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The Transformation of Rural Schools

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The Transformation of Rural Schools

by Carmen Elboj, Amparo Gil, Isabel Rodrigo and Ignacio Zaldívar

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A rural school is commonly understood as a school that is situated in a rural setting. If we specify a little more, we can say that a school situated in rural surroundings is an educational institution that is supported by rural culture and resources. Additional factors and circumstances exist that if not resolved favorably, can make it difficult to attain those objectives that make this a quality school, with conditions of equality in line with other schools.

In a rural context, the teaching staff faces a situation that they are generally not prepared for. Often they are not familiar with the environment and their professional training has not addressed the characteristics of education in a rural setting. Students are, on occasions grouped together in only one classroom, and this leads to children from different years and courses working together and sharing the same space. Our intention in turning ourselves into Learning Communities is that the interaction between such diverse groups of students can become a source for knowledge and learning. With reference to the families, interactions between them and the school can be much more easily achieved than they usually are, for example, in an urban setting. However, the history of lack of participation by families means that, in general, they are not very involved.

Facing this situation, the Learning Communities project provides the opportunity to promote the creation of an educational community in which the participation of family members is converted into the fundamental axis to obtain the best forms of learning for all girls and boys. Through their participation, the teaching staff can understand the context better, families can collaborate in classrooms so that all students are given attention, and they can participate in starting up activities to support learning during after school hours. These reasons, among many others, are those that led CRA Ariño-Alloza to begin the adventure of transforming into a Learning Community.

The CRA Ariño-Alloza is located in the north of the province of Teruel, in the north of Spain. Our CRA is made up of schools from both localities. Ariño is principally a mining village and Alloza is a zone mainly dedicated to agriculture. As can be easily seen, both schools have very different contexts and realities although they are physically very close to each other. The school population is made up of 71 students from Ariño and 43 students from Alloza.

Fourteen teachers make up the staff team, of which only five have a permanent position in the school. The rest of the teachers do not have an assigned place in this school. This means that, every year, a large proportion of the teaching staff is different. For this reason, in our school we think that the participation of families in school life is essential for the development of long-term projects in educational research and innovation.

Therefore, our reason for joining the Learning Communities project was not due to serious school failure or because of a problematic intercultural coexistence but, instead, to open the school to the community, to take advantage of all its wisdom and experiences to benefit the school and, through this, the community. Following this, we understand Learning Communities as a way of forming schools for the future and we did not hesitate for one moment in embarking on this new experience at the end of the school year of 2002/2003.

The first step was to explain to the families the Learning Communities project and the teaching staff's desire to start on this adventure. The reception by the families was positive, as was the reaction from the educational administration. Specifically, we were working with the Unit of Programmes from Provincial Management (Unidad de Programas de la Dirección Provincial (UPE)) and the Center of Teaching Staff in Andorra (Centro de Profesorado de Andorra (CPR)), to whom our CRA belongs. The UPE is responsible on a provincial level for different areas of education, for example teacher training, attention to diversity, European programs, Adult education and ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies). The CPR is the teacher's center where staff is advised and receives training on any of their educational interests and areas related to the educational curriculum.

Once we were sure that all groups agreed and understood the project, we began to develop the phases of the Learning Communities project. First, we carried out the *sensitization or training phase*, in which members of CREA explained what Learning Communities consisted of and resolved any of the families' or teachers' doubts as they arose. After thirty hours of training and information we were all sufficiently informed to vote on whether to become a Learning Community or not. Therefore the next step was the decision making stage. In other words, we had to decide whether we were going to embark on the project or not. The majority of all the sectors involved were in favor of starting the project.

Probably the most delightful moment for all the teaching staff, students and families was the *Dream phase*. We all let our imaginations run free about how we would like our school to be and, in this way, dreamt about the school we wanted for everyone. Many dreams and hopes were projected in this phase. Families dreamt of being able to rely on committed and enthusiastic teaching staff to continue the work already being carried out in the school, integration of ICTs in the day-to day work, promotion of teaching-learning of languages, promotion of education in values and training for the families.

The teachers highlighted their wish to have a stable teaching staff, social recognition for teaching work and the provision of other measures that we believe to be beneficial for our school, for example, a school radio, and computers for all classrooms and a sandpit for the playground of the preschool.

Our students dreamt of a school with a cafeteria with more green spaces, with more games in the playgrounds and they expressed their desires for "special" well-known people to visit, and that there be more school festivals.

After dreaming of our school and in order to achieve this dream, the first thing we did was to establish priorities and form the first commissions. From these, we tried to achieve the requests of the different groups involved in the school, in order to attain the school we dreamt of.

Before being a Learning Community, there were already efforts made by the school and families that showed their conviction that it was necessary to join effort and enthusiasm; and one of our priorities is to continue doing this. More specifically, entering into Learning Communities has led us to integrate all projects into one with the same philosophy: that all the girls and boys obtain the best forms of learning.

One of our biggest challenges has been and will continue to be the integration of the New Technologies in the teaching-learning process. Our classes now have all the technological resources necessary to access all the information that the Internet can provide for us. The resources available in the classrooms and the training received by families are another example of how relations between the school and its surroundings are a reality in our school.

Another of our priorities is training for families in activities related to new technologies. Specifically, we are working on learning to create webpages and to edit digital videos.

Related to this priority and to celebrate the day for coexistence in the Schools Associated with UNESCO, families together with teachers received specific training on how to make a video film using the different activities and acts that had been collected for the meeting, and this was later projected to show the visitors coming on this day.

The mothers' committee also continues with its activities, since, before entering the Learning Communities project this organization was already responsible for organizing weekend leisure activities for children, through different activities in the local cultural center.

In the same way, participation by volunteers to carry out special activities with students can be highlighted:

- Talks and leisure activities given by health staff on topics related to health.
- Visit to the studio of olive wood crafts to get to know the work
- Arrival of Santa Claus at the school to surprise the youngest children with a Christmas present.

Thanks to the participation of families, last year we were able to organize the Annual meeting of schools associated with UNESCO, as mentioned earlier, which we celebrated in Ariño. We received more than 500 students from different schools; we worked on activities relating to two themes: Heritage and the Environment. Thanks to the generous collaboration of volunteers, local tours of the area, paintings of cave murals on the school walls, making of videos, etc. was possible. On that day the Preschool building was transformed into "Ariñópolis", where engravings of footprints and fossils and fancy dress transported us to prehistoric times where dinosaurs reigned.

The latest project we have carried out was the Twinning of the school with another one in Mali: Saint Andre Pari. Initial contacts were made through correspondence. From our school, we sent them a letter explaining our center, the activities we do and how excited we were about establishing friendships and collaborating with them.

In the new academic year 2003/2004 we can already talk about the priorities of the following work commissions. In Alloza, the library and the infrastructures have been the first priority to be set in motion. In Ariño, they have started by preparing special activities, which were specified previously in the requests, for example, to have a school dining hall, visits from people of interest, improvements to playgrounds, talks with volunteer mothers...

Also the Friends of Nature committee has been set up, where the main aims are to gain knowledge of the immediate surroundings and to collect information on place names, also during the weekends.

Another priority this year is to organize interactive groups in the school with a specific and ongoing schedule in Early Childhood education. The decision to begin this experience at this level is because we consider its introduction to be easy and very positive and because at this stage family-school coordination is even more important for developing any educational proposal. In addition, the relations between these two contexts for children of this age-group must always be present.

Other committees have continued with their tasks, like the one dedicated to learning about film projection to provide leisure activities on the weekends for both adults and children, or the committee for learning languages with the main objective of being able to help their children, which has resulted in the creation of a Beginners English course. Also, training has been requested through talks on different subjects, given by health professionals, psychologists and pedagogues.

Once more during this new academic year, it is obvious that we are a community that learns through different projects encompassing the same school philosophy. We have carried out many activities among all of us, with the aim of the students acquiring an integral education in accordance with the new demands of society. So, we celebrated the day of the Constitution; a day in which work shared by mothers, fathers, teaching staff and children was what stood out most.

With the visit we made to a TV program called "Parlamento", we spent two days recording different activities we carried out with the new technologies and with the participation of families, in rotating workshops on make-up, puppets, banners, story-telling...Everything directed towards the celebration of the 25th anniversary of the Constitution.

Another of the activities that relies on participation is the *Fiesta de la Castañada* (Chestnut Festival) or the "Fall Festival". Different classes in the school were involved in doing work related to the seasons (poems, songs, rhymes....). The festival ended with a shared meal of roasted chestnuts prepared by mothers collaborating at the school, and included special decorations for this day.

The last projects carried out with the participation of families have been the sharing of a day in the school dining room and a visit by a bullfighter, who showed the boys and girls all about his profession. The school radio "Sierra de Arcos" is another dream run by the school with programs that are transmitted locally on a daily basis .

All in all, maintaining enthusiasm is the key to success. We believe in the project, we count on the participation of families and we have recognition and support from the Educational Administration.

Beginnings are usually difficult. The economic and human resources that are necessary are almost never available at the beginning, but it is important to look for strategies to obtain the initial success. This guarantees achieving a better availability of means and better academic results. In order for this to happen, we start from the basis, as Freire has taught us so well, that in our school there is no room for the culture of complaint, only the culture of transformation.