Negociating curriculum: Learning-Service in included school

Negociando el currículum: Aprendizaje-Servicio en la escuela incluida

Abstract

This article analyzes the planning and implementation of a Service-Learning (SL) as a curricular practice. The aim of this study is to describe the development of the SL project as a curricular practice linked to the territory and to analyze the curriculum negotiation strategies and student participation in the educational practice. Methodologically, it is a case study with an ethnographic approach, where have been used qualitative tools such as participant observation, interviews and focus groups, documentary analysis and the research diary. The results show the process of negotiation and development of the SL practice carried out among all sectors of the educational community. It was through the use of cooperative dynamics and participatory social diagnosis such as social cartography, cooperative learning and classroom assemblies. In addition, the main participatory strategies developed by students are highlighted, such as those that facilitate their own voice in a collaborative work, like theater or mockups, and others oriented towards the knowledge mobilization using social networks. Discussion section emphasizes the relevance and educational value of this experience of participation and democratic negotiation of the curriculum due to the few initiatives that exist in this regard and the fact of reconciling it with the interests of the territory.

Keywords: School community relationship, student participation, democratization of education, intercultural education, Service-Learning.

curricular vinculada al territorio y analizar las estrategias de negociación del currículum y de participación del alumnado en dicha práctica educativa. Metodológicamente se trata de un estudio de caso con aproximación etnográfica, en la que se utilizan herramientas cualitativas como la observación participante, las entrevistas y grupos de discusión, los registros audiovisuales, el análisis documental y el diario de campo del equipo investigador. Los resultados dan cuenta del proceso de negociación y desarrollo de la práctica curricular de ApS llevado a cabo entre todos los sectores de la comunidad educativa, mediante la utilización de dinámicas cooperativas y de diagnóstico social participativo como la cartografía social, el aprendizaje cooperativo y las asambleas de clase. Además, se evidencian las principales estrategias participativas desarrolladas por el alumnado entre las que destacamos aquellas que facilitan la articulación de su propia voz de manera colaborativa, como el teatro o las maquetas, y aquellas otras orientadas a la movilización del conocimiento como el uso de las redes sociales. En la discusión se constata la relevancia que tiene esta experiencia de participación y negociación democrática del currículum debido a las pocas iniciativas que existen en este sentido y al hecho de conciliarlo con los intereses del territorio.

**Descriptores:** Relación escuela-comunidad, participación estudiantil, democratización de la educación, educación intercultural, Aprendizaje-Servicio.

1. **Introduction and state of the art**

   **Included School**

   We propose the redefinition of the role of the school and other social institutions in relation to the place they occupy in their territory. We rethink school change and educational improvement from models that are based on the principles of inclusion (Echeita, 2008, Echeita, & Ainscow, 2011); interculturality (Essomba, 2006; Aguado, & Ballesteros, 2015) and community and democratic participation (Dewey, 1995, Muñoz, 2011). We conceive the school as an inclusive school, that is, it is belligerent against inequalities and exclusion and promotes personal agency and social commitment. Inclusion, interculturality, democratization and territorialization structure this proposal as principles of the inclusive intercultural education model (Sales et al., 2011, Moliner et al., 2011) that we have been developing in recent years.

   **Curricular practices linked to the territory**

   Citizen participation, which is essential to promote from the formation of a critical and democratic citizenship, to intervene in the processes of globalization (Dezuanni, & Monroy-Hernández, 2012). It implies an active link and a reflection for change from an inclusive leadership. For this reason, forming critical citizens means legitimizing the globalizing function of an educational project through democratic dialogue, equal participation and commitment to social transformation. Thus, this educational transformation makes sense in a broader social process that culturally emancipates and allows social reconstruction (Kincheloe, & Steinberg, 1999). This means granting a role of political activism to teachers and communities. A debate is opened in schools about the exclusionary practices that can sustain the teacher’s own training such as the curriculum, the development and use of materials and resources, expectations about students and their families, the evaluation of results, the language used or the values and attitudes that are promoted in the school.

   From the contrast of the scientific literature, we refer to the international background of school transformation projects with an inclusive intercultural orientation, such as the Halton Project (Stoll, & Fink, 1999) and the model of *Ecole Communautaire Citoyenne* (FNCSF, 2011) in Canada, the Accelerated Schools Project (Levin et al., 1993) in the United States, or the Improving the Quality of Education for All project (IQEA) (Ainscow, Hopkins, Southworth, & West, 2001). At the national level, it is worth highlighting the
training of teachers to lead inclusive intercultural schools (Essomba, 2006), the diagnosis of intercultural educational contexts (Aguado et al., 2003); the Learning Communities network (Alcalde et al., 2006), the network of inclusive schools (Echeita, 2006) and the project of democratic schools “Proyecto Atlántida” (2001).

From the conclusions of our previous research we highlight three key elements for the development of curricular educational practices linked to the territory: full democratic participation, the visibility of the students’ voice and the interconnection of knowledge. This conception of the curriculum assumes the challenges of complex thinking that, as a setting, as a content, as a nature and as a process, gives a new impetus to educational action (Moraes, 2010).

Therefore, this network of knowledge built from democratic participation puts at the center of the process the voice of the student body, which acquires a leading role in making decisions about any aspect of school life (Susinos, & Ceballos, 2012) and which allows democratization in the structures of participation and management, learning skills of deliberative dialogue and political-social competences. In this sense, the development of curricular educational practices linked to the territory, from the adoption of a holistic communicative perspective from dialogical approaches (Traver et al., 2010) takes on special relevance within the framework of the included school.

**SL as a curricular practice**

Linking the curriculum to its territory means advancing in proposals where the political dimension has to be present starting from the school as an agent of change. It also involves reconstructing shared spaces that guarantee the common good, taking the curriculum as a social fact as its axis. As defined by Puig (2009), service-learning is a methodology that combines the learning of content, competencies and values in a single activity with the performance of community service tasks. Learning and Service form a feedback loop: “learning acquires a civic sense and service becomes a workshop of values and knowledge” (Puig, 2009, p.9). It is, therefore, a didactic methodology that forms responsible citizenship, with an ethical and solidary conscience in contexts of social transformation (Pérez Galván, & Ochoa Cervantes, 2017). In addition, it implies a mobilization of the knowledge acquired and produced, the results obtained and the process of knowledge construction is put at the service of the community and the territory (Naidorf, 2014).

### 2. Case study

In the present case study, the focus is placed on the process of planning and putting into practice a curricular proposal such as Service-Learning to inquire about the participation of students in the negotiation of the curriculum and its connection to the territory.

**Context and background**

The CRA of Benavites-Quart de les Valls is a grouped rural school of the province of Valencia (Spain) that was constituted in the 2005/2006 academic year with the objective of optimizing the educational resources available in two bordering populations. It is a school that has two classrooms, one in each municipality and that houses around 167 students.

In recent years the CRA has become an educational community managed by a coordinating commission formed by teachers, students, families and local administration. It has its own identity that includes in its motto “SOMESCOLA (WEARETHESCHOOL)” that defines the educational style of the center as dialogical, democratic and inclusive. As the courses take place, new students from other schools are incorporated, changing their identity from the center and configuring, at the same time, new ideas that influence the sense of belonging to the
CRA. It has become an educational reference, as a result of the successive projects developed within the framework of the construction of the inclusive intercultural school. Because of its educational model receives visits and conducts training courses in other schools. He has extensive experience in democratic participation strategies using participatory methodologies in the classrooms, organizing open days, and incorporating self-management strategies such as mixed work commissions and the coordinating commission as a collective decision-making body.

Over the years the school has been democratizing its structures and strategies and has become aware of the plurality of voices and the need to articulate them. However, the last community assemblies warned of the fact that participation was located too much in the “periphery” of the learning process (more focused on family participation in some extracurricular spaces) and the need to focus on the curricular practices began to become more apparent. At the same time, it was observed that the voice of the students was still weak and was often invisible in the School Council and in the debate sessions.

Our accompaniment to this school, as external consultants, has been articulated around a process of Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Ander-Egg, 2012) developed through annual cycles for five courses. During the first phase of the project (contact with the context and shared negotiation of the demand) several participative social diagnostic dynamics were developed that allowed to project the desired school to the educational community, as well as to establish the point of the participatory process in which it finds itself. In these sessions, the different sectors of the school pointed out the need to continue deepening in the democratic participation of the educational community and in linking the school with the territory. For this, one of the proposed lines of work to start a new cycle of PAR was to initiate processes of curriculum negotiation (what to learn and how to do it) with the educational community. In a community assembly the teachers proposed the SL methodology as an opportunity to develop this type of curricular practices and, from there, the planning of the action proposal began: development and problematization of a curricular proposal developed through SL. The topic chosen through a participatory and deliberative process of the educational community was the reform and improvement of the infrastructures of the two CRA classrooms. The development context of this practice was focused on two classrooms of the CRA, one for each classroom, from which the proposal was carried out involving the rest of class groups and the school’s educational community.

As part of a multi-annual PAR process, this paper focuses on the Case Study with an ethnographic approach to a service-learning project, the result of a decision by the educational community to reflect on the linking of curricular practices to the territory of the school, during the 2017-18 school year.

Objectives

To understand this SL project within the framework of the included school, we set out the following objectives: a) Describe the development of the SL project as a curricular practice linked to the territory. b) Inquire about the strategies of curriculum negotiation and student participation in the curriculum practice of SL.

Method

For the elaboration of the case study, we have used qualitative tools characteristic of ethnographic studies such as participant observation, interviews and discussion groups, audiovisual records, documentary analysis and the field diary of the research team.

The participants in the study were the 6th grade students of the CRA, the two teachers of the two classrooms and the families participating in the SL, as well as the center’s management team and the town hall education council.
The analysis of the content of the data produced has allowed us to reconstruct the learning process, emphasizing the moments and strategies of curriculum negotiation and student participation. The data has been triangulated with the participants and the returned generated information has served to, in turn, document the process as a strategy for mobilizing the knowledge of the participants themselves.

3. Results

The results of this study, regarding the two stated objectives, are related from the own process of origin, negotiation and development of the SL curricular practice. In its description, the guidelines of the ethnographic narrative logic have been followed, in order to demonstrate the participatory strategies developed by the students.

The origin of SL

The celebration of the Open Day was used to organize mixed work groups (teachers-students-families) that, following the technique of the photo-speaker, made proposals to develop the SL. For this work we start from the results of a previous activity, a social cartography (Lozano et al., 2016) which detailed, on the maps of the two locations, the different spaces and elements of the territory in which to articulate educational proposals that link the work of the school with their community.

Subsequently, and based on the proposals elaborated in the Open Day, a working session was held in the CRA open to the participation of all sectors of the educational community. The work dynamics were explained and mixed discussion groups (students, families, teachers, neighborhood/territorial agents/local administration) were formed, which, dynamized by members of the research team, they went on to carry out the deliberative analysis of the proposals and, based on it, formulate the prioritization of the proposals. This deliberation was concretized in three dimensions that substantiate the quality of the educational link that the proposal harmonized between the school and the territory: the academic and curricular content contained in the proposal, the service offered to the community, and its viability.

Community Assembly

In the assembly the options to carry out the SL were presented, and the faculty, who had been evaluating, in a previous session, the curricular possibilities of the different proposals, prioritized the improvement of the infrastructures of the two lecture rooms of the CRA as project theme. The families commented that the project had a double objective: on the one hand, to improve the conditions of the school and, on the other, it would help to continue strengthening the idea of the CRA as a shared project.

Project planning: negotiations begin

The planning process of the school reform project begins in the classroom and takes place in two sessions of two hours each, in each one of the classrooms. A first session is dedicated to planning the practice and the second to establish tools that allow documentation. The sessions were held with the teacher, five representatives of the families of each classroom and the students. It was established that the research group would accompany the documentation of the process.

a) First session: Planning the practice of SL

In this session, the SL notebook was introduced and each of its parts was explained, with the proposal that each teacher adapt it and customize it. In addition, the minimum criteria that should guide the practice were established:

• That it be consistent with the Center’s Educational Project (CEP) and with the principles and dimensions of inclusion and interculturality followed in it.
• That at all times the relationship between the learning of the curriculum (Center Curricular Project - CCP) and the fulfillment of the service (the link with the territory) was clear.

The two projects that were finally presented to be carried out were:

• “EL colegio que queremos” (The school we want): SL project to be carried out in the Quart classroom, in which 14 sixth grade students participated: ten boys and four girls.
• “Escuela Nueva” (New School): SL project to be carried out in the Benavites classroom, in which 15 students from 4th, 5th and 6th grade of Primary School participated: seven boys and eight girls.

b) Second session: Analysis of the SL

To analyze the practice from an included school approach, in addition to attending to the coherence of the SL with the educational and curricular project of the center, we rely on the dimensions and indicators of the CEIN Guide (Sales et al., 2010b), which is a self-evaluation guide to accompany the participatory processes of construction of the inclusive intercultural school. Each teacher selected the indicators of the guide for the analysis of the practice that were related to the principles of the educational model of the school.

In order to document the SL process, techniques such as questionnaires, graphs, interviews, discussion groups, newspapers and audiovisual presentations were proposed, allowing to collect the different moments of the project and share them with the rest of the educational community. The research team accompanied the process, offering ourselves as one more resource for the center and as a critical friend in order to strengthen and enrich the proposals.

Curriculum negotiation process

In the SL planning sessions, the teachers dynamize the group-class, in constant dialogue with the students and the families attending. They compare the methodology of Project-Based Learning (PBL), which they already know, focusing on the philosophy of the service and the values it entails. A debate about the relation of the SL with the school model that the CRA has as an ideal is introduced here.

It is the students who raise the possible dynamics of cooperative work and the use of the Google Drive platform as a space to share information, organize tasks and make visible the weekly progresses during the project.

The curricular contents involved in the SL are analyzed and compared with the learning results established by the current legislation in the autonomous community. This task is done in small groups of students and families, to highlight the relationship between the curricular practice that globalizes learning and puts them at the service of the community and the prescriptive objectives in compulsory education.

The conclusion reached is that the school reform project covers many areas of knowledge and multiple learning outcomes, many more than using the textbook or the more traditional teaching units.

All the sections of the SL notebook are planned: contents, objectives, expected results, type of service, recipients and work phases.

It is the first time that these class-groups have the presence of families in this moment of planning and decision making. Therefore, the relatives are asked for a degree of collaboration and involvement beyond timely participation. They are wanted to be integrated in the tasks of the process and in their follow-up, opening all the classroom work sessions to their participation and accompaniment.
The SL begins: what do we need and how do we organize ourselves?

The project begins with the creation of working groups. From a sociogram, a self-esteem test and the centers of interest of the students themselves, three heterogeneous groups are created. The first one (Patineiters) focuses on investigating the space of the patio, in order to improve it and get a coeducational space. The second (Aventadors) focuses its research on the educational environments and school furniture of the center. The third (Ampligrups) deals with the expansion of the school, to be able to have more classrooms without having to take space from the patio.

These groups are organized through the distribution of roles (supervisor, coordinator, public relations, material manager and moderator), to have an individual responsibility, in addition to signing a contract with the standards that must be met by members of the group, and specify the work plan that they follow in each session.

A brainstorm of ideas, contributions, interests, tastes, etc., are collected from the people who want to collaborate: students, teachers and families of the school. The following sessions are used to analyze and classify the received proposals and distribute them among the three groups. A survey is also conducted in all CRA classrooms to gather information about the needs of each class. An interview is held with the management team and with the teachers of the whole school to know the status of the process of expansion of the school (lands that are available and needs of the teachers to be able to distribute the spaces).

At the same time, an investigation is launched on which playground features are viable (slides, tunnels, ropes, sand court, etc.), through an Internet search, with reference to innovative and sustainable schools from all over the world.

The development in open access

One aspect taken into account from the beginning is the documentation and communication of the project to the entire educational community and local agents. To do this, it is decided to make a small video every Friday, explaining the weekly work done to be able to disseminate it in each WhatsApp group of the school.

When the students have collected all the information and analyzed the survey and the interviews, they share the results in a mural to make it public.

A new classroom assembly allows organizing the new tasks of each group: designing plans and models; contacting companies, the municipal architect and other schools; establishing budgets; rethink the educational use of school spaces; participation in educational contests for the collection of economic resources.

Once a month, the roles are exchanged so that all the students pass through all the responsibilities, acquiring the same competences.

When the reform project of the school takes shape, they investigate the way to make their proposal reach the local and Autonomous Administration. They prepare the application, present it in a plenary session of the City Council and deliver it to the Infrastructure Office of the Autonomous Government.

From the general project, it is decided in the assembly to start making some changes in the courtyard that make visible the work done. Use the Thursday workshops for the design and construction of games with recycled material for the playground (bicycle parking, solar clock with ball game, scales and musical instruments (music wall).

The project mobilizes knowledge

When the course ends and the project ends, it is time to present it to the entire educational community and show the Service: a whole proposal for school reform, carried out by sixth grade students in collaboration with families, local agents, experts and other schools.

Taking into account that the SL links the curriculum with the territory giving a service to the community, there is the need to disseminate
the project at three levels: educational community, administration and territory. In a collaborative project like this, dissemination goes beyond informing about the results, it implies the mobilization of the knowledge generated in the process of learning and of inquiry in the form of a Service. Thus, the project does not really end until such a return occurs, that appropriation by the community, for which the students organize, in coordination with the teachers and families, a Seminar of SL in which the working groups prepare participatory dynamics. Interactively show their work process and results, while the community gives their opinion and contributions to the work done. The dynamics are varied and include a timeline (with the TIKI-TOKI digital tool) to show the entire process that has led to the realization of the SL project. Teachers decide to publish this on the center’s website and spread it via WhatsApp. They also organize workshops that the members of the educational community go through and that consist of: a staging with puppets, with live music, of the rocket trip that represents the work they have done in the project; a musical with familiar songs to which the lyrics change; a theater play, in which one is the narrator and two are characters, to express how they have felt, the difficulties that have appeared and how they have overcome them and to collect proposals for the future; a scale model of the school of expanded polystyrene, 1:28 scale and pictogram figures made by the students, which represent the spaces that the classrooms should have; a mapping workshop in which they present the toys that have been created in the workshops on the Thursdays and propose to the people that they distribute them around the courtyard area; a tree of dreams that, dynamized by teachers, shows what dreams the school has fulfilled up to now.

Finally, the students create a dynamic in which participants are asked to read some of the objectives and curricular contents that were chosen in the planning session. Several students explain how they have acquired these learnings with the SL, using concrete facts. The final reflection of this journey, made among the different participating groups, raises the benefits of this methodology for the acquisition of significant learning connected with its most immediate reality. The three sectors participating in the process (teachers, students, families and research team) made a very positive assessment of the curricular practice, noting that this process of negotiating the curriculum was a novelty and a challenge, given the scarce educational initiatives in this regard.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The case studied frames the problematization and reflection of the curriculum practice of SL in a broader process of improvement from the IAP. Based on the results, in the process of shared negotiation of the demand and gestation of the project, several fundamental elements emerge to take into account:

• The participatory dynamics themselves relate the interests of the actors that initially may be different but in the end are complementary. Thus, for example, the teachers point out the need to continue deepening the democratic participation of the educational community and the link of the school with the territory; families demand a curricular work or more linked to what they consider genuinely school; the students start with the purpose of improving the school, physical or infrastructure because the school is too small. It is an element of inclusive research that is developed under participatory models working cooperatively to give voice to people who participate in research (Parrilla et al., 2017).

• The strategies allow to put in relation the contents and interests gathered in the school curriculum with those of the own territory and base from these wicks an educational proposal that guarantees qual-
Negociando el currículum: Aprendizaje-Servicio en la escuela incluida

ity learning for all (Rodríguez, 2017). One of the main virtues of the experience is that of turning all of us into apprentices and teachers at the same time, into companions and fellow travelers of the other participants. In this way, under the leadership of teachers, it has been possible to invert the classic hierarchical relationship of the classroom to introduce egalitarian learning relationships. The learning climate has had much more to do with what are known as communities of practice (Wenger, 1999) than with the typical teacher-to-student dyadic relationship.

• Joint planning as a participation experience. The negotiation of the curriculum through participatory dynamics leads to a proposal for the development of a curricular practice linked to the territory through two work projects with the SL methodology. Thus, the SL is configured as a strategy that allows to generate E-A processes in which everyone participates (students, families, teachers) by relating the curriculum to the territory and placing the students in the center of the action (Puig, 2009). Too many times we see the few opportunities that students have to learn one of the most important ingredients of genuinely human behavior: the planning of our actions. Planning and evaluation are still two actions absent from the interactive classroom space and from the instruction that teachers provide to their students. These are two activities that, based on a productive vision of the teaching work, they perform outside the classroom, when the students are not present. And, as we well known, planning is learned by planning. Well, this experience offers a unique opportunity to start working with students planning and at the same time learning to do it. In addition, the fact of opening participation to families has given a community dimension to the negotiation of the curriculum. In this way bridges of understanding are built between all sectors of the educational community that bring us closer to the ideal of building a shared educational and school project. Nothing is closer to the model of democratic school to which we aspire so much.

The shared analysis of the information allows to plan the action in a communitarian way and the emergent elements are:

• Citizen participation: the working sessions open to the participation of all sectors of the educational community (students, families, teachers, neighborhood/territorial agents/local administration), favor the involvement of all groups and the deliberative analysis of proposals and of its prioritization.

• Democratization of decisions: through mixed discussion groups all the actors involved have a voice in decision-making. In the planning of the action (community planning of the SL in the class), the voice of the students who learn planning strategies and project their longings for improvement in a concrete and shared project, in relation to the center’s ideology (Aguado & Ballesteros, 2015).

• Collaboration between school and territory: the educational proposal through SL allows to link the work of the school with its community. The improvement content of the school facilities responds to the needs of the educational community and positions it, socially and politically, in front of the local and regional administration. The dimension of the project encourages to make divergent and possible proposals for the improvement of spaces and educational environments.

• The mobilization of knowledge: the process of appropriation of knowledge for its practical implementation (Naidorf, 2014)
and the shared construction of knowledge has occurred throughout the process.

In addition, throughout this process there has been a voice that has been articulated with greater force than ever: that of the students. In fact, most of the mediations with families present in the experience have been made by boys and girls. Teaching, as we all know, is the greatest learning experience. And, in this sense, we believe that we have been able to place students in a position to achieve their highest learning potential. Thus, these practices move towards a true democratic participation of the students that is not reduced to a response to a specific curricular activity, but it encompasses a shared intergenerational knowledge management process in spaces of deliberation and responsibility linked to the common good (Susinos, & Ceballos, 2012). All this places us in an educational experience that fosters all the participants a critical and active awareness of their own reality, in this case, something as important as the infrastructure of a public school. We enter that space that Freire called “awareness”, which contributes so much to practice a transformative and emancipatory education.

Finally, it is necessary to recognize the leadership exercised by the teachers of the CRA. A leadership that begins to be within the parameters that in educational research we recognize as “distributed leadership” (Sales et al., 2016, Spillane, 2005). A model of leadership that is central to the experiences of democratic schools and models of social justice.

**Supports and acknowledgments**

This study is part of the research projects: “The included school: planning and implementation of curricular educational practices linked to the territory”, financed by the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDER) (EDU2015 –68004-R) and “Mobilization of Knowledge on Inclusive Education: Roles and Strategies of Researchers/Trainers in School Improvement Processes from Participatory Action Research”, funded by the Autonomous Government (AICO/2018/066)

We want to thank all the members of the educational community of the CRA of Benavites-Quart de les Valls for their collaboration and participation, as a fundamental part of this research and its final beneficiaries.

**(Endnotes)**

1. From this point, as a result and as an example, we describe only one of the two experiences due to space limitations.

**Bibliographical references**


Parrilla, A., Susinos, T., Gallego, C., & Martínez, B. (2017). Revisando críticamente cómo inves-


