Contract on Dialogic Inclusion:
How to get out of the ghetto

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ABSTRACT: The current debates about competencies that we can find in the forums, agendas and documents along our country, where yet held during the nineties in the European Union. Although, the core of the international debate is being, more recently, centered in the success actions that are managing to develop these competencies in all the students from an approach that go through the boundaries of the school and that involve families and the community in the whole process, from its elaboration until its development. The contributions of the International Scientific Community are entering in interaction with the experience of social agents, especially those belonging to vulnerable groups such as the Roma. We can find one of this possible processes that facilitate this interaction in the case of a school where, through a Dialogic Inclusion Contract (DIC), has been transformed in a Learning Community where success educational practices are being applied. From the INCLUD-ED research this experience is being analyzed pointing out as the principal conclusions the overcoming of academic results and coexistence.
Key words: Successful educational practices, Dialogic Inclusion Contract, Learning Communities, academic success, coexistence.

RESUMEN: Los actuales debates sobre competencias que llenan foros, agendas y documentos en nuestro país ya se llevaron a cabo durante los años noventa en la Unión Europea. Sin embargo, el núcleo del debate internacional se centra de forma más reciente en las actuaciones de éxito que logran que todos los niños y niñas desarrollen estas competencias, desde un planteamiento que va más allá de los límites de la escuela y que involucra a familiares y a la comunidad en general tanto en el proceso de elaboración como de desarrollo. Las contribuciones de la Comunidad Científica Internacional están entrando en interacción con las aportaciones y experiencia de los agentes sociales, especialmente de aquellos pertenecientes a los grupos más vulnerables como, por ejemplo, la comunidad gitana. Uno de los posibles procesos que facilitan esta interacción lo encontramos en el caso de un colegio donde, a través de un *Contrato de Inclusión Dialógica* (CID) ha favorecido su transformación en Comunidad de Aprendizaje desde la que se aplican prácticas educativas de éxito. Desde la investigación INCLUD-ED se analiza esta experiencia, apuntando como principales conclusiones la mejora de los resultados académicos y de la convivencia.
Palabras clave: Actuaciones educativas de éxito, Contrato de Inclusión Dialógica, Comunidades de aprendizaje, éxito escolar, convivencia, competencias básicas.

THE INTERNATIONAL DEBATE ON EDUCATIONAL STRATEGIES THAT DEVELOP COMPETENCIES SUCCESS

The debate that is currently being developed in Spain on basic competencies was

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yet initiated in the context of the European Union in the nineties. More than fifteen years later, from some Spanish quarters the discussion is still focussed on the definition of these competences that are yet being identified by the European Union. Besides being late, as has been usual, in some cases we are falling in the same old mistakes as copying the process that was yet initiated in Europe in the nineties or, what is worse, copying it in a wrong way as we did in the nineties focussing our discussions in the context of the LOGSE educational reform in Spain on the difference between conceptual, procedural and attitudinal concepts.

The current debate in the European Union is based on the analysis and identification of those actions that contribute to successful development of basic competencies according to an international consensus. In some cases, from Spain we are focusing the discussion on those educational practices that are obtaining positive results in tests on basic competencies of the students. As we will see throughout the article, to the extent that these tests are generalized all around the country and their results public, the strategies for success will be recognized as a very valid way of overcoming school failure, absenteeism and conflict that characterized the ghetto schools.

At last we are making the move from superstition to science education (Aubert, Flecha, Garcia, Flecha and Racionero, 2008: 15). We have access to information on, for example, which classroom organization generates more social exclusion and school failure and how we can contribute to overcoming them. It is not necessary to function as medicine had worked in the seventeenth century, that means we can now apply those educational activities based on scientific evidence (such as medicine of the XXI century) without having to try and invent on the basis of our intuition, or the "inspiration" of any academic that states his or her ideas and superstitions with no scientific basis. Now we can ask: where has this been tried before?, and what results it has had?, and we can also access to those actions we know where have been implemented and what results are given.

These practices are defined and recognized from the international scientific community. This is in the scientific journals of education as the most prestigious Harvard Educational Review, in the contributions of the European Framework Program of research or in the most important databases at the international level (ERIC, PsycINFO or Sociofile, among others) that allow a depth analysis of those theories most relevant, for example in psychology (Vygostky, 1979), in pedagogy (Freire, 1997, 2003) and sociology (Habermas, 1987).

CREATING A CONTEXT OF EGALITARIAN DIALOGUE FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF CONTRACT ON DIALOGIC INCLUSION (CDI)

Since the above mentioned international scientific community, both in the most important theories and key research methodologies, as well as in the experiences of success, the dialogue with the social partners is considered as necessary. In particular, the critical communicative methodology (Gómez, Latorre, Sánchez and Flecha, 2006) which is recognized from the European Framework Program of research as the most suitable for the analysis and study of vulnerable groups, the basic criterion is equal

dialogue between the researchers and the researched. A dialogue that also occurs throughout the research process, from its design to the final conclusions, breaking the gap that has been traditionally relevant in the research methodologies.

This means that the interpretations and conclusions reached by those that investigate, are contrasted with the reality being investigated by its protagonists. Knowledge creation is done jointly, assuming responsibility by the research team to provide scientific knowledge and international relevant developments, and incorporating the contributions from the social reality of the subjects being investigated. Thus, the results are more objective and more scientific than through other methodologies. Finally, results and conclusions that are accomplished through the critical communicative methodology will result in concrete proposals of good practices and recommendations to carry out from the educational practice.

One of the international researches being developed at present based on the critical communicative methodology is INCLUD-ED: *Strategies for inclusion and social cohesion in Europe from education* (2006-2011), funded by the Sixth Framework Program of the European Commission. This is the main project and with more funding on school education in the European Union context. For the first time, a Spanish research centre (CREA from the University of Barcelona) coordinates which is the only Integrated Project (IP) in the area of Social Sciences.

The dialogue process that is given in the *Contract on Dialogic Inclusion* (CDI) (Flecha, 2008) meets this criterion of equal dialogue, offering a solution to social exclusion through the transformation of a school in a Community Learning (Elboj, Puigdellívol, Soler and Valls, 2002). The scientific basis of this project, taking the most important contributions of the different disciplines and practices of success, serves as a framework for the CDI.

In this article we take the example of a Learning Community that has undergone a unique process of transformation with no precedent. Community involvement and commitment of teachers and the educational Administration in implementing educational practices of international success in overcoming social exclusion, have made a significant impact both in the same school as in its social environment.

In this case, the school parted from a difficult situation in which school failure, absenteeism and conflicts had been maintained, increasingly abandoning hope to find a valid solution for the school and the neighbourhood. The school is situated in a peripheral area to a major city, built as a result of a local social housing created in the eighties with the goal of eliminating slums. In that time the families settled in the district were with few resources and, many of them, Roma. Throughout the years there has been a lot of mobility in the area and who had access to housing in the city left the neighbourhood, leading to the arrival of new families without resources, such as immigrants. Currently we can find living in the neighbourhood Romani families (in 46% of the population) and immigrant families (who come up to 7.1%) (http://urbact.eu/fileadmin/subsites/urbanitas/doc/budapest_modesto%5B1%5D.doc), all with very low incomes and social risk situation. One example of this depressed area situation is the fact that, according to the IMSERSO, a 35% of people in the neighbourhood of working age are involved in social plans for employment (http://imsersodiscapacidad.usal.es/

mostrarficha.asp?ID=13542&Fichero=1.1). The result is depressed living conditions and little or no access to social benefits to those who access the majority community. The situation of marginalization and social exclusion that suffers the neighbourhood has affected, too, in the school.

A significant example of how the depressed situation of the district affected the smooth functioning of the school is found in the evolution of the enrolment of students throughout the years. While the academic year 1994-1995 the school had an enrolment of 334 students, during 2005-2006 the figure had fallen to approximately 100. Currently, in the year 2008-2009 the enrolment has increased to 157 students. The increase in school failure, problems of coexistence and serious conflicts between teachers and families led many families decide to remove their children from school and take them to other sites, some quite distant from the area.

Throughout this period, the school process of ghettoisation and the internal conflicts were increasingly accentuated. The drastic reduction in academic performance, the high absenteeism and dropout, the existence of serious difficulties in the classroom and the misunderstanding between the educators and the community were increasing. In the local media they published reports on these issues, reflecting the situation that was unsustainable in the school, while encouraged by the very negative image to the rest of the city.

To avoid what seemed inevitable, that is deciding to close the school and to redistribute students to other nearby sites, it was necessary to seek alternatives to the educational actions implemented so far and that did not provide any valid solution. Obviously, the solution of the *forced redistribution of the students* that we know form some cases in Spain or from some policies that are no longer in force, was not considered a satisfactory way for anyone.

As is well known, for example from the above mentioned cases in Spain and from the findings of major investigations (Mickelson and Heath, 1999; Orfield, 2001; Tate, Ladson-Billings and Grant, 1993), the result is that this strategy offers several negative aspects. On the one hand, this has a direct effect on the growth of racism towards minority cultures, since students redistributed do often belong to these minorities in a significant percentage. On the other hand, this strategy creates a greater difficulty in the students schooling continuing because the dropout is higher due to various factors such as geographic distance from their homes, the labelling these students suffer when redistributed and joined a new school, the feeling of loneliness when separated from their former classmates colleagues and, finally, the segregated educational pathways they keep in a large number in the new schools.

However, in this case, the educational Administration, social entities in the area and families of the neighbourhood decided to back the implementation of a scientific project to ensure that those educational actions and strategies that would be applied had the expected and desired results. They came into contact with researchers of international standing to initiate a process of transforming the school and its environment based on equal dialogue between all social and educational actors involved, and through the implementation of educational strategies supported from the international scientific community.

Contract on Dialogic Inclusion (CDI), a process towards social inclusion

In the process of Contract on Dialogic Inclusion (CDI) family members, teachers, administration staff, researchers from the university and the community at large are involved to implement, in a given school, those educational practices that have proven help in overcoming social and educational inequalities. In this contract each sector has a role to be determined jointly agreed through dialogue that is set equal, since that defines responsibilities and commitments with the shared goal of working towards social inclusion through the implementation of strategies for success.

For example, one of the strategies being evaluated for implementation in the school were *the interactive groups*, as they are one of the performances that is demonstrating all around the world significant results in both academic performance and the improvement of the cohabitation. Indeed, from INCLUD-ED it has been made an identification, classification and definition at the European Union context of the various forms of inclusion (INCLUD-ED CONSORTIUM, 2009), being the interactive groups one form of success.

In these interactive groups children are not separated by level of learning, or ethnic origin, or because they are considered "difficult" or "slow." One of the main premises of the ways to Inclusion identified from INCLUD-ED (2009) is not segregation. By contrast, in the group class some small groups of four or five students to the most heterogeneous possible are created. Thus, while a member of the group has just finished the activity, yet another is doing it, so there is space for a may help the other, accelerating the learning of both.

An interesting aspect of interactive groups is that each group also incorporates the figure of an adult who can be a teacher, a volunteer or a family member. The adult's role is to promote peer learning, as this supportive apprenticeship process stimulates more learning is given and more solidarity. Further, as these adults are more diverse, more enriching interactions and therefore more learning. Since a volunteer from the university until an illiterate mother with veil who brings her knowledge of oral English, they all bring knowledge and rich and diverse experiences that accelerate learning much more.

Finally, the activities carried out in short time in each interactive group brings the children are working throughout the session, while the changing of table and of the adult, becomes a factor to give more diversity and multiplicity of interactions. During the session, a student will have passed through four different volunteers, and will have completed four different activities conducted around the same theme. The result is learning more and more solidarity.

Another key identification made from INCLUD-ED (2009) is different forms of involvement of families and the community at large, distinguishing between those that best manage to promote the educational success of students. Some of these forms of participation are: *the participation of the community in decision-making processes in schools*; *the participation in the development of the curriculum and in evaluation*; and *family and community education*. Family participation in the Learning Communities, in fact, occurs in all areas of the school, including the classroom. Indeed, the community

and especially the families are involved, for example: in the family education in various activities at the school, managed and designed by themselves; in the decision-making process; contributing to curriculum or to evaluation on the progress of the school; in the classroom as tutors in interactive groups or in support of reading, among others or; finally, promoting inclusive practices.

Thus, by opening the doors of the institution in all its spaces, the voices that have traditionally been silenced in any decision-making process in education are, in this case, visible, heard and taken into account. The social partners participating in Learning Communities have a space to voice their opinions, views, grief, interests, feelings and dreams, especially those vulnerable groups such as families from ethnic minorities or immigrants.

In the case of the school that we set an example for this article, the dialogue that at the end of the 2005-2006 academic year the educational Administration, families and social organizations established was the first step of the process leading up to the profound transformation of the educational centre in a Learning Community.

In an unprecedented process, through the publication of the *Decreto 7/2006 de 06-06-2006*, the educational Administration, with prior agreement with the unions, established administratively close the school, reassigning teachers to other schools in the area of different profile that they voluntarily requested in its entirety. From the academic year 2006-2007 a new school, with a new name, a new team of teachers and a new educational project, in this case based on the current contributions of the international scientific community, opened in the same physical space as the previous one.

Through the CDI, the criterion for selecting the new team of teachers that the Administration issued in the corresponding resolution of teachers was based on a commitment to implement the new educational project. Specifically, the Annex II of the resolution stated that access to the plaza, as well as career staff the candidates would also had to submit a project that took into account, in a 70% of the final weight, the knowledge of the project and the implementation of its basic principles (DOCM, Núm. 126: 13518. Junio 2006). In fact, international research points from long ago the importance of the commitment of teachers as key to the success of such educational programs of transformation (Peterson & Skiba, 2001). While the former faculty, after the recurrent failures in trying to push the school, had just accepted the poor academic results and the difficulties in cohabitation as something without hope of solution and rather typical of a depressed and deprived context, the new faculty came with a common project processing under the arm.

As a premise for the success of the transformation that the "new" school began in the 2006-2007 academic year, another decree (DOCM, Núm. 126: 13518. Junio 2006) established the need to implement educational strategies and practices that conform to a quality project backed by the international scientific community. This was the agreement to launch an educational project that actually manage to transform the school and its environment with the aim of overcoming school failure, absenteeism and problems of coexistence present until the moment. In this regard, the project implemented in the school through the *Resolución de Junio de 2006 de la Dirección General de Coordinación y Política Educativa* are those already mentioned Learning Communities.

Through the process of CDI the school has been conducting the various stages of transforming in a Learning Community, from the first prophase of sensitization to the phases of dream and planning. Once the previous school was administrative closed and began the project with the new teachers, all the team held intensive 30 hours (6 hours over 5 days) of sensitization, which worked through the main aspects of the Learning Communities. Throughout these 30 hours not only attended 100% of the faculty, but also the entities involved in the neighbourhood who were feeling more than ever that there was space for them where they can make their voices heard and where they can carry out joint and agreed with the school and the community. There, one of those responsible for one of the entities in the neighbourhood that had also been a father of the old school, said aloud that he would re-enroll his two children and would say it to the families of their surroundings that, as he, had decided some time ago to remove their children from that school. The opting for the new project was shared by all, from the Administration and faculty, to families and social organizations.

Once the entire education community decided to pull ahead with the project of transformation, they proceeded to start the processing steps, starting with the dream phase. Those first few months were hard. With the new team of teachers and the first steps of transformation there was still a certain inertia in the dynamics of those created in the previous situation of insecurity and conflict. However, they soon began to feel the first results. The decision that through the CDI the entire educational community had taken to implement those strategies to succeed in school, such as the inclusive organization of students through the interactive groups in the classroom, was the key that allowed the important and necessary turning point.

The involvement of university volunteers, relatives and others people in the neighbourhood in the interactive groups meant the incorporation of new and different interactions in the classroom, positive references and the school opening of all spaces to the participation of the community. Reducing the problems of coexistence was the first to be observed, initially in class and then in the rest of the school and the environment. For example, while they needed eight teachers in the recess watching, at the end of that year only three were needed.

The assemblies taken daily in all classes of primary school, from first to sixth degrade, have also been key, and the creation of joint working committees with the participation of teachers, students and family members responsible for pulling ahead with the changes prioritized after the dream phase carry out by the entire community through the CDI. At first it was necessary to visit families at home to encourage them to participate in the school, from the joint committees to interactive groups, as well as family education. Based on the steps taken to transforming the school, families have found a space where actual participation make their voices heard and where they can realize their dream of training and leadership in the education of their sons and daughters.

The results speak for themselves. One of the main problems of the old school, absenteeism, has fallen in the past three years dramatically. While at the beginning of the transformation, during the academic year 2006-2007, absenteeism rose to 30% (in total, 60 students of school), it declined at the end of 2007-2008 to 10% being, in the current year 2008-2009 something sporadic with a total of 4 students. Moreover, in the

year 2006-2007 62 students left the school while in this current year the abandonment has been of 13. Another major concern, the high school failure, has been one of the most important improvements that accompanies the move towards good living and the actual participation of the community.

As mentioned earlier in this article, the CDI is based on a process of dialogue among the entire education community in the implementation of successful educational strategies endorsed by the international scientific community. Also at the international level, when assessing how successful the strategies applied are, the important issue is not the number of actions performed (as we have more custom in our country), but results that the implementation of these strategies provide for the development of basic competencies.

In this case, the educational Administration also decided to conduct an evaluation of the implementation of the changes involved in the project based on results, making an internal test of basic competencies for four academic years, from 2006-2007 to 2010-2011.

While a process of external evaluation of the basic competencies of students that is being applied in some Autonomous Communities of Spain is not, over time, generalized and spread throughout the state, from the educational Administration decided to have internal objective data from the school to assess how the results are improving or not. Objective data of this school that have been offering different tests of the *Evaluación de Competencias Básicas* (Basic Skills Assessment) conducted by the *Administración Educativa Competente* (Competent Authority and Education) which we access through the annual reports of each academic year, show how the development of basic skills has improved so much visible in these few years.

In the assessment of basic competencies made in the school in the school years 2006-2007 and 2007-2008, we can see a significant improvement of results. While in 2006-2007 the average of reading was 1.4 on a maximum score of 5, in the following year 2007-2008 it had risen by 3.0. As for the writing, on a maximum score of 5, the average rose from 0.5 to 2.8. In the other areas analyzed during the same period, increases were also significant, for instance in mathematics of the 5th and 6th grade the average grew from 0.5 to 2.1 on a maximum score of 5. Along with the openness to family and community participation, the success strategies applied have allowed this results improvement. Here we can find one of the main reasons why the students that attend school have increased from 45 in 2006 to 157 in 2009.

IMPACT OF THE CDI IN THE TRANSFORMATION TO THE EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS

As we can see, the impact of CDI on the successful transformation of the school in a Learning Community is a fact. From the scientific contributions of INCLUD-ED, the current major research with the most funding from the European Union on education, in dialogue with the people actually involved in the investigation, especially traditionally marginalized groups, the process of Contract on Dialogic Inclusion we have exemplified in the case of a ghetto school is developed through its transformation into a Learning Community. Within this process, the ghetto school is able to overcome its situation of

social exclusion and to obtain good results such as the increasing enrollment, the elimination of absenteeism, the improvement of coexistence, and the overcoming of school failure.

Obviously this is an unprecedented case in which institutional involvement has been key to avoid other options that have been proposed in the past for a school ghetto. In this case and through the institutional decrees and orders, the redistribution has not been forced of students, but volunteer of teachers from a mutual agreement. Open dialogue between researchers from international scientific prestige, individuals and families in the neighbourhood, the social environment, teaching and educational Administration has made it possible. With this alternative to the school ghetto, the results are significantly better. Thus, through the process of CDI, an educational community fight together for a common goal or a dream, in this case the goal is the improvement in student learning and in coexistence in the school and the neighbourhood. Without the major scientific contributions that allow progress towards this common dream, and without the support of the Administration, faculty, organizations of the environment and the families is not possible to move towards better results.

The CDI is the process that has allowed an equal dialogue among different sectors involved in the educational development of students of a ghetto in a very depressed area and with important conflicts between the community and the neighbourhood. It is not easy, in times of conflicts, to think that this dialogue would be possible. When educational strategies for success endorsed by the international scientific community are applied, the results end up being positive and generate the conditions necessary to get out of the ghetto.

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