Training in Learning Communities

Unit 3

TRANSFORMATION OF AN EDUCATIONAL CENTRE INTO A LEARNING COMMUNITY

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This unit explains the process of transforming an education centre into a Learning Community. Centres which are transformed must open their doors to the community in order to allow for the achievement of a dream of education which overcomes school failure and problems in coexistence and is orientated towards quality education for all children, both boys and girls. Everyone involved in this process is aware of the goals and is committed to its execution. The necessary steps to be taken are: raising awareness, decision making, dreaming, prioritisation and planning.

It is important to stress that the details of each step do depend on the particular circumstances of the centre and they are to be altered, considered and discussed within the educational community as a whole. The transformation of a centre is not an unalterable process but is open to changes which may arise as a result of new contributions, considerations and continuous evaluation.

3.1. The steps involved in transforming an education centre into a Learning Community

Learning Communities are usually the result of schools and institutes themselves deciding to begin the transformation process. Over the last twenty years, most of the educational centres which have opted to become Learning Communities have done so thanks to members of staff meeting others on a course or in a lecture, seminar or training session, who informed them about the project. Then, on returning to school they were motivated to share what they had discovered with their colleagues, particularly regarding the contributions of the international scientific community. However, this is not the only way centres have been motivated to become Learning Communities. In some instances it has been a decision made by the management of the center and subsequently agreed with the school staff and the community. In other cases, students' families have found out about Learning Communities and so put forward the idea to the school principal. Also, local education administrators have decided to implement the fostering of their schools into Learning Communities.

CEIP La Paz, in Albacete (Spain) is a clear example of the decision to turn a school into a Learning Community coming from the local educational adminis-

trative office in Castilla-La Mancha. In this case the change was made in order to resolve serious problems with school failure and coexistence.

Transformation process of the La Paz Learning Community (Albacete)

The process carried out by the La Paz Learning Community has been studied by the international scientific community. In the following article it is possible to see in depth the transformation process of a 'ghetto' school where there was a high ratio of school failure and serious coexistence problems, into a school which can produce evidence of success after its transformation.

Flecha, R. & Soler, M. (2013) Turning difficulties into possibilities: engaging Roma families and students in school through dialogic learning. *Cambridge Journal of Education, 43*(4), p. 451-465. doi:10.1080/0305764X.2013.819068

Education centres which opt to become Learning Communities carry the process out in several phases. In each phase there are a number of procedures orientated towards achieving educational success and complete inclusiveness. This orientation to the *transformation* of the context and the centre is fundamental and is more effective in determining the success of the process than the *adaptation* of the current circumstances.

Even though the steps are clearly defined, each centre develops the process in a unique way, paying attention to their own distinctive features and/or needs. Here below the steps are shown:

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This transformation process does not stop at the last phase. The dream continues endlessly as everyone within the Learning Community reviews and evaluates the extent to which their dreams have been achieved and each school year then offers a new opportunity for achieving new targets and making new hopes come to fruition using approaches to education which are based on excellence and equality. Each step in the process is described below.

3.1.1. *Raising awareness*

The phase of raising awareness consists initially of training in relevant scientific research and today's most notable theories about learning and education from a multidisciplinary perspective. Scientific contributions are included from key fields such as sociology, psychology, pedagogy and anthropology, amongst others. Theory and practice are brought together in internationally recognised evidence-based education procedures. These are what Learning Communities are based on and what is clarified in the awareness-raising phase. From there, education professionals, researchers, community facilitators, relatives and others together analyse the challenges and priorities of their particular education centre with the overarching aim of improving their children's education.

The main goal of the awareness-raising phase is to make Successful Educational Actions (SEAs) and evidence-based information available to everyone related to the centre (Flecha, 2015) so that, following an informed discussion and decision-making process, the centre can decide whether or not to become a Learning Community.

The awareness-raising phase lasts for 30 hours, held intensively over several days. It is preferable that the training be done in this manner rather than over an extended time period because ideas and responses can be more easily analysed in depth in real time. The training usually takes place during in-person sessions in order to start creating as strong connections as possible among everyone in the education community.

In the awareness-raising process it is advisable to have input from most, if not all, staff members and, if feasible, also education agents from the community since the aim for the centre is to create a global transformation which will involve everyone. The inclusion of student families and others from the community in this particular phase enhances reflection and discussion and contributes to the consolidation of the scientific basis of the Learning Community. With this in mind, a general assembly is called with the education community.

Topics considered in the phase of raising awareness include: the evidence-based scientific foundation of Learning Communities; dialogic learning in an information society; the transformation phases of Learning Communities; organisation of Learning Communities; Interactive Groups; Dialogic Gatherings;

educational participation of the community: dialogic reading, length of learning period, Mixed Working Committees; training of relatives; dialogic training of staff; a dialogic model for the prevention and resolution of conflict; multiculturalism in Learning Communities; voluntary work; preventing socialisation of gender-based aggression.

People in charge of training here must understand and know the scientific basis of Learning Communities, including evidence from psychology, sociology and gender surveys, for example. Trainers also must be familiar with the Successful Educational Actions which the international scientific community has shown contribute to successful educational procedures and improved coexistence after the implementation of a Learning Community (Flecha & García, 2007).

The awareness-raising phase need not cause any delay to beginning the process of transformation in the Learning Communities.

3.1.2.   *Decision-making*

Decision-making is the phase in which **the education community** as a whole decides whether or not to start the transformation process of their education centre into a Learning Community. This means that the decision must not only be agreed on by staff, although this is the initial step, but it also needs the approval of student families and the education community in general. In this phase, a general assembly is called with the education community. Usually, this process of decision-making involves an in-depth discussion about what it would mean to transform the school or institute into a Learning Community.

Since this decision-making process must include all members of the education community, it is crucial to encourage the participation of the maximum number of people (Mello, 2009). To this end, it is important that the staff, the student body, their relatives, volunteers and everyone connected to the centre are involved. They become informed about Learning Communities and have the opportunity to take part in the decision-making process. To facilitate participation, several things can be done such as suggesting a variety of meeting times so that everyone, regardless of their personal circumstances, can attend. In some centres, for example, in Mare de Déu de Montserrat in Terrassa (Barcelona, Spain) they repeat the same meeting at various times of day so that everyone can fit the meeting in with their day-to-day lives.

The decision to transform an educational centre into a Learning Community is taken at these meetings. Prior to the main meetings, the staff may hold smaller or internal sessions in which they discuss particular considerations in depth.

The final decision is reached by achieving agreement from everyone concerned. It is highly advisable that the majority of the staff wish to transform the

centre into a Learning Community. The management of the school should also be in agreement regarding their capacity to foster the transformation process in the centre. Either way, the decision must ultimately be approved and verified by the centre's decision-making body, the School Council. Of course it is also highly beneficial when the decision is supported by the local education administration too.

The next step, the dream, is taken once the community has opted to become a Learning Community. This is the most exciting step for it means that the school is now on course for real change.

3.1.3.   *The dream*

The learning method that we would want for our own
children must be available for every boy and girl.

As stated by Ramón Flecha in an interview by Vieites, *Los sueños son posibles, mejorar la realidad sin sueños es imposible* (*Dreams are possible, improving reality without dreams is impossible*) (Vieites, 2006: 26). Every example of change from history, has occurred as a result of someone's dream. Paulo Freire said that 'education really needs technical, scientific and professional training together with dreams and utopia' (*Freire, 1997, p. 34*). Learning Communities is a project that embodies a community's hopes and dreams. It is born at the school where everybody including teachers, pupils, parents, volunteers, administrative assistants and so on wishes to change their school into a Learning Community. In Learning Communities there is no room doublespeak, since the planned school is the one we wish for our children.

Learning Communities are education centres in which Successful Educational Actions (Flecha, 2015), recognised by the international community, are implemented and result from the dreams of all concerned in the said community. The reason why this phase is absolutely essential for the transformation process is that it is the point at which teachers can start seeing the results of their commitment and for them to see that their expectations are being fulfilled. It is also the point at which families can see that their children, both boys and girls, can learn in a proper manner without compromise. No matter their background, these children can access the gifts that thousands of people over the centuries have given us such as 'wisdom and universal knowledge' in the form of a curriculum which includes mathematics, languages, environmental awareness, history, music and so on. The dreams, hopes and expectations of the whole community are connected with scientific evidence. It is essential that everybody dreams and takes part in the process so that everyone can enjoy sharing their dreams of achieving the ultimate goal of improving the educational system for their children and students.

With this in mind, the educational community dreams about the school that they wish to have. The dream should have no limits. Whereas many projects begin

with making a list of problems to overcome, shortcomings and needs, transformation starts with utopia. The staff and non-teaching staff, students and their relatives, local council staff, volunteers and local residents all dream together.

To organise the dreaming phase, a committee in charge of this phase is formed (preferably from the staff, students and their families and other agents) and they establish how to gather the dreams of their education community. How this is achieved varies between institutions. Preferred channels of communication are decided upon according to how the maximum number of participants can be reached. For example, some centres can contact the families of their pupils directly and so the project and its meeting is duly explained. In other centres, word-of-mouth is more common and so everyone actively tries to inform each other on the street, at the market, at school or when they drop off or pick up their children and so on. Alternatively, letters are sent to students' families informing them of the meeting. Also, communication can occur via WhatsApp or other social networks. Each school has its own circumstances and conditions. In every centre and every district, the best methods for reaching people are different but the goal remains the same: everybody takes part to dream of the kind of school they wish to have for their children and students. The key factor for success is varying the channels through which both participation is called for and through which dreams are collected. For example, in a school where there is a percentage of Moroccan families who may not speak Spanish, a letter in Arabic is written inviting them to the dream meeting.

The dream is not meant to be linked to only one meeting. There are centres where dreams have lasted for several weeks, where they had several meetings and called for assemblies and where all student groups, from the first to the final year,

have devoted some time to writing down their own dreams. There are centres where the dreams are placed on a board at the school gate or on every classroom door as 'classroom dreams'. Some schools have decided to create a 'dream post-box' or a 'tree of dreams'. There are centres with clouds raining dreams from the ceiling and when each dream is fulfilled it becomes a star which decorates a wall in the 'hall of dreams'. There are even centres where, as you walk up to it in the street, you discover a 'train of dreams' has arrived at the centre with multicoloured carriages filled with dreams. Similarly, the way in which dreams are collected also varies between each school. In some schools there is even a different process for each dream. The main point is, as always, that everybody participates from the students and their families to the cooks and the director.

Dreams are normally considered unique, however over the course of this process, it is realised that in reality, the various individuals and groups in the education community share a common and fundamental dream: everyone wants the best possible education for their children. Often this dreaming process serves to start overcoming barriers and conflict between the school staff and families who understand for the first time that both parties have identical goals. Frequently, despite variations in methods of communication or language, dreams are quite similar.
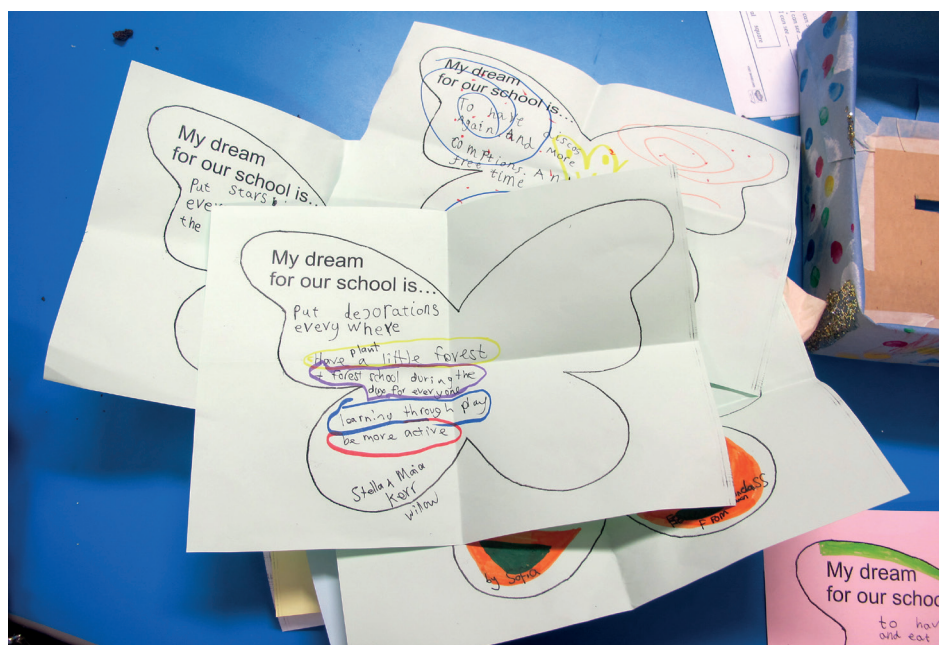
During the dreaming process, an assembly can be held in which the whole educational community participates. In the said assembly a process is undertaken in which a common dream is agreed upon under the title 'The kind of school we wish for'. The objective is that the maximum number of people attend so various assembly times can be established to achieve this. Punctuality is essential. The meeting can then perhaps begin with reading dreams which have been collected in preceding days in, for example, a dream box.

The dream phase is essential for transforming a centre into a Learning Community. But it is equally important to revisit the emergent dreams, that is to review the dreams repeatedly in order to assess which have been fulfilled, which have not and then dream again. This is an endless process since there are always new goals and targets to reach and fresh hopes and new opportunities which show themselves. Learning Communities review their dreams so that they never forget them. They serve as landmarks on the centre's journey so that it may always look ahead and set the next milestone to reach on a course and pace which is mutually agreed. In this way, when the people involved in the school come to a consensus that they must update their dreams, the dream assembly is carried out again. For example, at some schools, a particular weekend is allocated each year in which the maximum number of people gather to review what has happened since the last dream meeting and to create a fresh set of dreams for the future. At primary schools, it is often decided that the dream phase should take place yearly in order to involve the new pupils and their families. Each centre is different and each centre and its communities are the ones who decide.

3.1.4.   *Selection of priorities*

Once the initial dream step is filled with wishes and utopian ideas, it is time to create a plan of action for how to turn the dreams into reality. This is a step in which decisions are made to prioritise what can be achieved within a given timeframe and according to levels of importance or urgency. Each centre has its own circumstances and its own resources and different centres have varying options. It is necessary to examine available resources before deciding what should be done first. A Mixed Committee is formed especially to undertake this task and be in charge of reviewing the centre's dreams and establish which can be fulfilled in the short-, medium- and long-term. It is essential to assess the circumstances of the education centre and what is already in place in order to prioritise actions in this way.

During the prioritisation process it is essential to gather the dreams of everyone concerned. Perhaps in one centre the decision is made to improve results in mathematics because, for example, problem solving and geometry results have been poor. The centre therefore decides to form Interactive Groups in mathematics. Perhaps, however, there is a problem with insufficient volunteer numbers for effectively holding groups for all levels frequently enough. Ultimately, therefore, the decision is made to initially hold Interactive Groups just once a week for years four and six, since these are the levels which are examined by the education administration body. Then, the dream of creating interactive groups for other years, more frequently and in further disciplines remains outstanding to be reviewed at the next meeting. All centres are different. Every Learning Community selects their priorities based on discussions involving everyone in the community.

3.1.5. *Planning*

After prioritising goals, it is time to plan. Decisions made at this stage are agreed on by the community. The educational centre calls an assembly in which the Mixed Committee responsible for the above proposes a set of priorities grouped by topic and working group. Planning is necessary to decide how the selected goals will be reached. Thus, dreams are not simply hopes, but a set of specific actions which lead to success. As we explain in the next section, generally, Mixed Committees are formed by volunteers to work on implementing the agreed processes (as detailed below).

**Article on the transformation of a school
into a Learning Community:**

Ríos, O., Herrero, C., & Rodríguez, H. (2013). From Access to Education. The revolutionary Transformation of Schools as Learning Communities. *International Review of Qualitative Research, 6*(2), p. 239-253.

3.2. Organisation of a Learning Community

Learning communities based on dialogic learning ensure their principles are upheld in various educational acts which foster the organisation and management of the education centre. In summary, a Learning Community is:

- a **democratic** organisation. It is horizontal and incorporates the opinions of everybody in the community through egalitarian dialogue, maintaining at its core the validity of its reasoning in making proposals. Agreement between participants is valued more highly than voting.

- **not a rigid model.** It is in constant, dynamic evolution, to support democratic decision- making where the whole educational community is involved.

- **based on participation.** The approach only has meaning as long as partici- pation in all areas and activities is open to the whole community. This type of organisation, as described later, includes the formation of Mixed Committees which foster a dialogic leadership (Redondo-Sama, 2015).

- dependent on **priorities defined by the community.** Barriers based on hierar- chy which were constructed in an industrial society are removed and decisions are made by the community as a whole.
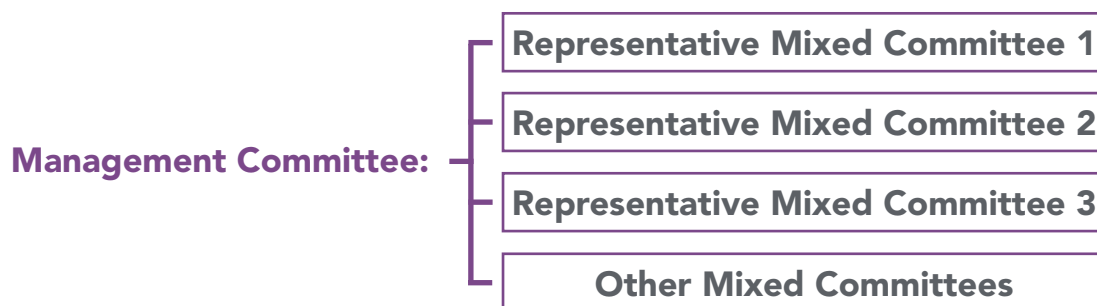
The more flexible and democratic organisation of Learning Communities, adjusted to the needs of an information society, also benefits from the **diversity of interactions** which occur during the learning process, adding to the instrumental dimension of the activities of education centres (Gatt, Puigdellívol, & Molina 2010).

When planning, it is important to ensure that decisions are agreed on by everybody in the community by calling an assembly. A Mixed Committee puts forward a list of priorities (as stated before in the description of steps) and the availability of internal and external resources is considered. Sometimes further Mixed Committees are formed during the assembly whose task it is to plan how the prioritised dreams will be realised. For example when there is a proposal for Dialogical Literary Gatherings with students' families, considerations such as location, times and dates and how to communicate arrangements are covered.

At this point, the only thing to do is to launch the Mixed Committees, make public the decisions of the community and begin the agreed activities.

Mixed Working Committees

The management of Learning Communities is carried out by **Mixed Working Committees.** These Mixed Committees are made up of various people in the education community who wish to take part in them. It is essential to define specific tasks for each committee. Mixed Committees are coordinated by the Management Committee.

Management Committee:
- **Representative Mixed Committee 1**
- **Representative Mixed Committee 2**
- **Representative Mixed Committee 3**
- **Other Mixed Committees**

Management Committee: The Management Committee coordinates and oversees the Mixed Committee. As the Management Committee is formed not only from management representatives but also representatives from each of the Mixed Committees, all in all it could also be considered a Mixed Committee as well.

Mixed Committees: Mixed Committees exist in order to ensure that the whole organisation allows for participation in an egalitarian dialogue by everyone regardless of their position in the school. There are specific Committees which respond to and manage specific areas. These Committees can consist of non-teaching staff, students, staff members, relatives and members of local associations, to name but a few.

Mixed Committees maintain an autonomous decision-making capacity. Although any decisions made must be agreed to by the Management Committee and verified by the School Council, the decisions made by each Mixed Committee are to be trusted. All Mixed Committees are considered equal in terms of both planning and educational approaches. The Management Committee is formed with the specific role of overall coordination. It oversees all work in the Learning Community. Therefore if, for example, the Dialogical Literary Gatherings Committee and the families of a particular Learning Community decide to meet on Wednesday evenings between 5 and 6pm in the school library but the Tutored Library Committee also decides to meet at an identical time and place, the Management Committee has at their disposal all the relevant information and is able to avoid an overlap in the timetable. It goes without saying that decisions must then also be agreed to by the School Council since this is the legal body which has the power to make decisions about centre life. This is why the Management Committee and the School Council maintain a close daily dialogue at all times.

Each Committee prepares a number of feasible proposals which respond to the suggested needs of each topic. Proposals are submitted to the Management Committee which either approves them or reconsiders how best they might otherwise be implemented. Committees are formed according to the priorities established in assemblies. Their operations depend on a dialogic leadership which fosters access for every school family. This involves setting a suitable and flexible timetable, exhibiting punctuality with start and end times, giving the floor to everybody and so on.

It is important to emphasise three basic rules in Mixed Committees:

— **Instrumental decisions:** The core objective at the school is the advancement of learning for children, both boys and girls, for the school and for student families. Any other objectives can improve on this core objective but never replace it.

— **Productive time:** Since time is precious, it is important to used the available time productively in terms of making key decisions. Therefore, it is advisable to make as many instrumental decisions as possible in the least possible time, applying reason as much as possible but without wasting time. Apart from the above, meetings always take place regardless of the number of people present and they start and finish on time.

— **Plurality of voices:** Sometimes there is a tendency for people to think *that whether they attend or not, the result is going to be the same and that the same people always speak and the topics are subjects they have no idea about.* Therefore, participants are always encouraged to express their views without forcing them to do so. After all, it is the Mixed Committee itself which facilitates changes and implements proposals.

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Addressing the organisation of a Learning Community

CEIP Jaume Conqueridor explains how through the dreaming step it was decided that Committees would be organised for all of the dreams put forward: volunteers, TIC, pedagogy and infrastructure. All of them are coordinated by the Management Committee, although it has its own autonomy.

Moreno, V. (2013). Organización transformadora de la Comunidad de Aprendizaje. *Suplemento Escuela*, 4, 7-8.

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The following are examples of Mixed Committees according to topic or interest areas: Learning Committee, Volunteers Committee, Library Committee, Infrastructure Committee, Relationships Committee, Family-school Relationships Committee and so on.

Mixed Committees are representative of life at the education centre. Their dynamism and functionality react to the needs and priorities of the centre. For instance, there are centres where the Volunteers Committee is the central pillar of its operations and it takes care of the management, recruitment, welcome and overseeing of volunteers. In one particular institute, one of the medium-term priorities was that of opening a canteen for boys and girls, something they had dreamt of. In this particular case, the community specifically decided to create a Mixed Committee focused on achieving the canteen dream. Committee roles were all directed towards restructuring the space for the canteen and creating it. At another school, a priority was to have a library in the district in which to do homework as no such library was in existence. In this case, the educational community decided to open a library at the school.

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To find out more:

Flecha, R. (Ed.) (2015) *Successful Educational Actions for Inclusion and Social Cohesion in Europe.* Berlin: Springer.

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Mello, R. (2009). Diálogo y escuela en Brasil: Comunidades de aprendizaje [Dialogue and school in Brazil: Learning communities]. *Cultura y Educación*, 21(2), 171-181.

Redondo-Sama, G. (2015). Dialogic leadership in learning communities. *Intangible Capital*, *11*(3), 437-457.

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