

Notes on **Service-learning schools as part of the social fabric**¹

These notes will discuss the links between schools and their local community, which can follow three different institutional models: a) the school as a "temple of knowledge" or "island", isolated from reality and detached from society and the community; b) the school overwhelmed by reality, working as a "community center" or "youth aid" institution where a welfare approach prevails. As an alternative to these models, c) a service-learning school model is presented here, a school which contributes to the social fabric from its own identity, which is considered part of interinstitutional networks, and which succeeds in overcoming the outdated notions of "in" and "out" toward a comprehensive and holistic view of educational quality and inclusion for the common good.

1- **Education institutional models: school-community links. From the "temple of knowledge" to social networking**

An important element in school commitment to service-learning as part of the institutional education project involves decisions on school identity and institutional models to be adopted.

Institutional missions usually express very noble purposes, but everyday practice has often shown these purposes to be outweighed by school inertia and historically naturalized contexts, a sort of "hidden" curriculum which can survive all curricular reforms and superficial changes.

At the risk of oversimplifying a complex issue, it could be argued that Latin American and Caribbean schools have traditionally adopted competing institutional models in their relationship with the community, either becoming isolated from community reality or being overwhelmed by community demands and losing sight of their educational identity.

a) A school isolated from reality

In one of the extreme views on school identity, the so-called encyclopedic school as part of XIX century legacy was conceived of as a "temple of knowledge", where science was intended neutral and aseptic and in which theory superseded practice. Metaphorically described as an ivory tower, this school model disregarded links with the "outside" world

¹Adapted 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 1.5.1

and even contemporary history was kept out of the curricula to avoid knowledge “pollution” with everyday life.

In this context, and beyond educational missions declared, even citizenship training was basically rhetorical and persuasive. The school was a place for homogeneity: no matter whether children were immigrants or spoke ancient native languages, the school had to impose a leveled-off national identity, based on worship of the military heroes of independence and sometimes even current dictators. In most of Latin America and much of the XX century, few things were so far from real life as those civics and ethics curricula, concerned with the study of constitutional and civil rights hardly ever in force.

We are aware that many countries in Central and Eastern Europe are post-communist, and that under that regime educational systems were in many ways very practical, but maybe worked in ways similar to what was described for Latin America. Is that so? How did / does this work in your country?

The inertia promoted by this foundational school reflected in our first high school institutions is still somehow present in the collective unconscious of our education systems, and many schools still fear or feel unreasonably suspicious of community links.

In the second half of the XX century, the founding paradigm of the “ivory tower” became more and more flexible and schools began “laying bridges” to the community but still picturing themselves as islands.

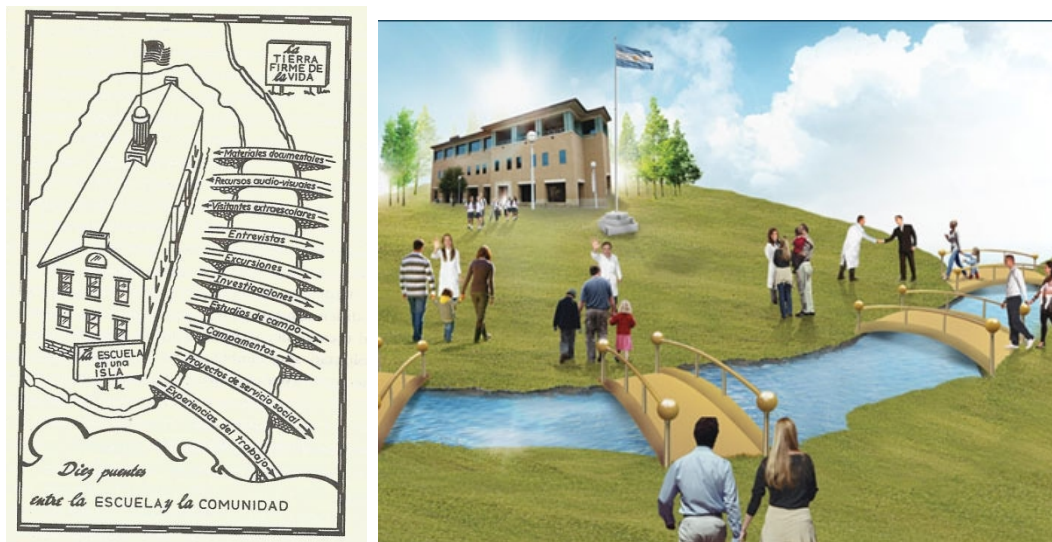


FIGURE 9: The school “laying bridges” (Olsen, 1960, cit. in: Puig, 2009:39; advertising for *School and Community* course, Buenos Aires, 2014).

More than 50 years separate these two images showing school as an island detached from real life and reaching out for the educational community or society in general.

The image of 1960 promoting "bridges to the community" made reference to practices which are widely established today and could even be regarded as extension, "documentary materials, audiovisual resources, extracurricular visits, field studies, camping trips" and other experiences such as "social service" or "work" projects which even today several institutions fail to include in their daily lives.

Despite the time gone by and several educational reforms, many public and private Latin American schools still suffer from this "island" syndrome which prevents them from attending community claims other than those connected to learning disciplines. The curriculum may have been updated to include Computer Science and Technology, but the logics of school isolation remains.

In fact, especially certain elite schools seem to lay "drawbridges", rather than bridges, which guard the school and shun the outside world should the need arise. Today, we are often riddled with gated communities, country clubs and high income areas where schools have returned to "ivory tower" models, raising their drawbridges on behalf of student safety and educational quality measured in terms of foreign language training. These schools often hire British teachers and American specialists, but rarely teach students how to solve local problems or what the community around them is like, a sort of ignorance actually promoted as "academic excellence".

Several children in our ruling classes grow up in this type of bubble-like school and later study at equally gated university campuses, to finally move to prestigious universities in "more developed" countries for a Master's or PhD degree and come back to become leaders of countries they do not actually know, if they come back at all.

These schools are surprisingly never mentioned in our countries when education crisis or failure is discussed, even when they pretend to promote academic excellence but fail to educate leaders with the knowledge and skills required to contribute to the common good and to the authentic development of our nations.

b) A school overwhelmed by reality

Right opposite to school isolation from reality, paradigmatic in XIX century high schools, our education systems have also harbored schools immersed in such poverty-stricken contexts that their educational mission seemed to be almost in the background.

These schools could not possibly remain isolated from reality, as painful social conditions pervaded the entire school life. Many heroic Latin American rural teachers turned out to build their own schools out of mud and straw to have a place to teach at; they had to take money out of their own pockets to feed starving children, or collect books and materials in

whatever way possible to teach and, at the same time, act as social workers, community leaders, *ad hoc* justice officials, nurses and much more.

It is extremely sad to see that, as the region celebrates its bicentennial, schools in countless areas in Latin America and the Caribbean still remain a sort of community center overwhelmed by the weight of urgent social demands and, in some places, the only representation of a weak state, otherwise absent.

Big city outskirts in our region host thousands of schools educating the most vulnerable children and adolescents today and facing equal or greater challenges than rural schools, in contexts which have broken away from a so-called educational agreement, to put it in Pope Francis' terms (2015).

Indeed, in recent decades, families and society in general seem to have imbued schools with almost exclusive responsibility for children education and thus broken a much needed alliance among adults to guide new generations. If it is true that "it takes a village to raise a child", many in the global village seem to have turned a blind eye.

Teachers are expected to set children limits which are not set at home, to teach values nowhere to be found in their social context, to advocate for diversity and against violence or bullying even when discrimination, weapons and aggression are part of everyday life. Teachers are also supposed to feed kids, get them shoes and school materials, prevent bad colds and even drug addiction or AIDS, detect signs of family violence, promote road safety and environment protection, and whatever politically correct cause may come up, a burden hardly ever in keeping with teachers' salaries and working conditions.

Across all social and economic groups, parents absent in kids' education for various reasons are reluctant to admit that their teens get drunk and come to class on no sleep, or that their lovely little ones harass and terrorize fellow classmates, they are not ready to see their champions not making it to team captain and, even if no one at home supervises children's homework, and the television or tablet are on 24/7, they will by no means accept that their poor kids are given low marks.

Societies that will go to extremes to evade the taxes that help support it expect schools to train the workers companies need and the citizens new democracies require, to support the social groups the economy shuts out, to overlook social and economic gaps in the classroom when they prevail outside and, at the same time, to achieve top PISA scores.

In this context, some teachers survive on strong will, dedication and great commitment until they wear out, and many others put up no fight, give up or leave their jobs.

The most vulnerable schools often fall victim of a welfare culture. The school works as a community center and becomes a distribution channel for second-hand clothes or government food supply, a place where students are "customers" in the oldest sense of the word: those receiving patronage in exchange for submission. The school lunch facilities

become more important than the classroom and hardly anyone expects good educational outcomes when teachers are too busy providing support.

Even on teachers best will, these schools reproduce and perpetuate paternalistic models and exclusion, as they do not encourage student learning or leadership and, therefore, do not help them to autonomous life projects or the exercise of active citizenship.

Somewhat paradoxically, the other end of the social gap in our region is witness to the birth of elite private schools established on market logics where students, like customers, are "always right". Usually coated with marketing, psychological and pedagogical talk rather than education support, these schools shift across didactic tendencies in fashion but are always governed by the iron rule of not displeasing parents or school sponsors. They sometimes promote "social responsibility" work, but only as long as it does not upset parents or raise issues that may be considered ideological. Somehow, this type of school is just as limited by social demands as those of harsher economic contexts. In fact, it is not uncommon for bullying and student anomie to be very similar, although expressed through different cultural codes.

These welfare models make it very difficult to achieve true educational quality. The school becomes an automatic reflection of inequality and social fragmentation, and further fuels them.

c) A service-learning school contributing to the social fabric from its own identity

Initiatives in recent years have sought to overcome the tension between these two models. Within these innovative views, we will see how service-learning aims at school relations with the community which assert its educational identity and open doors for collaborative networks.

2- The institutional model that we define as "service-learning school":

- builds on a comprehensive and holistic view of education quality, as we have mentioned in the previous point, and its mission thus explicitly include not only excellence in knowledge and expertise, but citizenship training that will allow students to use their knowledge for the common good.
- stems from the reasonable notion that the school can neither single-handedly solve all social problems, nor be burdened with trying to do so, and should not then take up full responsibility for social demands.

From a clear identity whose priority is to educate, service-learning schools seek to address social demands which may be relevant to their educational project and make sense in students' training and growth.

At the same time, it seeks to call for specialized government or non-government organizations in the case of problems which cannot be solved through its educational project or are beyond its scope.

A service-learning school looks around for networking and weaves reciprocal links because it is recognized as part of a community, a social fabric and inter-institutional networks. In this context, it contributes to addressing social demands on the basis of its identity and student leadership and seeks all possible help in issues it cannot address for itself.

FIGURE 10: The school in social networking



The local community: a space for action/participation-driven learning

Community organizations/Companies/Religious institutions/Cultural agencies/Public offices/Other schools

This school model recognizes that resources can be found outside the school which can help address issues inside the classroom. From addiction to bulimia, from starvation to domestic violence, countless social problems actually cross-cut school life and specialized government agencies and social organizations which can help address them. A service-learning school is also smart in finding the right partners, be it to train teachers, to guide students through specific problems or to work collaboratively in solving them.

A service-learning school overcomes outdated contradictions between "outside" and "inside", as learning takes place both in the classroom and the community. Students do learn from their teachers but also from community partners, and they are assessed both at school and by the social organizations they work with.

We could speak of establishing a new educational agreement between school and community, which implies setting and resetting links, recognizing and giving value to different roles and different institutional cultures and fostering networks to reinforce everyone's contributions.

In this regard, service-learning pedagogy has a lot in common with "Ciudades educadoras" (or *Educating Cities*) pedagogy² and the ideas expressed by Italian pedagogue Francesco Tonucci in "La Ciudad de los Niños" (or *The City of Children*, Tonucci, 2009). In this perspective, education should recreate social ties so that it is "the whole village" that educates new generations, and also make sure that new generations can be active leaders and have their voices heard for the common good.

We believe this school, open to the community from its own educational identity, will strike a balance in the pendulum between a school isolated from reality and one overwhelmed by it.

²http://www.bcn.cat/edcities/aice/estatiques/espanyol/sec_charter.html