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Building a Dream: Learning Communities in the Basque Country

by M^a Luisa Jaussi and Carmen Vega

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All of us that make up the Learning Communities project share the same dream, the same utopia: that all children regardless of their social situation, their culture, their personal characteristics are able to develop, to a maximum, their abilities and enjoy the same rights and real opportunities in today's society. It is a dream of equality that includes difference. We think that "another education is possible" and for this, it is necessary that more people join this utopia, as is already happening in the Basque Country, where increasingly more schools are starting the transformation process. The *dream* is one of the phases in the process of transforming a center into a Learning Community. It is the catalyst for enthusiasm, meaning and enchantment.

It is a utopia towards which all efforts are directed -- the time when everyone, big and small, young and old, can let their imaginations and their aspirations run free, and begin the process of transforming the center. It is not possible to educate without hope; educators without hope contradict their practice. They are men and women without direction.

In contrast to what irresponsible people think, the language of those who are in a contradictory reality, driven by the dream of making it less perverse, is the language of possibility. It is the language used by the person who fights for his or her utopia, in a impatiently patient way. (Freire, P. 1997, p. 57)

In understanding learning as a process of interaction between all individuals, it is necessary to create optimum situations for dialogue. In the dream phase, built with everyone's voices, our project begins. We believe that only through the communicative interaction of families, teachers, students, the neighborhood and society is it possible to build a useful educational project.

This phase consists of everyone imaging, all together, the center that we would like to attend, to give classes in, to take our children to, etc.

We began the dream phase feeling very excited and convinced that we could improve and transform the school with contributions from the whole school community. Teachers, families, students, cleaning staff, cafeteria staff, the caretaker, different social agents, city hall, we all dreamt. Each group dreamt separately with the idea of combining all the ideas and contributions later, in order to make a common dream.

The task that is given to the teaching staff and the rest of the community is to dream about the school that they want for their children. The aim when using this approach is to avoid the double standards that may arise. For example, thinking some specific educational resources are vital for their own children, (learn languages, computers...) and that these are not necessary for the others. Through this approach, it is easier to establish dialogue among families because they all have the same dream: *the best for our children*.

The fact that dialogue starts based on the dream allows everyone to participate regardless of his or her culture, social class and educational level, because technical and excluding language is avoided. We all have dreams, we can all dream, including children of all ages. The youngest children can draw or tell their dreams through fantasy stories.

It was suggested that parents take an active part in the dream-making process, autonomously, giving them a voice, listening to them and gathering their ideas, proposals and suggestions. To this end, and after the initial informative meetings, in which families took on the project as theirs and understood the importance and impact of this phase, we moved to putting it into practice.

Delegates were chosen from each course who committed themselves to making sure that the majority of families participated in the process. People who initially did not feel capable of carrying out the task, and that had never been in a similar situation, took on the entire process successfully. This improved their relationships in school and their personal development. Different meetings took place, with the delegates analyzing the techniques that could be useful for gathering the dreams of the majority, so that everyone's contribution was reflected in the shared dream.

At the end of the process, they found that although there was a high level of participation, it was not 100%. They checked the class lists, and on seeing that some families had not responded to written calls and for different reasons had not attended the meetings, other strategies were employed. The work was divided up and they dreamt with a neighbor while having coffee, in the park while the children played, on a one-to-one and more intimate way. The evaluation was very positive; they ensured that the least integrated groups in the center dreamt, therefore meeting the aim of gathering the dreams of the majority.

Students in class and with the help of the teacher dreamt how they wanted their school to be. The youngest children drew pictures and the others made wall charts and posters. When all the material was put together, a huge banner was made that was hung in the entrance to the school along with a post box. This meant the dreams of people who could not attend meetings because of work and conflicting schedules, could be collected.

The dream, likewise, facilitates overcoming barriers or low expectations closely related to a biased vision of reality. Frequently, in the usual processes of participation, people's real aspirations or small desires do not come out, because they do not feel they have a right to them or that they are not even possible. Worst of all, this is usually confused by others as evidence of a lack of motivation or interest.

The simple fact of giving them the opportunity to express what they wanted was enough to make some of the dreams real, without waiting to form a commission to implement it. The expectations of what families wanted for their sons and daughters and staff wanted for their students soared.

When dreaming is promoted on egalitarian terms, imposed and self imposed barriers start to crumble and we discover that we all have similar aspirations. This converts it into an important catalyst both for dialogue and the mobilization of action.

When we put all our dreams together, we realized that we all wanted the best for our children and students. There were not any huge differences, and we agreed on the basics. It all seemed very easy and it made us aware of the potential we had, that we really could carry the project forward.

This phase makes it easier for more people to experience the school as theirs, something that has meaning.

The Moroccan families dreamt of after-school Arabic classes to help their children retain their language and identity. This was made possible with the efforts and collaboration of different entities. From this moment on, families began to participate in other areas within the school.

The dream is known and shared by the whole community.

A bulletin was written, gathering all the dreams, and was handed out to all the groups, so that the information could reach all of the educational community.

Dreams were classified by those relevant and significant elements that were repeatedly expressed in all the groups. To summarize, the following table was drawn up, that has become our reference point: the utopia towards which we are headed.

THE SCHOOL WE DREAM OF

- A school without school failure, with success for all
- An integrated school where all participate and collaborate, open to the neighborhood, grounded in egalitarian dialogue
- A Basque school
- A school with respect and tolerance
- Acceptance by students of peers with problems
- Good teaching staff
- A school with respect and dialogue between different cultures, ethnic origins and languages that live together in the school: a plural society
- Respect for Nature and the Environment
- Responsible and independent students, critical and reflective, adapted to society, and with high self-esteem
- High expectations for everyone integrated in the community
-

- Collaboration and participation of fathers and mothers both in the school and in the Parents' and Students' Association
- Sharing criteria, objectives and approaches between teaching staff and families
- Training for parents
- Permanent teaching staff
- Extending the schedule
- A place to study outside of class hours (playtime, cafeteria...)
- Well run and efficient school cafeteria
-
- Time to organize
- Ongoing coordination by teaching staff
- Students are the responsibility of all the teaching staff
-
- Clean school, with attractive and well- equipped classrooms
- Good access avoiding architectural limitations, elevator and ramps in order to access the classroom and the playground
-
- Extensive sports facilities, gym, and good playgrounds
- New furniture, walls and curtains, without too many tables and chairs
- Lockers
-
- Teaching from 2 to 18 years old: Preschool, Primary, Middle and High School
- Free books
- Funding for flexible and autonomous management of school repairs and maintenance
-
- Change in the teacher's role, as promoter of interaction and cooperation
- Dialogic learning
- More adults in the classroom
- Motivation
- Individualized attention
- Dynamic school and more opportunities
- Daily life approach
- Clear objectives, shared by students and families
- Coherent line of work
- Ongoing training for teaching staff.
-
- Promote languages: Basque, Spanish, English, French
- Information Technology accessible to all students
- After school activities: Information Technology, theatre, Basque dances, creative movement, sports, workshops
- Children's play-center
- Outings to get to know the surroundings
-
- Varied courses
- Extra study help
- Arabic classes.