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Dialogic Education in Spain: Some Initial Words

by Marta Soler-Gallart

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In April 2003 three educational conferences were organized simultaneously in three different Spanish cities: Barcelona, Zaragoza and Vitoria under the title "Learning Communities: Quality Education for All". These conferences meant the celebration of the success and consolidation of an educational project that has been taking place in Spain since the beginning of the nineties and that each year continues to expand throughout the country. All the schools that function as Learning Communities have a feature in common: they are based on dialogic learning and they are oriented towards achieving school success for all children. Both Gordon Wells and Marta Soler-Gallart participated in the conference: Gordon was invited to share his ideas on dialogic inquiry and to describe his experiences and research in schools; Marta explained the theory and practice of dialogic literacy drawing on her experience with teachers in some of the learning communities.

The idea of preparing a bilingual issue for "Networks", collecting different contributions from Spanish teachers and researchers, originated during the conference days. During that week, together with other Spanish colleagues, we had an extended opportunity to talk about the situation of education in Spain, about the practices that characterize the learning communities, about proposals for teacher research, ideas for student inquiry in the classrooms, etc. With this special bilingual issue we hope to bring English-speaking teachers closer to the Spanish reality, being sure that they will find much in common with the issues that we discussed. We are also certain that this issue can serve as a space for common reflection and the beginning of a wider, international network of collaboration between advocates for dialogic educational experiences from different countries.

The articles we present in this issue refer to the "Learning Communities", an educational project that is being developed in different Spanish schools with very positive results. The Learning Communities Project was first put into practice in 1996, in a primary school in Portugalete, a town near Bilbao, coordinated by CREA. Since then, a number of schools from the Spanish autonomous regions of Aragón, Catalunya, and the Basque Country, have joined the project: they have become centers open to the community, social movers, capable of developing activities that reducing the gap that exists between less educated families or cultural groups and the requirements of the information society.

We are witnessing great social changes that pose a major challenge to education. Knowledge has become the raw material for economic and cultural exchange, and the capacity to select and process information is now necessary to avoid social exclusion. Education is thus the key that opens the way to full participation in society. All children have the right to a quality education that stresses this capacity to learn and helps them to achieve high standards, regardless of their social, cultural, or linguistic background. All children have the right to dream that one day they

will go to college, and for that they need us, as educators, to encourage these expectations and help them to realize their dreams. It is often the case that schools in low SES environments tend to water down the curriculum and practice a pedagogy of "care" or "happiness". Children with the greatest educational needs end up being placed in the lower track that leads to their future exclusion from any opportunity to reach higher education. Aren't schools responsible for the future of their students? Don't we have ethical obligations as educators? Thinkers and activists such as Paulo Freire and Lev Vygotsky firmly believed in the power of learning and instruction. The Learning Communities Project starts from this belief and proposes a model of schooling in which parents, teachers, community members, volunteers, and students work together in the school to create the education they want.

In Spain, and in other European countries, the various comprehensive educational reforms have not been able to solve the problem of school failure. Many teachers in urban schools end up being more concerned about discipline than learning, and the only solution so far provided has been to place children in different tracks or in specially adapted units, often given a false legitimacy as "individualized learning units", in order to withdraw the "difficult" or "noisy" children from regular classrooms. During the eighties and early nineties, there was a belief among some educators that education can do nothing, that society must change first, and that unless children's environments were transformed they would not benefit from what school can offer. However today, more and more teachers and educational researchers stand up against such fatalism and argue that it is education that can do most to contribute to achieving a better life for all.

One example of the search for educational alternatives is the Learning Communities Project captured in this issue of *Networks*. In a school that functions as a learning community, traditional teaching and learning practices are transformed with the objective of responding to the students' needs and to the changes that people face in society. For this reason, the project involves all the community in the educational process, thus creating spaces for volunteer participation either in specific educational activities (family courses and gatherings, interactive library, digital room, storyteller, etc.), in the classroom (interactive groups, literacy support, etc.) or even in the management of the school. As a result of these transformations, therefore, both the school and its environment are included in an integral, participative and continuing educational process.

The project is developed in different phases, and one of the initial and most important ones is called *The Dream*, a time in which all school members (children, teachers, parents, etc.) dream what they would like for their school. In "Building a Dream", Carmen Vega and M^a Luisa Jaussi narrate what it meant to dream for the School San Antonio de Etxebarri. As in the twelve other Learning Communities that currently exist in the Basque Country, dreaming the Dream constituted the first step toward establishing a common project. Similarly, in "Gypsy Families Transforming the School," Xavier Folch and some members of the Parent's Association from the School Salvador Vinyals Galí explain their process of transformation, based on reciprocal participation and reestablishing trust between the teachers and the Gypsy families. The involvement of mothers in literacy activities, the school canteen, and the school board, meant overcoming prejudice and focusing on learning for all.

One of the significant features in the Learning Communities Project is a new classroom organization called *interactive groups*. In "Dialogic Learning in Interactive Groups," Josepa Adell, Belinda Siles, and Carlos Herrero, two teachers from two different schools and one volunteer, explain how the children work in small heterogeneous groups to solve concrete math, language or science problems. In one classroom we find four or five adults working with the groups. They are parents, grandparents, college students, retired teachers, community members, etc., who volunteer to support and accelerate children's interactive learning. Those children who are more proficient, industrious or have greater expertise in a particular task will help others to solve the problem, reinforcing their own knowledge at the same time. Solidarity and collaboration thus become important principles for learning. Furthermore, in the article "The Transformation of Rural Schools" Isabel Rodrigo and Amparo Gil, together with Ignacio Zaldívar and Carmen Elboj, describe a different reality: the challenge that a small rural school faces to survive in the information society. Among their many dreams, the Ariño-Alloza School decided to immerse the community in ICT, transforming their small town situated in the middle of a rough mining region in Teruel, into an emerging local hub in the digital era.

Finally, the last contribution is a theoretical piece discussing new challenges to the school and the need for alternative perspectives to revitalize the educational task. In "The Global Curriculum. Rethinking schools from education" Pablo del Río and Amelia Álvarez bring up different elements from the psychology of education that have been at the foundations of diverse educational practices. These elements shed light to a reorientation in the field of education, that goes from a focus on individual meaningful learning to a focus on shared activity with meaning. They argue, from a historical-cultural perspective, that the developmental process of learning within a culture can be understood as a *global curriculum* in which, in their words, "school must develop the role of structuring and creating meaning". Their reflections, after learning from the teachers' accounts in dialogic practices, will probably leave us with many new insights to improve our work and commitment to improving education.

Interrogating ourselves, our theories and practices, by dialoguing with colleagues and educators from all over the world, opens our minds and makes us wiser. Many Spanish teachers and educational researchers are doing so and fighting, in this way, against those sterile innovation efforts that fail to build on research and previous practices that support new projects and enable them to be successful. We cannot experiment on children; however, there are many innovative efforts throughout the world that we can look at, reflect on, and share. Spain has a long tradition of popular education and cultural projects for the working class (although, at certain times in history, it has been suppressed or misappropriated by authoritarian regimes or neoliberal technocrats). Today, most of the original spirit has been recovered and updated within the scope of the information society, and many teachers are looking for alternative projects to provide answers and hopes for all children in schools. The Learning Communities Project is just an example of this optimistic attitude towards improving education, and the construction of a shared project with a common commitment: the education of all children and youth.