

## Notes on **Diagnosis. Selecting and defining community issues**<sup>1</sup>

Once the issues to be addressed have been identified, it will be relatively simple to define the goals and activities to be undertaken in the design and planning stage.

The use of a “problem tree” may come in useful at this point, as it allows teachers and students to sort out and give priority to the variables involved in a given subject. On the basis of research, project members can define what aspects of a problem will be given priority and the most appropriate service activities: *raising awareness, solving, reducing, preventing or making changes to respond to a problem actually and truly felt by the community.*

It should be clear that diagnosis does not focus only on the problem, but also on identifying the pedagogical relevance and learning opportunities associated to a particular social scenario.

### **Aspects to be considered by those promoting service-learning:**

- a) Fostering participation in diagnosis to ensure students and community involvement.
- b) Doing research, identifying and defining the problem to be addressed through a service-learning project.
- c) Surveying the school’s capacity to respond to social needs considering institutional identity, students’ age and educational level and resources available in the community.

(Further reading on these notes can be found in PASO JOVEN, 2004, Chapter “Herramientas para el Diagnóstico”)

## **2-Diagnosis**

As in medicine, the term diagnosis refers to the identification of a problem from data interpretation or symptoms present in an individual or population at a given time. In education and social studies, diagnosis allows us to better understand what happens in a social space, detect problems and structural relationships and determine factors at play and possible courses of action. Accurate diagnosis is then a premise for the success or failure of project implementation and results.

Starting from the motivation to actually *do* something, the diagnosis stage seeks to specify the problem to be addressed and dig into all aspects of its complex nature. On the one hand, diagnosis is intended to help project members understand community priorities as clearly as possible and

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<sup>1</sup>Adapted from Tapia, M.N., with Bridi, G., Maidana, M.P. and Rial, S. (2015): *El compromiso social como pedagogía. Aprendizaje y solidaridad en la escuela.* CELAM –CLAYSS. Chapter 3, Point 3.1.2

share students' diverse interest and concerns. On the other hand, teachers and school directors should assess whether the issues raised by the community or students can be –or should be– targeted by the school, whether they offer significant opportunities for students' growth and learning and whether they can be realistically addressed with the material and human resources available.

This stage may prove either very simple or complex, as initial motivation will make project goals and activities more or less easily defined. The use of a “problem tree” may come in useful at this point, as it allows teachers and students to sort out and give priority to the variables involved in a given subject. On the basis of research, project members can define what aspects of a problem will be given priority and the most appropriate service activities (See PASO JOVEN, 2004, Herramientas, pages 30-37).

Let's now have a look at two possible scenarios:

- A relative of a student at high school No. 11 Abel Acosta, in Santa María, Catamarca, Argentina, had to be admitted to the local hospital and needed a blood transfusion. The family had a hard time finding donors, and class discussion revealed that several other families had been faced with the same problem in the past. This motivated students and teachers to do something to ensure better provision for the hospital blood bank.

During diagnosis, and guided by teachers, students conducted interviews with hospital doctors, designed and conducted a survey among neighbors digging into their knowledge about blood donation and the reasons why or why not donate, and then systematized results. Students also studied national legislation on the subject and found out that, as minors, they could not be blood donors themselves but could certainly help spread aspects of the legislation which were not well known in their city.

From the findings obtained during diagnosis, a service-learning project was designed to launch an awareness raising campaign, organize a donor registry, have students volunteer at the hospital to help adults filling forms for blood donation and other activities which, after two years, allowed the hospital to have a donor registry and ensure regular provision for the blood bank.<sup>2</sup>

- A group of 12-year-old students saw a television report on a hospital giving attention to adults with serious psychiatric illnesses, and came up with the idea of organizing a group of volunteers to offer help at the institution. Dialogue between school and hospital directors clearly showed

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<sup>2</sup>Award-winning project at Service-learning Schools Presidential Award 2014,  
[http://www.me.gov.ar/edusol/pp\\_2k14.html#ganadores](http://www.me.gov.ar/edusol/pp_2k14.html#ganadores)

students to be unprepared for this kind of work in terms of knowledge, expertise and ability to help, and it was concluded that direct contact may even be traumatic for students and of little use to patients. As a result of this diagnosis, teachers proposed a project more suited to their strengths and searched for local community organizations which could better fit students' initiative. From a mapping of local organizations and interviews with their leaders, the group finally chose to work in an organization offering school support for elementary school children.

As these examples show, diagnosis should not only focus on the problems to be addressed, as it would in other types of social intervention, but also aims to identify the pedagogical relevance and learning opportunities that a given social scenario can offer. Diagnosis should involve students and community participation, as well as teachers' responsible guidance.

As reported by the Ministry for Education in Argentina, it is common to find projects with excellent diagnosis but little community involvement, or well-meant but ineffective service initiatives stemming from poor diagnosis. It is necessary then that due time and effort are devoted to this stage to ensure project development and lead to action (Ministry for Education, 2012:38).

Diagnosis aims to define, as accurately as possible, the problems to be addressed on the basis of real community demands, students' interest, pedagogical considerations on what students can actually do according to their age, knowledge or expertise, and the possible articulation with specific learning content.

The following section will discuss the various aspects of the diagnosis stage:

***a) Diagnosis with broad student and community participation***

Service-learning projects do not only promote school research on reality, but also active community participation to give voice to as many members as possible, both within the school and among community leaders who will share the work.

Especially in projects arising from teachers and students' motivation to *do* something regardless of specific community demands or not relying on community partnerships, it is necessary to guide students in listening carefully to and empathizing with community members, by means of specific social studies tools appropriate for students' age.

Diagnosis is the perfect point to make initial contact or set up alliances with community members who can provide knowledge and their own views and experience on the issues to be addressed. Diverse participation of neighbors, neighborhood organizations, people affected by the problem, professionals and experts will certainly render more fruitful diagnosis.

In areas with a weak social fabric, project partners will tend to be individuals rather than institutions, but it is still necessary to listen to all possible voices and try to strengthen the organizations present in the community. For example, in the case of Banda del Río Salí school, located in the industrial outskirts of San Miguel de Tucuman, initial diagnosis showed the school, the police station, the women penitentiary and a health care center to be the only institutions present in the community. The school then began collaborating with the center and, on the basis of the needs identified by the medical staff, designed a service-learning project including health education, the promotion of breastfeeding, teenage pregnancy prevention and first aid training (Ministry for Education, 2008b: 29-34).

It is essential that students participate in diagnosis, not only for them to feel the project as their own and help define the issues on which they will work, but also because these activities provide an excellent opportunity for learning and interdisciplinary work, and may strongly encourage student participation in the creation of project instruments and analysis of results.

During diagnosis students can do school research suited to their age and level of knowledge about social problems using journalistic material, web content and specialized publications. They can apply tools from the social studies to design surveys, interviews with community leaders or specialists in the field and approaches to the analysis of reality. Discussion on social issues can take place in the classroom or during open classes, etc.

In many cases, dialogue with the community involves a certain degree of negotiation between community needs and students' interest. A community center once required the collaboration of students in school support activities. On visiting the center, a group of students who were not altogether interested in school support, noticed that the local health care center was located in the same building and, after an interview with the attending doctor, came up with an idea for helping the nurses with children weight and height check-ups in pediatric consultation. On the basis of this diagnosis, the final project included both school and health support to cater for students' interest.

The following Google Maps image shows the location of potential community problems in the school neighborhood.

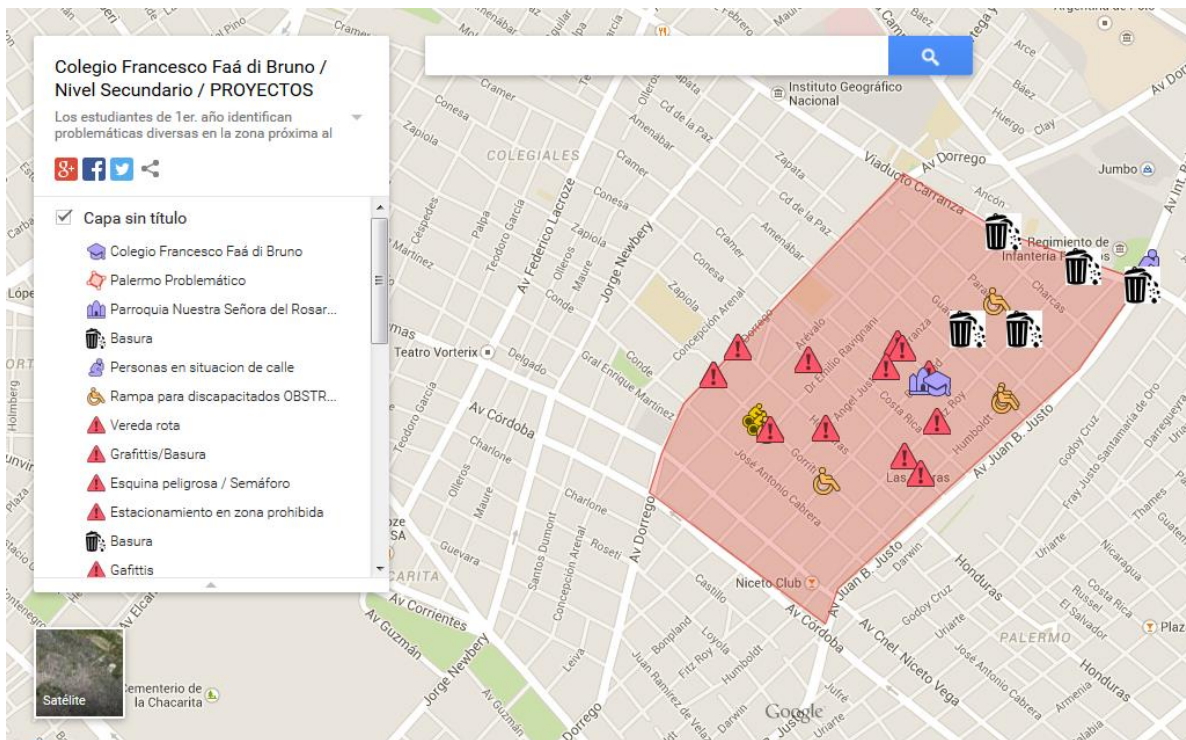
**FIGURE 26: Diagnosis: location of community problems.**

**Francesco Faá di Bruno high school/PROJECTS**

First year students survey school neighborhood problems

- Francesco Faá di Bruno school
- Risk zone
- Nuestra Señora del Rosario church
- Garbage

- Homeless people
- Ramp for the disabled blocked
- Broken sidewalk
- Grafitti/garbage
- Dangerous crossroads/traffic light
- Illegal parking



**b) Investigate, identify and define the problem to be addressed through a service-learning project**

Service-learning projects usually seek to address an unmet demand. It will be a real need, truly felt in the community, which may be thought of as an unfulfilled human right, a need requiring recognition and satisfaction or the absence of minimum health, food or education conditions (no drinking water, no care for community children, etc.). This can either be an actual problem, a conflict situation affecting the community, or something just not working as it should (the neighborhood library is neglected and material is outdated). Finally, it can be a challenge, a situation perceived by

the community as a possible achievement, a goal to be met (to turn wasteland into a space for children recreation, to organize a neighborhood library).

To analyze reality depending on the aspect selected, it is necessary to consider the factors involved and their possible causes, indicators and consequences.

*Diagnosis may include some of the following elements:*

- *identifying a problem affecting any given group of people in the community and determining how urgent attention to the problem is (priority given and its connection with other problems);*
- *characterizing social factors which may have triggered the problem;*
- *analyzing the structural factors involved in the problem identified: geographical location, economic situation, social conditions, etc.;*
- *characterizing the local education community, its strengths and weaknesses, to choose proper courses of action;*
- *digging into project background (whether similar projects are or have been under way in the area or nearby, whether issues have been addressed using the approach under consideration) (Ministry for Education, 2012:38-39).*

It may also be necessary to:

- estimate the number of people affected;
- determine how serious the problem is in both objective and subjective ways (how do those affected perceive the problem?);
- pinpoint possible obstacles and difficulties;
- find out about possible community partners;
- find out about public offices bearing responsibility for the problem.

Initial diagnosis is by no means a static snapshot of reality, but rather a dynamic analysis which will feed from project members' contribution during project development. Therefore, all members should be ready to make adjustments during the course of the project, especially if they help reroute activities which are not rendering the results expected.

### ***c) Analyze school response capacity on the basis of identity***

As schools' mission is to educate, they should not work as NGOs or community organizations, let alone expect to replace public agencies. Therefore, the multiple and complex problems detected during good diagnosis should not make us forget that a service-learning project should be limited in scope and aim at realistic goals, on the basis of students' level of knowledge and with clear learning objectives.

For example, school diagnosis may identify unemployment as the main problem in the community, but no school can build up students' hopes to solve a problem with such complex structural, economic and social roots.

What we certainly can do is analyze the complexity of the problem to find a clear-cut aspect in which students can make specific contributions, provided they have the necessary resources in the school and community.

For example, within the great issue of unemployment:

- Students at Martin Buber School in the Jewish community of Buenos Aires conducted research on neighborhood problems and decided to address the issue of unemployment among adults with insufficient training in new technologies. The school computer room was then put to community use by offering a course on computer science taught by students with teachers' help and then helping adults access the labor market:
- Schools located in rural areas addressed the problem of unemployment by seeking alternatives to traditional agricultural activities: silkworm raising was then promoted in one case, the ancestral tradition of Andean greenhouses was recovered in another case, and homemade jam was produced with fruit previously discarded in yet another.

Given the educational nature of service-learning experiences, we should watch out for potential community demands which may expect the school to address issues which are out of reach, or students to do work they are not prepared for or which is not significant or challenging enough from the point of view of learning. Collecting and sorting plastic items for a children's hospital campaign may involve the development of motor skills and the use of basic mathematical knowledge at K3 level, but will be of little relevance for 17-year-olds.

As a **criterion for problem selection**, school priorities and characteristics should inevitably be taken into account, as well as students' age. An elementary and high school giving scientific training can both work on environmental issues, but the activities each of them will carry out will be different and suited to students' age and knowledge.

Finally, the diagnosis stage will appraise the school's strategic resources, as well as those which may be provided by partner organizations. Faced with the same problem, such as no space for children recreation in the area, diagnosis by a rural school may identify a vacant lot to build a park, while a city school may only count on its own schoolyard. Both resources can be put to project use, but obviously through different activities.

Diagnosis also entails identifying other institutions, community organizations or public agencies already active in the community or connected to project goals, which is a key element in assessing resources for action. Community awareness raising on the problem may also be the starting point to put to use community resources which were previously idle.