



The Achieved Dreams of a Neighborhood

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Abstract This article explains the social transformation process initiated at the end of the 1970s within the neighborhood of La Verneda-Sant Martí in Barcelona. This process started with the foundation of an adult education center that was organized as a Learning Community (the first one in the world). From the beginning, it was administered for and by the community. It became a space of debate where the demands and dreams of the neighbors converged about transforming their neighborhood along with the recommendations of the international scientific community. Twenty years later, the dreams came true: There have been substantial improvements throughout the urban space, infrastructures, housing, urban thoroughfares, and public highways. The INCLUD-ED European project, using the communicative methodology of research, has thoroughly studied the transformation carried out in the La Verneda-Sant Martí Adult School and its neighborhood. INCLUD-ED has identified successful practices within diverse social areas that are transferable to other contexts and contribute to overcoming inequalities and improving the most underprivileged neighborhoods.

Keywords: communicative methodology of research, adult education, Learning Communities, egalitarian dialogue, social transformation, INCLUD-ED

Introduction

The school has changed me, to learn things always make you change, but if you do it the way we do it in the school, teaching each other, participating beyond the classes, worrying for the neighborhood, for what is happening out of our walls and borders . . . this is not just about changing you but revolutionizing you from inside and you transmit it and step by step all what you are living is also felt by the people surrounding you and the whole neighborhood. This is why many people say that the school has changed the neighborhood. (Giner, 2011, p. 81)

La Verneda-Sant Martí Adult School is a successful socio-educational project ruled by two grass-roots associations, Àgora association and Heura association, and is characterized by an organizational model in which the students manage and decide their involvement within the social and cultural projects of the neighborhood as well as by an educational methodology based on dialogic learning (Giner, 2011).

The school is open Monday to Sunday from 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. The main activities are basic education for adults, Catalan and Spanish language courses, computer classes, and foreign language instruction (English, Chinese, Arabic, French, German), in addition to a series of workshops as well as the important dialogic literary gatherings¹ (Flecha, 2000; Pulido & Zepa, 2010; Serrano, Mirceva, & Larena, 2010). In total, there are more than 400 hours per week of free education that includes the participation of 2,415 adult learners and 152 volunteers ranging from housewives to professors. The educational activities are all aimed to offer access to a quality education and culture to adult learners, especially to those members belonging to groups at risk (women, immigrants, school dropouts, illiterates or those without basic qualifications, people with disabilities).

La Verneda-Sant Martí Adult School is a grassroots school deeply connected to the community, a working-class neighborhood in the city of Barcelona, Spain.² The school is present in the neighborhood's social movements, participating in parties and popular celebrations and promoting cultural activities. It also encourages participation of everyone in the neighborhood.

Over the last years, La Verneda-Sant Martí Adult School has been studied for its democratic participation and dialogic management because in this school the idea that adult learners decide what and how they learn has always been present. Therefore, not only has this school been managed and directed by the adult learners without intermediaries, these learners also have actively participated in social and academic movements of adult education and have established international links with organizations of other European countries as well as with other areas of the world, such as Brazil. For the past 30 years, the school has never stopped belonging to the learners and continues to be a model of dreams, enchantment, and vindication (Tellado Ruiz de Gauna, 2007).

This study analyzes the elements that have turned this school into an international educational model that accomplishes the educational, social, and cultural transformation of its environment. A brief description of the communicative methodology of research is presented to introduce the methodological paradigm in which this study is based. This research is centered in describing the school and the underlying best practices that mark the school as a successful practice in adult education.

Discussion of three areas on how this educational project of social transformation is actually being transferred to other educational contexts such as Learning Communities where La Verneda-Sant Martí Adult School has been a pioneer will be addressed (A. Gómez, Mello, Santa Cruz, & Sordé, 2010). First, we review the history of the school to contextualize the reason for its diverse characteristics. Second, we describe the democratic management that facilitates the inclusion and participation of the learners throughout the school's decision-making process. Finally, we analyze the school's achievements. From its origins La Verneda-Sant Martí Adult School has been a project for and by the community, allowing its successes and transformations to extend beyond the school to the entire neighborhood.

The Methodological Paradigm of La Verneda-Sant Martí Adult School: The Communicative Methodology

The European project INCLUD-ED, Strategies for Inclusion and Social Cohesion in Europe from Education (2006–2011), is an example of high-level European research that uses communicative methodology of research.³ Project 6 of INCLUD-ED, Local Projects for Social Cohesion,⁴ has analyzed communities involved in learning projects that have developed the integration of social and educational interventions that contribute to reducing inequalities and marginalization. Within these experiences, it has studied in depth the process of transformation at La Verneda-Sant Martí Adult School as well as its neighborhood. It has identified successful actions in diverse social areas that are being transferred to other contexts, contributing to overcoming inequalities and improving the most disadvantaged neighborhoods. These dialogic transformations have affected many areas of society, such as the political, economic, social, cultural, and personal spheres. This study will focus on the dreams that have come true and the substantial improvements made in the urban spaces, the infrastructures and housing, the public highways, and the associative life of the La Verneda-Sant Martí neighborhood.

A Brief History of La Verneda-Sant Martí Adult School

The La Verneda-Sant Martí Adult School started in 1978, in the middle of the transition toward democracy in Spain. With the death of Francisco Franco in 1976, the regime characterized by the repression of rights and civil liberties for more than 40 years started to collapse and give rise to more participatory spaces within a more democratic context. In many cities the neighborhoods movement was a way to

channel the debates of the population, the citizen claims, fights, and dreams of change. The La Verneda-Sant Martí neighborhood was not an exception, and many neighbors united to work and fight for a neighborhood dream to overcome and transform the serious lack and shortage of many bare necessities (Sánchez Aroca, 1999).

The origin of the La Verneda-Sant Martí school is deeply linked to these citizenship claims and to the coordination of all of the neighborhood entities. On the school's founding document, there are several signatures and stamps of diverse organizations and political parties, which agreed to support the opening of an adult education center in La Verneda (Giner, 2011). It is important to note that the neighborhood movement then was characterized by its huge pluralism: They were altruistic people with different beliefs, mentalities, and ideologies who worked for the improvement of the living conditions of the people in the neighborhood in exchange for nothing (Giner, 2011). This link with the citizenship is not just the origin of the school, but it is also nowadays the basis of the daily work of the center because it works with and for the people and organizations of the neighborhood of La Verneda (Verneda-Sant Martí Adult School, 2007).

To work for a better neighborhood, the neighbors decided to occupy a building that had been left empty since the dismantlement of the regime. It was an old residence for "young ladies" of the "female section of the National Movement" (Francoist); it had been claimed as a space for cultural and social activities, which the neighborhood was lacking. With a population of low educational levels, access to education was a key element not only to learn and get the right competences to improve at the professional level but also to learn the mechanisms for citizen participation (Sánchez Aroca, 1999).

The first course in the school started with 17 people. During that year, the people involved spoke about the school everywhere they went: in the workplace, at the market and at any shop, in the urban parks, with their families, and so on. They showed so much enthusiasm and interest for the school that as a result, the initiative rapidly sparked interest and grew. At the beginning of the second school year, the expectations these 17 people generated in the neighborhood led to a huge increase of more than 100 registrations. Year by year the registration grew in such an exponential way that nowadays the average school enrollment is 2,400 people (Verneda-Sant Martí Adult School, 2011). By word of mouth of the participants, information spread out easily to anyone in the neighborhood and the community, and these 17 adult learners gave the information credibility.

Gradually the neighbors started to obtain more resources, and in the years to follow they already had hired three teachers and received recognition as an

educational center. The human resources obtained from the public budget were always matched by the volunteers who became a strong pillar for the school (Verneda-Sant Martí Adult School, 2007). The volunteers in the school are highly diverse in terms of origin, background, age, occupation, and profession. The cultural and professional diversity of the volunteers allows the school to meet the needs and the social and educational demands of a changing society. With the educational and social challenges this community faces daily, a diverse staff with different points of view provides coherent principles for the school. In line with the communicative methodology of research (J. Gómez, Latorre, Sánchez, & Flecha, 2006), dialogue, interpretations, points of view, and shared arguments facilitate the conception of reality. The result is an intersubjective process of knowledge creation. But the fact that so many different profiles exist also allows overcoming the traditional methodological gap produced so often in the social sciences where the researcher becomes the subject of the research (the only one that carries on the central role of the research) and the researched is just the object of the research. By exchanging standpoints, the process of knowledge creation and decision making is improved.

In 1980, the council of the school approved the rules of internal regulation in which the principles of the project were defined (and still prevail today): “an organization that always has to be at the service of the necessities of the people and the neighborhood, the equality in the decision making with all the people involved and with a relationship between the project and the neighborhood” (Verneda-Sant Martí Adult School, 2007). In 1983, the current organizational model was adopted, and the school started to receive visits from people interested in learning about the dialogic management model being developed by the learners participating daily based on a coherent synthesis between educational theory and daily educational practices. Other initiatives started to gain interest; in 1985 teachers of the school, who studied and worked at the university, started claiming the need to create a space at the university for adult education. AEPA (Association for the Permanent Education of Adults)⁵ was created, and the school continued growing (Flecha, López, & Saco, 1988). The following year another achievement took place: The school was awarded the right to do vocational training with courses developed by the Generalitat of Catalonia (the regional government body).

However, the great event of the year 1986 was the creation of Àgora and Heura, the two associations of learners participating in the school that started to directly manage all aspects of the La Verneda-Sant Martí Adult School. The Àgora association of learners is a mixed association made up by students and former students. The Heura association was specifically created to defend the rights of nonacademic

women both at the educational level and as a part of the feminist movements from which these women have been traditionally excluded (Puigvert & Muñoz, 2012). Through both associations, the role of the learners is strengthened as the key decision makers of the project as well as the representatives of the whole center (Padrós Cuxart, 2008, p. 243):

Ramón proposed the participants to organize associations with the objective to get autonomy, opportunity to get projects, to organize activities and this is how the participant people started to meet together and legalize it . . . now the associations are the school and easily overcome the number of participants, activities, projects, capacity to organize any of the adult schools depending on the administration of the neighborhood. (Giner, 2011, p. 77)

This is possible because the project starts from the idea that everybody is capable of language and action (Habermas, 1984, 1987), that is, that everybody has the same capacities when we have the same opportunities, when we know that our ideas and opinions will be only defended and criticized by means of reasoning and that all reasoning will be listened to in an egalitarian way. The egalitarian dialogue (Flecha, 2000) is a key element to make this principle real. According to Flecha, “a dialogue is egalitarian when it takes different contributions into consideration according to the validity of their reasoning, instead of according to the positions of power held by those who make the contributions” (p. 2).

The creation of the associations has not just facilitated the voices of students, it also has made sure that they are heard. That is why one of the demands that the associations have always made is to consider the people in learning processes not just students but also participants,⁶ that is that they participate from their own educational process (FACEPA, 1999). On the other hand, creating these associations was a way to ensure that La Verneda-Sant Martí Adult School was a project of the people and for the people and that it always answers to the interests, necessities, and dreams of the people who had suffered the social exclusion and not the interests and necessities of education professionals (Verneda-Sant Martí Adult School, 2007).

The Àgora and Heura associations also were key to the later development of other democratic movements in adult education (Giner, 2011; Tellado Ruiz de Gaura, 2007). One of the organizations working to promote the democratic movement of adult education is FACEPA (Federation of Cultural and Educational Associations for Adults).⁷ FACEPA was created in 1996, and the La Verneda-Sant Martí Adult School took a central role in this movement. Through its organization and activities,

FACEPA has shown it is possible to make a democratic and inclusive movement of adult education work with the collectives that have traditionally been excluded from participation because they lack university degrees.

The Democratic Management in La Verneda-Sant Martí Adult School

The participants, volunteers, and the staff hired by the associations are the three key collectives of the La Verneda-Sant Martí Adult School. They all work together from a democratic model of management, allowing each contribution to be part of a successful model of education in which everybody can access the information, select, decide, and participate of their own educational process and of the collective process as a whole.

The democratic management of the school is organized through two main spaces of decision making: the Assembly and the Center Council. Together with them, three other participation spaces execute the agreed decisions as well as work with new proposals that have to be debated and agreed by the bodies of decision: the Monthly Commission, the Weekly Commission, and the Permanent Commission (Verneda-Sant Martí Adult School, 2007). The result is a complex model, but it is efficient to carry out this example of deliberative democracy.

The most important decision body is the Assembly (Verneda-Sant Martí Adult School, 2007). The importance of the Assembly is not just based on being open to the whole community but being an example of deliberative democracy (Habermas, 1998). Everyone can pose questions on any issue of interest and propose and debate new activities or commissions to be agreed under consensus that is the product of egalitarian dialogue (Flecha, 2000). As A. Gómez, Puigvert, and Flecha (2011) point out, “social actors are increasingly using and arguing for dialogue and interactions in multiple areas, from classrooms (Aubert, García, & Racionero, 2009), family relationships (Beck-Gernsheim, 1995) to international politics (Beck, 1992) and academic research” (p. 236). They add that “in the new modes of organization, dialogue becomes the most important tool helping people to cooperate, reach agreements, and work together” (p. 236).

The Council is the space where the decisions affecting the achievement of the objectives included in the annual plan are taken (Sánchez Aroca, 1999; Tellado Ruiz de Gauna, 2007; Verneda-Sant Martí Adult School, 2007). It also evaluates the educational and sociocultural actions the school has conducted, and it proposes, if necessary, improvements in the processes to achieve such actions.

A decision-making process based on a deliberative democracy is not simple. Reaching a consensus requires a real egalitarian dialogue in every space of participation and management; this is so everyone feels respected and safe when making contributions about the functioning and organization of the school. The three participation spaces that implement the agreed decisions are the Weekly Commission, the Monthly Commission, and the Permanent Commission (Verneda-Sant Martí Adult School, 2007). All of them are open to everyone's participation (Giner, 2011; Sánchez Aroca, 1999; Tellado Ruiz de Gauna, 2007). An example is the Commission Against Sexual Harassment and the Affirmative Action Commission (Verneda-Sant Martí Adult School, 2007) started by the Women's Group in response to a harassment situation denounced by a volunteer woman and which became a permanent commission. Before the situation, the Women's Group proposed three measures: first, a zero-tolerance policy against violence (Verneda-Sant Martí Adult School, 2007); second, the creation of a commission against sexual harassment where anyone who suffers it may report it; and third, the inclusion of the Àgora and Heura associations in the Platform Against Gender Violence. All these measures reached a broad consensus at the Center Council.

These democratic practices in the everyday life of the school do not mean there have not been people who have tried impose power relations. There have been several episodes when a group of teachers tried to impose a new organization in the center without taking into consideration the voices of the participants or questioning schedules, contents, and all the democratic working of the school to impose a new organization according to their personal interests, abolishing the participants voice, and volunteer people, eliminating classes in the hours that did not suit them, etc. (Giner, 2011; Sánchez Aroca, 1999). In such situations it has been most worthy to have this model of democratic management as well as the deep connection with the neighborhood. The intervention of the organizations and the management with the school through the decision bodies has not just resolved the conflict but allowed the project to move forward from each of these episodes.

The direct involvement of participants in the management of the school through egalitarian dialogue (Flecha, 2000) is an innovative contribution that this center makes to adult education. Moreover, participants also perceive that the school's democratic management promotes more egalitarian relationships, and for that reason, more participation not only in the school but also in other spaces because of the required consensus of everybody (Giner, 2011; Sánchez Aroca, 1999; Tellado Ruiz de Gauna, 2007).

A Social and Educational Project That Transforms Its Community

The collective coordination that prompted the creation of the Adult School also led to the creation of the Entities Platform of La Verneda-Sant Martí, VERN (Giner, 2011). The Platform was born as a mechanism to strengthen and promote collective action and participation in the neighborhood. Therefore it represents a joint agreement to be the intermediary between the population of the neighborhood and the administration. Legalized in 1986, VERN is one of the oldest entities platforms in the city of Barcelona.

The school not only had a fundamental role in the creation of the VERN Platform, but its activity and support has been key to the development and the social transformation of the La Verneda-Sant Martí neighborhood. As Giner (2011) notes:

The School has been characterized for its support to the VERN project. And it has been one of the founding entities, in deed From VERN and in the name of all the entities that form it, we see as very important the task that was carried out from the Adult School of La Verneda, not just from an academic point of view, but for the importance given to the joint work of participants, of the conscience of being a part of the collective, in our particular case of La Verneda, and that any of us may influence, becoming men and women with a central role in the life of our neighborhood. (p. 65)

It was through the coordination and collective claims that the La Verneda-Sant Martí Adult School and VERN Platform were created. And it is this coordinated action that continues allowing people today to work for the collective claims started before 1978. Both men and women, neighbors of La Verneda-Sant Martí, dreamed all together a suburb with better infrastructures, housing, and communication with other neighborhoods and began to work for it. The majority of such claims became a reality, achieving important transformations in the neighborhood. As it continues, we analyze some of these claims that are a part of the achieved dreams.

One of the major goals of the neighborhood was connecting with the city of Barcelona and its public transportation system. During the 1990s, access to the neighborhood of La Verneda-Sant Martí was only possible through several bridges. The neighbors wanted a boulevard to unite the entire neighborhood and facilitate access without bridges. To achieve this goal, the VERN Platform participated as an intermediary for the neighborhood in the meetings about the urban plan that the City Council of Barcelona was carrying out. It brought the proposals of the entities that

were previously worked on in the platform meetings. That is how Guipuscoa Boulevard was achieved; it is one of the main roads that crosses the entire neighborhood and meets Aragó Street, which leads to downtown Barcelona.

As for public transportation, one of the biggest accomplishments was to make the subway reach the neighborhood. As many other working-class neighborhoods in Barcelona, this neighborhood did not have a subway connection to downtown. The public transportation network was really restricted to certain areas of the city, causing many people who lived in the peripheral neighborhoods to walk part way for their everyday affairs, such as work, school, and shopping.

During the 1980s, the subway reached near La Verneda-Sant Martí; specifically, the Line 4 arrived at La Pau station. The neighbors also mobilized to get the new Line 2 to reach the neighborhood. This line was 100% accessible because it was created by the Council of Barcelona as an infrastructure for the Olympics and the Paralympics of 1992. In the planning stage it was set to go under the neighborhood without any stops. Demonstrations were organized at the La Verneda-Sant Martí Adult School to achieve such stations.

This effort was later led by the VERN Platform. In addition to demonstrations, other activities included getting dressed up as a “subway” for the Carnival. As it happened with Guipuscoa Boulevard, the neighborhood had debates to decide where they wanted the subway exits to be located and the number of stations. With the help of the VERN Platform, all these school actions resulted in two subway stations for the La Verneda-Sant Martí neighborhood: Bac de Roda and Sant Martí, both along Guipuscoa Boulevard.

Additionally, new bus lines were added along with the expansion of older bus lines that connected the neighborhood with downtown. At the end of the 1970s, there were three daytime lines and one night line. By 2003, the neighborhood had nine daytime lines and two night lines (Societat d’Estudis de la Verneda de Sant Martí, 2004). One of those, No. 33, has special meaning because it connects with multiple university campuses in the city. Through this line a neighborhood of people with elementary or no education had access to higher education.

The urban transformation of the neighborhood has also been an important point within the efforts of VERN. Demonstrations and other actions were made to keep and protect the historical heritage of the neighborhood and the refurbishment of the Sant Martí Park. Regarding the historical heritage, the City Council planned to demolish three 18th century country houses, Ca l’Arnó, Can Planas, and Can Cadena, in the historical center of the neighborhood to build new apartments. The neighbors had always claimed them as an integral part of the neighborhood. At the end of 1982,

and as a result of an alleged mistake by the administration, the demolition of Ca l'Arnó started. Needless to say, demonstrations by neighborhood associations and the school prevented it. They coordinated surveillance shifts day and night to stop the demolition (Societat d'Estudis de la Verneda de Sant Martí, 2004). Today, Ca l'Arnó is home to a public play center administrated by the City Council of Barcelona. Can Cadena was in the worst condition. The goal was for the neighbors to claim the space for renovation and later public use. The school and the neighborhood accomplished their goal, and the house was restored. Today it serves as a center for environmental education, and it has one of the urban vegetable gardens in the city of Barcelona.

The VERN Platform represents different entities from the neighborhood of La Verneda-Sant Martí, which allows the coordination of different goals in the neighborhood until completion. In contrast with other neighborhoods in Barcelona, the struggles to achieve a better neighborhood have the participation of the people. These struggles have not diminished in the past 30 years and continue to be strong today. In 2001, VERN Platform decided to launch the "dream" neighborhood initiative to set new objectives to work in all areas: social, cultural, educational, sports, infrastructure, health, etc. In this way, organization by organization, individuals were interviewed about their ideas to improve the neighborhood, a neighborhood where everyone felt good and everybody had the same educational opportunities. All the entities participated with proposals toward a dream neighborhood.

The final result was a document entitled "Dream" that collected the main demands of the neighbors and the entities to achieve a better neighborhood. The issue that most worried the neighbors was public health. The key demand was the creation of a district hospital, in addition to an extended schedule for the Medical Centers and 24-hour emergency room service. Other demands included an alternative medicine center, a center for rehabilitation, and a women's health center independent from the existing medical centers. These demands were based on need because of the progressive aging of the neighborhood and the district. After health, the most important issue for the neighbors was education. Two proposals focused on creating more public schools in the neighborhood and to expand the La Verneda-Sant Martí Adult School.

Finally, to resolve many other demands, a center for the neighborhood was requested to be coordinated by VERN. The center was envisioned to have a theater, bar, exhibition hall, and computers; multipurpose halls for rehearsals and workshops; rooms with information, communications, and technology (ICT) for everyone; a resource center for women; rooms for adult education; a kindergarten education

center; a senior citizens center; and a library. It was emphasized that the center should be built in a multipurpose way and as a building for ICT.

In 2006, this dream was reviewed to establish new priorities according to the neighbors. After this revision it is clear that many priorities included in the 2001 dream have already been achieved or are being negotiated with the City Council. An example is the health demands; there's a larger medical center with new services and 24-hour emergency room services. In December 2007, VERN started a new participatory process. At a general meeting in June 2008, a document that collected the proposals of 30 entities from the neighborhood for a new cultural center was approved. It will be for the entire neighborhood and provide a space for organizations and the youth. Since 2010, VERN has participated in meetings with the City Council to build this new dream of a cultural center for the neighborhood. The school is also present in such meetings, not just supporting VERN demands but also claiming other demands such as extending the La Verneda-San Martí Adult School.

La Verneda-Sant Martí Adult School as a Successful Practice: The Transferability of the School Model

La Verneda-Sant Martí Adult School is considered to be a successful center (INCLUD-ED, 2012). Its practices are contributing to overcome inequalities and are improving the disadvantaged neighborhood that La Verneda-Sant Martí once was. These dialogic transformations have affected many areas of society such as the political, economic, sociocultural, and personal spheres. But it is also considered a successful action because its social and educational model is being transferred to other contexts.

The first objective evidence that the school is a successful center is the academic success of its participants. This is evident in the successful grades obtained in the external examinations that the participants take, as well as with the examination for the university access for adults 25 years or older. In 2011–2012 cohorts, 85% of those who took the test passed it. This corroborates relevant theories in psychology and pedagogy that defend the capacity of learning regardless of age (Schale, 1983; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Scribner & Cole, 1982).

Another example of the school's success is the participation of the community. According to INCLUD-ED (2009), the involvement of social agents in schools, of any educational level, promotes social cohesion from education. Four main arguments have contributed to this statement: the origin of the school, a working model centered in volunteering, a democratic model of management, and an involvement in the

associative network that has achieved important transformation for the neighborhood.

The origin of La Verneda-Sant Martí Adult School is linked to the demands of the neighbors as well as to the plural union of all its entities in the historical democratic transition at the end of Francoism. It is the entire citizenship of the neighborhood (people, entities, and political parties), the ones who decided to start an adult educational project, that promotes a public space where all these people may acquire knowledge, share experiences and learning, and promote participation and use it as a platform to work for a better neighborhood.

At La Verneda-Sant Martí, the major educational activities are possible because of the participation of volunteers, from the neighborhood and abroad, who commit to the center's objectives. The involvement of social agents make the center deeply connected to the context and to find answers not only to the educational demands but also to the demands posed from other areas of society. It is for that reason that the participation of social actors of society is needed and welcomed in this center, because they create and build with adult learners the new reality of the neighborhood.

Another finding of INCLUD-ED (2009) on promoting political participation to decrease the exclusion of people and collectives with low educational levels and other social situations has been the identification of effective mechanisms for the social inclusion of adults who had been excluded from the educational system as youth. One of these practices is the inclusion of people with low levels of education in democratic decision-making processes. The democratic management of the school not only facilitates the active inclusion of the same learners but also their participation in management and decision-making, from the class schedules or the planned curricula up to the human, economic, and material assignments throughout the school. This active participation of the learners is managed through the Àgora and Heura associations, which were created by the same participants. One of their main objectives is to guarantee that the project will always be from the participants and that the most excluded people have access to the highest standards and quality education. Furthermore, within this democratic organization, it is important to highlight the way different bodies of participation and decision-making have been created. These are open to the entire community for anybody to express their demands. On the one hand, the Assembly and the Center Council are the spaces to find consensus and to decide all aspects related to school management. On the other hand, the weekly and monthly commissions as well as the Permanent Commission are participatory organs to execute the decisions. The egalitarian dialogue (Flecha,

2000) is the tool that participants use to reach inclusive agreements that facilitate a consensus on what and how they want to organize education in the school.

Finally, regarding involvement with the neighborhood associations, the relationship between the school and VERN has been analyzed and its joint task that has contributed to transform the neighborhood at the social, educational, and urban spheres. It is not only the neighbors, the entities, or the administration participation in the school but the participation in the neighborhood.

INCLUD-ED has identified successful actions that through community participation are transforming the life of people of disadvantaged contexts through education (INCLUD-ED, 2012). These actions have been identified in several countries and contexts (INCLUD-ED, 2009) and present common features that make them transferable successful practices. The experience of the La Verneda-Sant Martí Adult School presents elements that are already being transferred to other educational and social contexts.

For instance, it was one of the precedents of the educational project called Learning Communities⁸ (Elboj, Puigdemívol, Soler Gallart, & Valls, 2002), and the only one in Spain (Giner, 2011). Currently there are 121 working Learning Communities; 116 in Spain, 3 in Brazil, and 2 in Paraguay. Learning Communities cover all educational levels, from preschool education to adult education. Even though they are mainly public centers, there are private schools assisted with public funds that have decided to become Learning Communities. Currently 4 out of the 121 Learning Communities are adult centers, including the La Verneda-Sant Martí Adult School.

Since 2004 La Verneda-Sant Martí maintains a partnership agreement with the city of Porto Alegre, Brazil,⁹ that took place in the Education World Forum between mayor of Porto Alegre and the president of the Àgora participants association. This partnership was created to facilitate the democratic exchange between the city of Porto Alegre and the La Verneda Sant-Martí Adult School (Giner, 2011).

La Verneda-Sant Martí Adult School has been visited by internationally known scholars such as Ulrich Beck, Gordon Wells, and Erik Olin Wright; by university professors of Spanish and international universities such as John Comings (former director of NCSALL, Harvard University), Imanishi Kouzou, professor at the Faculty of Humanities and Sciences of the University of Kobe Gakuin (Japan), and authorities of European institutions. It has also been the focus of theoretical and practice research-based articles in journals of impact as well as doctoral dissertations at international ranking universities (Giner, 2011).

The coordination, the team work, the democratic organization, and the inclusion of the voices of everyone and all the entities are key elements in the neighborhood of

La Verneda-Sant Martí and particularly in the La Verneda-Sant Martí Adult School that have allowed the adult learners to make a dream of life come true. All these elements can also contribute and guide the transformations of other neighborhoods and make it possible to achieve their dreams.

Notes

1. Dialogic literary gatherings are cultural and educational opportunities to share readings. People without academic degrees, most of them involved in becoming literate, read and discuss classic works of literature. They consolidate their newly acquired skills in reading and comprehension by discussing such classic books as Federico García Lorca's *Gypsy Ballads* and James Joyce's *Ulysses*. What sets these gatherings apart from other literary gatherings is the emphasis on communicative speech acts (Searle, 2004) where all the participants can contribute their interpretations, which are judged by how well they contribute to the discussion.
2. La Verneda-Sant Martí Adult School is situated in the neighborhood of Sant Martí de Provençals. According to the city of Barcelona, in 2010 Sant Martí de Provençals had 26,281 inhabitants. However, its area of influence also includes a second neighborhood, La Verneda and La Pau, which is next to Sant Martí de Provençals; it has another 29,385 inhabitants (City Council of Barcelona, 2011). In this article we will refer to both areas indistinctly as the neighborhood of La Verneda-Sant Martí.
3. INCLUD-ED: Strategies for Inclusion and Social Cohesion in Europe from Education (2006–2011), coordinated by the Center of Research on Theories and Practices that Overcome Inequalities at the University of Barcelona, has been the research project with most scientific excellence within the social sciences funded by the European Commission within the Sixth Framework Program for Research and Technological Development (FP6). The main goal of the project has been to analyze the educational strategies that contribute to the cohesion and the educational strategies that lead to social exclusion in the context of the European knowledge society, giving key lines and action lines to better the social and educational policies. For more information about the project, go to: <http://www.ub.edu/includ-ed>.
4. The INCLUD-ED (2006–2011) project structure is divided into three clusters containing six projects and a transversal integration project. Most of the references used in this paper are findings of Project 6, Local Projects for Social Cohesion. For more information on the project structure, go to http://creaub.info/included/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/1_D1.1-ProjectPresentation.pdf. For more information concerning Project 6, go to <http://www.ub.edu/includ-ed/docs/4.%20D.22.3.%20Working%20papers.%20Case%20studies%204th%20round.pdf>.
5. AEPA is a nonprofit association of adult teachers who understand adult education as a tool to overcome social inequalities. AEPA promotes activities related to adult education (permanent training, workshops, conferences, etc.) to strengthen the links among adult professionals who fight to defend the social and democratic model of adult education based on the

- inclusion of all voices, not only educators and administrators but also, and especially, learners. For more information, go to <http://www.aepa1983.org/>.
6. For *participant* we mean those adults who do not have a university degree and are not paid as professionals of adult education, that is, people with great cultural richness whose voices have historically been kept silent by the literate society. This definition comes from the Participants Bill of Rights in Adult Education at <http://facepa.org/facepa/wp-content/uploads/2009/06/declaracio.pdf>.
 7. For more information about FACEPA, go to <http://www.facepa.org>.
 8. Learning Communities is a project of social and cultural transformation in an educational center and its environment with the aim for everybody to access the Information Society. Learning Communities are based on theories, practices, and research knowledge of the international scientific community, answering in an egalitarian way to the challenges and necessities aroused by people and collectives of all the social transformations that are going on in the current society. For more information, go to <http://www.comunidadesdeaprendizaje.net/>.
 9. Porto Alegre is a city in Brazil well known by for its participatory and democratic experiences. For instance, the participatory budget is crafted in Porto Alegre and about 85 other Brazilian cities where a portion of the budget is set based on the demands of the citizens after a democratic process of decision-making in the other cities. The World Social Forum is another example; the forum held in Porto Alegre in 2003 welcomed more than 100,000 people from 156 countries and demonstrated that participative democratic processes of organization regarding common themes are attainable on a global scale.

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