

## LEARNING COMMUNITIES: RE-THINKING EDUCATION THROUGH LOCAL DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING<sup>1</sup>

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A *Learning Community* is an organised human community which builds and becomes engaged in its own educational and cultural project to educate itself, its children, young people and adults, within the framework of endogenous, cooperative effort and solidarity, based on an analysis not only of its deficits but, above all, of its strengths.

The only possibility for achieving Education for All and Lifelong Learning for All is by making education a *need* and a *task* of all, developing and synchronising the local community's resources and efforts with the support of intermediate and central levels in order to ensure feasibility, quality and equity.

The term *Learning Community* has extended in recent years with different interpretations, which have also given rise to different policies and programmes all over the world, both in developed and developing countries.<sup>3</sup> The diverse uses of the notion of the *Learning Community* (hereafter known as LC) are crossed by three fundamental axes: school/out-of-school, real/virtual, and the axis, which embodies the wide range of objectives and meanings attributed to LCs.

The LC sometimes refers to the school context, and, more specifically, to the school or to the classroom; at others, to a geographical area (the city, the neighbourhood, the locality); at others, to a virtual reality and to connectivity mediated by the use of modern information and communication technologies (networks of people, of schools, of educational institutions, of professional communities, etc). In general, and particularly in industrialized countries, the notion of LC is applied to urban realities. Some link the concept to economic development, social capital or human development in its broadest sense; others stress elements of citizenship and social participation. Generally, what has predominated until now is the notion of *community* more than that of *learning*. In fact, except perhaps for certain versions of the LC more closely linked to the school environment, little attention is paid to its pedagogic aspects.

The “Learning Community”, in its different interpretations and focuses, is recognisable as an aspiration and as a historic experience in all countries. Its revival and expansion in the current context can be explained by a series of factors, including:

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<sup>3</sup> For a review of the literature on this subject, see: R. Faris and W. Peterson, “Learning-Based Community Development: Lessons Learned for British Columbia”, Paper submitted to the Ministry of Community Development, Cooperatives and Volunteers, Canada, July 2000. For a review of the concept from the USA perspective, see “Learning Communities”, ERIC Digest 1999.

- The trend towards “*glocalisation*” (globalisation and its contrary impulse, localisation) and, in this context, the resurgence/renewal of the local and of so-called “community development”.
- The downsizing of the State and of its role, and the rapid process of decentralisation, along with the increasing complexity of civil society, the activation of alliances between different sectors and players, and the broadening of citizen participation in different fields, including education.
- The emergence and rapid expansion of the new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs).
- The renewed importance given to education and the emphasis on learning, and on *life-long learning* as an organising principle of future society -- defined as a “knowledge society” and a “learning society”.
- Growing recognition of diversity and of the need to diversify educational opportunities, tending towards innovation and experimentation with different models, sensitive to the reality and requirements of each particular situation.
- Disenchantment with the school system and with repeated attempts at educational (schools) reform, and search for new ways and means of thinking about school education and about education in general (the call for a “new model” for education can be heard coming from all quarters).

The *Learning Community* proposal which we summarise here <sup>4</sup> integrates school and non-school education, real and virtual resources, in a given community or territory (urban and/or rural), thus embracing the different notions of LC mentioned above. Its sources of inspiration are some of the most advanced thought and best practices of “community education”<sup>5</sup> and the Popular Education movement in Latin America. It also takes elements from the “expanded vision of basic education” proposed at the World Conference on Education for All (Jomtien, Thailand, March 1990). The LC proposed here does not intend to be a closed model, limited to the local level, detached from the State or even conceived as an alternative to it. It is expressly conceived as a proposal for education policy, centred on a strategy for educational and cultural development and transformation at the local level,

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<sup>4</sup> Some of the ideas discussed here were developed as part of the conceptual framework of the “*Learning Community Initiative*” launched in 1997 by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, when I was WKKF’s Director of Programmes for Latin America and the Caribbean. Fourteen projects were approved within this initiative, and are being implemented in nine countries in the region: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Haiti, Mexico, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela.

<sup>5</sup> The term “*community education*” also refers to different concepts and realities. Some of these are closer to the notion of the “*community school*”, which, in turn has important variants, either working within the school (“a school open to the community”) or from outside it (“actions complementary to the school”, based on the action of NGOs or other public or private organisations). Others are closer to the idea of the “*educating community*”. Different models of “*community education*”, some of them very specific, have been developed within the framework of traditional education and of education among indigenous groups.

with citizens as the protagonists and with local and human development as horizons and goals. As such:

- the LC necessarily forms part of, and should be organised around, an integral and integrating project for local and national development. This implies breaking with narrow sectoral approaches and fostering operational and strategic alliances both at micro (LC) and macro level (education policy, social policy, economic policy);
- the LC takes an integral, systemic approach to education, viewed through learning and through the world of culture in its broadest sense (meeting the learning needs of the population and developing a *new general culture* in accordance with the requirements of full citizenship). Thus, it articulates what has tended to be separated, amongst other things: formal, non-formal and informal education; school and community; education policy, social policy and economic policy; education and culture; scientific knowledge and common knowledge; children’s education and adult education; reform and innovation (“top-down” and “bottom-up” approaches to change); administrative and pedagogical management (at school, in the school system, in the education policy, in the training of human resources, etc); the poor —“disadvantaged” or “at risk” groups— and the others (in the framework of the “alleviating poverty” and “focus on poverty” strategies, meant as positive discrimination but which often end up reinforcing assistentialism and social exclusion); the global and the local.

Building a *Learning Community* entails reviewing the conventional distinction between *school* and *community*, and between *formal*, *non-formal* and *informal* education, and the conventional ways of seeing the links between them. The school is *part* of the community; teachers and students are at the same time members of the school and members of the community. Parents and the family have their own identity and are not subsumed into the “community”. Moreover, and since the school is not the only educational institution, the need for articulation extends to all educational institutions present at the community level. The *Learning Community* is not the sum of isolated interventions, or even their articulation, but implies the building of territorial education plans.

<b>FROM</b>	<b>TO</b>
<b>School Community</b>	<b>Learning Community</b>
Children and young people learning	Children, young people and adults learning
Adults teaching children and young people	Inter-generational and peer learning
School education	School and out-of-school education
Formal education	Formal, non-formal and informal education
School agents (teachers)	Education agents (including teachers)
School agents as agents of change	Education agents as agents of change
Pupils as subjects of learning	Pupils and educators as subjects of learning
Fragmented vision of school system (by educational levels)	Systemic, unified vision of school system (from pre-school to university)
Institutional plans	Inter-institutional plans and alliances
Isolated innovations	Networks of innovations
Network of school institutions	Network of education institutions
Institutional education project (school)	Community educational project

Sector-based, intra-school focus	Inter-sectoral and territorial focus
Ministry of Education	Various Ministries
State	State, civil society, local community
<b>Lifelong Education</b>	<b>Lifelong Learning</b>

### WHAT IS A LEARNING COMMUNITY?

- It is a community-based and solidararian education proposal whose area of intervention is the local society. It springs from the need to concentrate efforts on delimited communities, areas or territories, both at rural and urban level.
- It assumes that all human communities possess learning resources, agents, institutions and networks in operation, which need to be identified, valued, developed and articulated so as to build an educational and cultural project based each community's specific needs and possibilities.
- It adopts a broad vision of education, embracing all learning environments: family, the school system, the community, nature, the street, the media, the church, the workplace, the club, the library, the social centre, the sports court, the garden, the school playground, the cinema, the theatre, the museum, the farm, the zoo, the circus, etc. Thus, it articulates *school* and *out-of-school* education, *formal, non-formal and informal* education, overcoming these distinctions which have always been blurred and which impede a more holistic, systemic, learning-centred vision of education.
- It takes learning, rather than education, as the main objective. The LC aims at meeting the basic learning needs of the population (children, young people and adults), at identifying such needs and the most suitable means and modalities to meet them. It places great importance on teaching and learning, and on pedagogical renovation.
- It involves children, young people and adults, placing great value on inter-generational and peer learning, stressing the importance of adult education (parents, education agents of all kinds, members of the community, and adults in general) in the formation and well being of children and young people. It highlights the potential of young people as educators and active players in their own education, in the transformation of the school system, as well as in family and community development.
- It is based on the premise that only joint efforts between home and school, school and out-of-school education, and public and private institutions, coupled with the full use of all the human and material resources available in each community, can make *education for all* and *lifelong learning* possible. It therefore defends the need for dialogue, alliances and the joining together of different agents around a shared educational and cultural project.
- It encourages the search and respect for differences. It acknowledges that each group and community has its own resources, needs and realities, consequently requiring specific educational and cultural projects adapted to each situation and context. Rather than uncritically accepted "models", proposed as universally valid responses, the LC encourages

the construction of and experimentation with different models, capable of inspiring others, rather than of being replicated.

- It seeks to demonstrate the importance and potential of developing learning systems generated and developed at local level, based on cooperation, solidarity, inter-generational learning and the synergy of efforts, and equipped with an organised system of supports at intermediate and central level, both on the part of the State and non-governmental organisations.
- It proposes a bottom-up, inside-out model of educational development and change, one capable of *influencing conventional ways of conceiving and enacting education policy*, at local, regional and national level, and conventional international cooperation in the field of education. Such approach may help overcome certain well-known problems and biases in education, such as:
  - Lack of a *systemic, inter-sectoral* vision of education.
  - Divorce between school and community, school and out-of-school education, formal and non-formal education, etc.
  - *Uniformity* of education and education policy/reform, and difficulty in understanding and accepting diversity.
  - Emphasis on *quantity* and *results*, ignoring *quality* and *processes*.
  - *Education reform* understood eminently as *school reform*.
  - *Vertical* reforms, without or with little consultation, social participation and involvement of education institutions and agents.
  - *Project* logic and approach, rather than medium/long-term and sustained interventions.
  - Priority given to *things* rather than to *people* in the efforts to improve education and learning.

As a policy strategy, the LC seeks to have an impact at three levels:

- *local community level*: developing the community's learning and educational and cultural resources, including the development and transformation of school institutions;
- *intermediate levels*: developing a rich and diverse body of community-based learning experiences, articulated, evaluated and systematised so that the lessons learned can be shared with other LCs and serve as a point of reference and inspiration for similar initiatives in other contexts. Community leaders, education agents and professionals linked to both public and private institutions, the media and public opinion in general must be informed of such experiences.
- *policy-makers*: giving visibility to, networking and promoting experiences amongst key people and institutions who make decisions over education policy at both national and international level.

## SOME BASIC PREMISES

- Education does not take place only in the school system. The *school system* is not the only *education system* (family and the media are also education systems).
- What matters is learning, more than education in itself. Not all *education* or *teaching* results in *learning* (in fact, there can be teaching without learning: teachers or parents who teach, and pupils or children who do not learn). There can also be *learning* without *teaching* (for example, learning which is the result of observing, reading a book, working, solving a problem, watching a film, talking, exchanging experiences, taking part in a debate, travelling, etc.).
- There are many loci for learning: home, the school system, nature, the street, the community, the workplace, the church, the group of friends, the media, the library, the computer and the Internet, etc. And there are many ways of learning: games, reading, experience, observation, reflection, conversation, practice, trial and error, self-instruction, etc. All these sources are important and complementary in ensuring meaningful learning throughout the life of individuals and groups.
- All communities have teaching and learning institutions, agents and networks, which operate formally and informally through family, school, community organisations, in the park, the library, the sports court, the community centre, the health centre, at church, in the club, the cooperative, the museum, the workshop, the factory, the shop, local festivities and traditions, etc.
- All people and each and every member of the community is a potential educator and a potential learner, with the ability both to teach and to learn. It is a collective responsibility, and the responsibility of education itself, to develop such skills and abilities.
- Community and school are not two separate entities. The school is *part* of the community and owes its existence to it. Teachers and pupils are fully-fledged members of the community. Besides their identity as teachers and pupils, they are individuals, social subjects, community agents, citizens. It is possible and fundamentally important to find points in common and to establish alliances —rather than greater distance and rupture— between the family and the school, parents and teachers, students and teachers, students and parents, and between all these and local society as a whole.
- Learning has no age. Any age is good for learning. Each —childhood, youth, and adulthood— has its peculiarities, opportunities, strengths and weaknesses.
- The education of children and the education of youth and adults are mutually necessary and complementary. Adult education (of parents, education agents, members of the community, etc) is an essential condition for the education and development of children and young people, and for social and community development.

- Learning, to be such, must be meaningful to the learner. Learning (both the *whats* and the *hows*) must connect with the learner's interests, motivations and needs, with his/her knowledge and previous experience, and motivate him/her to continue learning.
- Cooperation and solidarity must be seen as the norm and as resources not only for survival but also for securing the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes, which form part of a community's cultural and educational basis.
- It is essential to respect, value, promote and learn from diversity, and, therefore, to recognise the need for specific responses to specific realities.
- Education and learning are the joint responsibility of local society, national society, the State and each individual.

#### **WHAT DOES THE ORGANISATION OF A *LEARNING COMMUNITY* IMPLY?**

- Concentrating on a particular *territory*.
- Building on processes already in progress.
- Children and young people as the main beneficiaries and actors.
- Participatory processes in the design, implementation and evaluation of the education plan.
- Associative projects and alliance building.
- Orientation towards learning and emphasis on pedagogical innovation.
- Revitalisation and renovation of the public school system.
- People and human development as the priority.
- Systemic intervention and search for articulations.
- Systemisation, evaluation and promotion of the experience.
- Building demonstration experiences.
- Continuity and sustainability of efforts.
- Quality processes and results, with efficient use of resources.

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