project analyses which educational strategies contribute to social inclusion and which ones to social exclusion across Europe basing its research in actions that generate efficiency and equity. From the international scientific research, the Includ-ed project states among others that the dominant statistics find a relationship between the level of studies of the parents and the educational results of the children. This creates low expectations towards non academic families. In addition, several statistics measure the cultural capital using the following approach: number of books at home, hours of daily reading, number of courses to which the members of the family have attended. Finally Includ-ed has demonstrated that the results improve by means of family education without having to wait for the next generation.

Through experiences such as the Learning Communities and its family education it has been demonstrated that there has to be an economic and social return to the society without waiting for the next generation, by working together for the transformation of our communities. As Freire (1997) stated, "education needs [to draw] both from technical and scientific education as well as dreams and utopia" (p.34).

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[i] In Spain early childhood comprises from 3 to 5 years old; primary education from 6 to 12 years old in general and the compulsory secondary education takes 4 years form 12 to 16 years old. From there a student can access to bachillerato (high school diploma) for two years, and later either to Higher Professional Training or University or otherwise to a Intermediate level of Professional Training.