

Learning communities. A commitment to another way of conceiving school organization

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6845055>

Published Date: 16-July-2022

Abstract: This article consists of a didactic material of teaching innovation that aims to provide guidelines to future teachers on how to develop learning communities in their schools. Therefore, this study aims to respond to the new social and educational changes by means of a project supported by scientific bases and favorable results after its implementation in different scenarios. This is the Learning Communities, a set of actions that aim to alleviate situations of social exclusion and to promote integral, cooperative and true learning.

Keywords: Learning Communities, Successful Educational Actions, Dialogic Learning, Information Society.

I. INTRODUCTION

Recent years have witnessed numerous social changes that urgently require new transformations in the educational sphere. It is difficult to continue maintaining an educational system almost identical to that of a couple of decades ago, in a completely different society. This is why we cannot continue to be anchored in a unidirectional teaching, in which only the role of teacher and student is the only one, and in which instruction is given through an outdated curriculum that has nothing to do with the current demands both in the labor and social spheres. In spite of this, not just any change can be welcome, and the fact is that, as in other areas, education also requires, before the implementation of such changes, certain indicators that guarantee an educational improvement.

It would be impossible to conceive education from a traditional pedagogical model, in which the educator would be the main source of information and the only protagonist in the transmission of teachings. As Mora (2004) rightly argues, we cannot bet on an education that promotes the accumulation of knowledge, when any type of information can be accessed in less than a second. It would therefore be interesting to have an educational vision that promotes an active attitude on the part of the student towards learning, making the student the protagonist of his or her own learning process, and transforming the role of the educator into that of director or guide of the learning process of his or her own student.

However, in most classrooms there is still a traditional methodology, unsuited to the needs of students and incapable of arousing interest in learners. It is for all these reasons that betting on a true and valuable transformation in the educational world is only possible if educational practices that defend theories and experiences recognized by the scientific community, which have been previously tested and positively evaluated (Racionero and Serradell, 2005), are taken as a reference (Racionero and Serradell, 2005).

In order to highlight the need to understand education in a different way in these times of change, we will first focus on understanding what Learning Communities consist of and how useful they can be for educational improvement; secondly, we will present the pedagogical principles and theoretical bases on which they are based; and finally, we will explain the phases of transformation and consolidation that educational centers have to undergo in order to become Learning Communities.

II. LEARNING COMMUNITIES: ANOTHER WAY OF UNDERSTANDING EDUCATION

Learning Communities have their origin in the studies carried out by the Special Research Center for Theories and Practices to Overcome Inequalities (CREA), in which this term took shape thanks to the various educational and social practices worked on in the field of primary and secondary education, which had very good results, achieving a better coexistence and an improvement in school failure (Flecha & Puigvert, 2002). This optimum result is achieved fundamentally by turning the school into a democratic place, in which the main and fundamental tool is the dialogue and participation of all the members of the center, considering also the family and other agents as responsible for teaching.

In Spain, the Learning Communities had their origin in the school of adult education of Verneda Sant Marti, which defended "a school where people dare to dream, develops dialogic learning with a high quality education, democratic, open to the community, participatory, plural, free and transformative" (Folgueiras, 2011, p.4). This is why from the beginning, the Learning Communities have opted for an education based on freedom, participation, solidarity and democracy. They also defend an education adjusted to the changes that society constantly presents, and this was one of the reasons for their appearance, to facilitate this type of education.

This alternative conception in education acts as a proposal to face these new social demands from the educational field, aiming at overcoming social inequalities and the inclusion of students in the information society (Flecha and Larena, 2008).

When it comes to defining the term Learning Community, we find a series of institutions and authors who try to contribute their own definition to the subject:

Cifuentes, Yeste, & Casadó (2021) indicate that the "Learning Communities is a project of social and educational transformation that begins in the school and transcends the entire community. It is a project based on a set of Successful Educational Actions aimed at achieving efficiency, equity and social cohesion."

Official Gazette of the Junta de Andalucía (Bulletin number 126 of 28/06/2012) "A Learning Community is a project of social and cultural transformation of an educational center and its environment, aimed at improving school results and coexistence, and to achieve the educational success of all its students. Its distinctive feature is to be a center open to all members of the community in which the consensual and active participation of families, associations and volunteers is contemplated and integrated within the school day, both in the management processes of the center and in the development of student learning".

Carmen Elboj, Rosa Valls and Miguel Fort (2000) "...the result of the social and cultural transformation of an educational center and its environment through an integrated, participatory and permanent education, based on dialogical learning".

Ramón Flecha, María Padrós, Ignasi Puigdemívol (2003) "... an educational response that breaks with the traditional structure of the school to open its doors to the participation of the whole community".

By way of synthesis, with regard to the various definitions of Learning Communities, it is worth pointing out some essential aspects that have been extracted by comparing the above definitions, which have in common that: it is a socio-educational project undertaken by the entire educational community (school, family, neighborhood, etc.) with the aim of transforming the educational community (school, family, neighborhood, etc.) with the aim of transforming the current social and educational situation, marked among other aspects by a high rate of school failure or social inequalities; to achieve this purpose, the involvement of the entire community will be necessary, which should develop an egalitarian dialogue, as well as an active participation of all its members, and the dreams and hopes that each member of this community puts in this project will be taken as the main motivation.

First of all, it should be emphasized that the transformation actions of the Learning Communities in educational centers are aimed at overcoming school failure and eliminating conflicts that may arise. The aim is not to adapt to the present circumstances of the context, but to transform the educational center into a tool to improve them, using as a means, a participative and dialogic education. Therefore, this particular project opens a door to a new point of view in which participation, collaboration and social support are a fundamental pillar (Flecha and Puigvert, 2002).

The numerous political, social and cultural changes in education demand that educators, schools and parents must take the lead and act. This requires the joint collaboration of all, through a continuous dialogue in which the brainstorming of ideas and proposals for improvement for the community is the basis of the structure that forms the educational community.

In the various researches carried out on this subject, it is stated that the more family participation in the educational center and school tasks of their children, the higher the percentage of school success of the students (Vahedi and Nikdel, 2011). In connection with this idea, it is interesting to mention the current "social and community de-responsibilization" in educational matters (Coll, 1999). Because of this, it is necessary to fight against this, proposing a shared responsibility, not leaving only in the hands of the educational institution in question, issues as important as those related to the education of our children and young people.

On the other hand, Flecha, García, Gómez and Latorre (2009) argue, based on the results of the research carried out by the Includ-ed project (2006-2011), that the actions of this project are improving academic performance in areas of low socio-economic level and with the presence of a wide cultural diversity in the classroom.

Understandably, new changes require new commitments. In this case, assuming the transformation of an educational center into a learning community implies, as reflected in the Official Gazette of the Andalusian Government (BOJA no.126/2012), to be involved in several responsibilities:

- a) Previous training on the contents and development of the proposal.
- b) Collection of the transformation proposals contributed by all the participating sectors and definition of priorities.
- c) Acceptance of the initiation of the project by the different sectors involved.
- d) Establishment of mixed work commissions composed of members of the different sectors of the educational community for the implementation, management and development of the project.
- e) Carrying out evaluation processes and proposals for improvement.

It is clear then that there is no project without absolute cooperation and joint commitment, and that it is not only enough with the implementation of the project, but it is also essential to make reflections from different perspectives about the process, always trying to improve it.

III. THEORETICAL BASES OF LEARNING COMMUNITIES.

As mentioned above, there are scientific bases that corroborate the positive results of this project, which is based on the Dialogical Learning Theory, which argues that "dialogical learning occurs in interactions that increase instrumental learning, favor the creation of personal and social meaning, are guided by principles of solidarity and in which equality and difference are compatible and mutually enriching values" (Aubert et al., 2008, p. 167).

Duque and Prieto (2009) state that this theory, the result of the contributions of some very relevant authors such as Vygotsky, Habermas or Freire, is based on seven principles: egalitarian dialogue; cultural intelligence; transformation; creation of meaning; solidarity; instrumental dimension; and finally, equality of differences.

It is also important to explain the assumptions and principles underpinning this project:

- The option for egalitarian dialogue as a procedure, as opposed to imposition, for the resolution of conflicts and controversies, and to facilitate change towards the objectives and priorities of a center. Egalitarian dialogue occurs when the contributions of each participant are valued according to the validity of the arguments they present and not their previous status.
- The principle that we can all work together, that is, that the strength and knowledge necessary for the transformation of schools is within them and not outside.
- The commitment to the inclusion of class differences and not to separation, which is achieved through interactive learning groups that seek to accelerate and enhance the learning of those who are disadvantaged, with the help and participation of as many people as are willing to collaborate in the center in achieving its goals.
- The ethical principle of wanting the same for all students and at the same level as we academics want for our children.
- Emphasis on the community and, especially, on families, empowering and enriching them in their abilities and knowledge, due to the multiplying effect they have on the learning possibilities of their children.
- The dialogic learning in which a good part of what is pursued in these schools is agglutinated (Echeita, 2006, pp.102-103).

In addition to these principles, it is essential to mention, when speaking of learning communities, their successful educational actions. These actions have contributed to the improvement of coexistence in the educational center, as well as to its academic performance. The following table explains what these actions are and what they consist of:

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Tabla 1: Types of educational actions of the CDA.

	Definition	Results after application
Interactive Groups	Proposal to organize the classroom in heterogeneous groups with volunteers in addition to the teacher.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More dynamic and participatory classroom rooms. - Guarantee of learning of all students (ZDP). High expectations. Transformation of the context. - More personalized teaching, the teacher is attentive to the needs of each person in the classroom. - Development of solidarity attitudes and improvement of coexistence. - Reorganization or increase of human resources. - High level of attention, better use of time. - Cultural intelligence is capitalized.
Dialogic Literary Gatherings	Activity of reading and joint construction of knowledge based on classics of universal literature.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Dialogic reading (that mediated by different voices, experiences and cultures, the one that passes from the individual to the intersubjective) generates an understanding of the text that cannot be reached individually. - Increased vocabulary, improved oral expression, comprehension, critical thinking, ability of argumentation (with claims of validity) - Reading classics breaks the social gap and empowers disadvantaged classes

Community Educational Participation	It is a form of participation in which families and people in the community are part of learning activities and make decisions about it.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Directly impacts on improving student learning outcomes - Changes the relationships and culture of the school ensuring the plurality of voices - Improves the management of the educational center - Achieves a stable and lasting commitment from families and community agents - Improves the coordination of school, extracurricular and community activities
Tutored Library	A proposal to extend learning time (inclusion) by incorporating volunteers from the community.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Acceleration of the learning of all students, in an inclusive way favors especially to those who have more difficulties. - More interactions with people in the community and peers of all ages, more learning. - Focusing on instrumental learning ensures equality of outcome = equal opportunities. -It improves coexistence and develops friendship and solidarity attitudes.
Family Formation	It is about opening the school so that family members can improve their instrumental training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Directly impacts the academic improvement of students (INCLUD-ED) - Increases the skills and opportunities of adults by improving their confidence - Expands the possibilities of helping your children in everyday tasks by creating a new sense around learning - Increase expectations regarding your future and that of your children by increasing motivation to continue studying. - Bonds of understanding and tolerance are created between families, stereotypes are demolished
Dialogic Pedagogical Training	It is about going to the sources and knowing and building together the knowledge around the best theories of education.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Improves professional practice and therefore the learning of students (parameter to evaluate teacher training) - Improves motivation and sense of teaching - Egalitarian dialogue establishes new and better relationships in the teaching staff - Tools are obtained to argue the practice before administration, families, community... -Occurrences are overcome and social valuation is gained.
Dialogic Model of Coexistence	It is a model that goes beyond the disciplinary model and the mediator through dialogue and the participation of the whole community.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Improvement of student learning by feeling the educational center as a safe place and free of violence - Improves coexistence and relationships inside and outside the school environment - Helps prevent gender-based violence - Participates in a procedural ethic and a deliberative democracy, learning whereas the effectiveness of the agreements lies not so much in the what but in how that agreement was reached; and to make decisions by consensus.

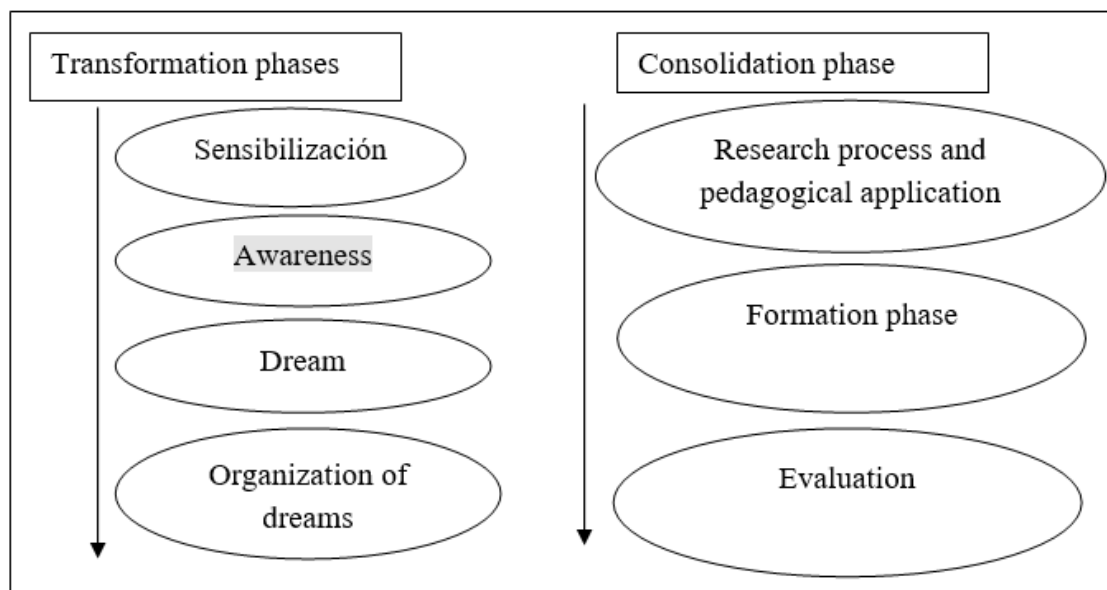
Source: (Álvarez y Vieities, s.f., p.2)

It is relevant to point out that the meaning of this project lies in the fight against social, cultural and educational inequality. In relation to this "goal" Elboj, Valls and Fort (2000) propose a change in the way our schools are conceived, highlighting the need for a renewed reflection of our current society, through the redefinition of new conceptions of teaching and learning, and trying to face problems through collaboration and common responsibility.

As for the pedagogical principles on which it is based, as well defended by (Flecha and Puigvert, 2002) it is necessary to emphasize that the teaching-learning processes are conceived as the center of the educational center and that in it there must be, above all, a learning environment. At the same time, teaching must present clear and common purposes for the entire community, and must foster high expectations in those involved. On the other hand, school leadership must be shared and horizontal, striving above all for equal rights for all. Another fundamental principle is the presence of a continuous and systematic evaluation to detect and make up for possible future errors.

IV. PHASES IN THE CREATION OF A LEARNING COMMUNITY.

Finally, the various phases for turning an educational center into a Learning Community are presented. The following chart shows what these phases are according to Flecha and Larena (2008).



Source: Flecha y Larena (2008).

As can be seen, there are two main periods. In the first one, the so-called "transformation phase", is the one in which the whole community shares its utopia of an educational center; it is the one in which all the dreams to be fulfilled that these members have about education are expressed and in which decisions are taken together for educational improvement.

The second period is a crucial phase for the consolidation of the center as a learning community, in which all members must become aware of and learn about their new roles and commitments in this project. The participation and involvement of the whole community is essential, as well as the cooperative reflection on how it is working and what aspects can be improved for future actions.

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