



## *Voices Inside Schools*

*La Verneda-Sant Martí: A School Where People Dare to Dream*

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### **Abstract**

In this article, Montse Sánchez Aroca describes the philosophy, activities, and achievements of La Verneda-Sant Martí, a school for adults in Barcelona, Spain, where Sánchez has taught for ten years. Started as a grassroots project, La Verneda is exceptional as a school for adult education because of the level of involvement of the adults and the democratic process by which students (who refer to themselves as participants), teachers, volunteers, and community members take part in the school's decisionmaking process. Learning and creating are the responsibility of and for the benefit of the entire school community. This is accomplished through egalitarian dialogue, in which everything is discussed and decided collectively; there is no hierarchy in the school's structure. Sánchez illustrates why people in La Verneda say that the school is the realization of a dream. As an example, she describes how students with little formal schooling organize literary circles where they read books by authors such as James Joyce, and invite the best writers in the country to their gatherings. They also create associations that make their voices heard at the educational policymaking level. Some of the students at La Verneda go on to receive university degrees and become highly qualified professionals. Sánchez's descriptions and examples clearly present La Verneda as an example of an emancipatory school for adult education. (pp. 320-335)

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*Ahora soy feliz. La gente me ha dado mucho apoyo, estoy muy contenta. Antes no conocía a nadie, pero ahora todo el mundo me anima y pienso que de esta forma*

*lograré llegar a la universidad. La escuela es como si fuera de todos, y cada persona es importante.*

—Fátima<sup>1</sup>

[I am happy now. People have supported me a lot, I am really happy. I didn't know anybody before, but now everybody encourages me and I think that in this way I'll be able to get to the university. It is as if the school belonged to all of us, and every person is important.]

Ten years ago, I started teaching at La Verneda-Sant Martí School for Adults in Barcelona, Spain. Since then, many participants at the school have shared their positive feelings about the school with me, as did Fátima, above.<sup>2</sup> Our school has close to sixteen hundred participants and about one hundred teachers and volunteer collaborators, all of whom work hand-in-hand to expand their knowledge, create new learning opportunities, and improve the school and their community, a working-class neighborhood in Barcelona. What surprised me when I first came to La Verneda School, and continues to amaze me today, is the participants' and educators' high level of involvement, as well as the various activities they generate. Fátima, for instance, is a member of one of the school's participants' associations. Like other participants, she always takes part in the coordination meetings and is active on several committees. While her experience with learning differs from the teachers, it is equally valued in a school that is, as Fátima said, a place that belongs to all of us.

What moved me to write down Fátima's words that night is also driving me today to write this piece. I believe it is important to bear witness to what the school is about and to share it with others, whether they live nearby or far away. La Verneda is a school at which people dare to dream because we know that dreams can become reality. For example, Fátima's dream is to go to the university. Other people's dreams have been to learn how to read and to participate in diverse conversations in their daily lives. For many people in the community, the dream is to overcome difficulties through education. Here, many people overcome the social exclusion that they might suffer elsewhere. We know the process is not easy and that we must work hard and fight for what we need and want, but the teachers and participants at La Verneda know that we can transform our reality together. We also know that the dream is worth the struggle.

In this article, I describe how La Verneda developed and how it functions today. I describe the community's participation in the school, the democratic way decisions are made, and the ways ideas are generated and responsibilities shared. By narrating various experiences and events that I have witnessed, I portray a project grounded in egalitarian dialogue and its outcomes — both the growing participation and range of possibilities within the school and the generation of solidarity beyond it.

As I start to write, I look around the staff room at La Verneda and see a crowd of people coming and going, greeting me, smiling. They are many kinds of people: young and old, men and women, fathers and mothers, graduates or not, but all of them are devoted to their community and its improvement. They have in common their participation in the school, a school that, thanks to their work, can host various activities. Everyone is working on something different: some are working on BASIC, a pilot project on basic literacy and employment that we share with educational centers in the Netherlands,

Belgium, and Germany; others are organizing events for the Fiesta Mayor, the annual local festival; others are planning an exchange program with a school in Galdakano, a town in Spain's Basque region, to help them create a participants' association; and others are studying for the access-to-university comprehensive exam.<sup>3</sup> Still others are preparing a literary gathering to discuss the poet Federico García Lorca. I sit here, thinking of how to capture on paper how that dream was created and what I see and feel in this school.

### **Creating a Dream**

When I first arrived at La Verneda in 1988, it had just celebrated its tenth anniversary with a big party. In Spain, the 1970s were years of grand debates, demands, changes, and many political and social hopes. Our neighborhood, La Verneda-Sant Martí, took part in these changes. In the aftermath of Franco's dictatorship, the doors to democracy were beginning to open, and people felt they could contribute to the ideal of creating a better society through civil and cultural participation. The neighbors of La Verneda-Sant Martí formed local groups and associations to analyze their needs and discuss ways to improve their neighborhood. One of the needs considered then was a school for adult education that would provide a public space in which people could share knowledge and learning in order to participate in what was then an incipient transition to democracy. This was also seen as necessary to defend the idea that education should be a public good available to everybody. Thus, in 1978, a group of people began to build this dream called La Verneda-Sant Martí School for Adults.

A group of seventeen people from the local residents' association engaged in a shared community-based learning process.<sup>4</sup> During the first year, people were so enthusiastic that they started to reflect on what they were doing and how interesting it was. They would talk about the school at the workplace, when they went shopping, and when they were with their children at the park. As a result, the initiative became increasingly well-known. The following year there was a sense of great expectancy, and the number of participants increased dramatically beyond the one hundred already involved. The many informal interactions of participants with people in the neighborhood contributed to the ease with which information about the school circulated by word of mouth.

When a group of university professors of education visited the project a few years ago, Carmen, one of the early participants, explained to them how the school started. As she spoke, her enthusiasm showed not only in her words, but also in her facial expression:

The building in which you are now is a Community Center. It used to be a facility used by Franco's dictatorial administration. Therefore, it became vacant in the late 1970s with the advent of democracy, with no specific function assigned to it. . . . In 1978, we decided to take over the building and set up a cultural center with all the services we demanded: the childcare center, the school for adults, the youth club, etc. We, the neighbors, decided what we wanted it to be like and what to do to achieve it. Afterwards, once we managed to get the center started, our struggle turned in part to demanding the different public administrations to take on their share of responsibility with funding. What still remains from all that is the way in which everybody gets involved and participates. . . . What we achieved is an extensive cultural project for the community, housed in our center. This center brings together most of the community's cultural life, and that is why here, on its fifth floor, the School for Adults is located.

During the late 1970s, the changes at La Verneda were part of the transformation taking place in adult education throughout Spain. At the time, adult education followed a compensatory education model designed for those who had not been able to attend school earlier in their lives. Educators and participants at La Verneda challenged the assumption that childhood and adolescence were the appropriate periods of life for learning. Using research from the fields of psychology and pedagogy that focused on adult learners, they showed that people of all ages could learn, and argued that education is a basic right throughout life.<sup>5</sup>

### **Creating Opportunities**

La Verneda's doors open at 9 A.M. and close at 10 P.M., which provides opportunities for extensive community participation. The school offers a wide range of activities to respond to community members who are involved in the school, who have diverse interests, expertise, and cultural backgrounds. Courses and activities available to students include basic literacy, certification courses (equivalent to the secondary school level), literature gatherings, computer science, painting, pottery, health, sociology, psychology, Spanish as a second language, and English for hotel business and tourism. Participants also attend seminars, such as "Where is science heading?" "Art and society," "The world of plants," "Ecology," "The Euro," or "What is happening in the world?" This diverse selection helps students discover or create what they need and care about.

The activities that elicit the greatest interest and the highest participation are those related to reading. Literature has opened previously unimaginable paths for action, created new attitudes, and contributed to sharing values and feelings. For example, Heura, the women's association, holds a literary contest every year in March, around International Women's Day. The contest is open to all, and the association receives numerous narratives and poems about women, many of exceptional quality. Last year one submission beautifully highlighted a woman's personal experience, relevant to all domains of women's lives. The poem was about her life as a woman — being a mother, a wife, and working in extreme conditions. It also referred to other women who, through very hard work, now also had control over their lives. The author expressed the thrill she feels when she realizes how women's expectations have been transformed so dramatically in recent years. The text was signed with a pseudonym and an epigraph that said, "86 years and 200 days." She was also overcoming the ageist participation concept. She was a transformative woman.<sup>6</sup>

The school community pays a great deal of attention to life stories, to literature, and to dialogue. A few years ago, a team of people from the library, the school, the community center, and other people who lived in the neighborhood created a project called *Vuit menys Set: Un Escriptor, Un Món* [Seven to Eight: A Writer, A World] to promote reading in the neighborhood. For four years, a writer has been invited every month to speak at our center, and between two hundred and four hundred people crowd the room in anticipation of hearing such noted speakers as José Luis L. Aranguren, one of the most acclaimed Spanish philosophers of our century.<sup>7</sup> After his participation in *Vuit menys Set*, he told us it would have been impossible to host such an activity without the community participation and support we had in the center. He said, "*Venir al centro me da más vida porque aquí se habla de la vida. Ustedes hacen que sienta vida y no teatro*" ["Coming over to the center gives me more life because here you talk about life.

You make me feel life, rather than fiction”]. In the *Vuit menys Set* events, we do not discuss literature as some “experts” do. Instead, people offer their impressions about the author’s work, or comment on something they watched on TV about the guest writer. People ask questions based on what really interests them from the readings, rather than what is “proper” to ask, such as the influence of reading in our everyday lives, and whether writers have any responsibility to society.

In a sense, *Vuit menys Set* is a space where education and learning happen in a way similar to the way that people of La Verneda interact in their community. It has become, as Jürgen Habermas puts it, a space where system and lifeworld meet.<sup>8</sup> Visitors often ask us why the room is always packed for these events, while similar gatherings elsewhere are not so successful. We believe it is because the people of La Verneda have participated in the creation of each event. Nobody had a preconceived plan of what was going to happen; it was a creative act in which everyone participated in the way that suited them best.

### **Egalitarian Dialogue**

Different kinds of knowledge can be considered equally valuable in a lifelong learning process. Interacting with others on equal footing is a way to learn from those with whom we debate and share our doubts and our experiences. At La Verneda we have learned that the key to learning is egalitarian dialogue. Egalitarian dialogue can occur if teachers have no preconceived strategy they want to impose on learners, and if participants know at all times what is going on in the classrooms, why things are done in a certain way, and what the goals of each pedagogical intervention are. In addition, participants must have the option to change, debate, or discuss all that goes on in the school. The collaborative environment that this creates makes knowledge multiply because it is intermingled with other people’s knowledge; this sharing allows people to search with others for the best arguments and solutions to problems they may face. Today, such dialogue generates a comfortable atmosphere of familiarity and belonging at the school.

People share equal potential when they are given the same opportunities. When people can assume that their opinion or idea will be defended or criticized only in open arguments, and that all arguments will be listened to equally, they can let their creativity flow and not be afraid to contribute their thoughts. For example, in class, students freely contribute their own ideas and questions. I remember a course organized by three groups of four people each that decided to carry out small pieces of research. One of the groups included Alonso, a paraplegic person, and for this reason they decided to conduct research on the nervous system with a part of their research focused on paraplegia. The day they presented their work to the rest of the class, Alonso presented the portion of the study on paraplegia, drawing from his own life as an example. At the end of their presentation, the other groups suggested that they focus on the human body in the following semester. By paying greater attention to participants’ own interests, it is possible to increase their motivation to learn and to increase their knowledge. Furthermore, when their contributions relate to their own life experience, they move closer to understanding the reality of other people’s lives and further away from relying on stereotypes.

Typical examples of such dialogue take place at the literary gatherings. This activity was created eighteen years ago by participants at the basic and new-reader literacy levels who chose to read classics by authors such as Federico García Lorca, Antonio Machado, James Joyce, Franz Kafka, and many others. In 1998, the participants in the literary gathering created a new adventure: they found a way to merge two of the authors they knew and admired most — poet Federico García Lorca and educator Paulo Freire. They decided to devote the year to remembering these two men who struggled so for equality.<sup>2</sup> While reading the work of these intellectuals, the group talked about literature, ideas, society, and *flamenco*. One of the participants was a young Gypsy musician, and sometimes they listened to his music and let their creativity soar. They used this creativity to put together a presentation for the Freire Year events at the university. These people, who had not been able to read a book when they had started school but who had poetry in their lives, moved an audience of five hundred with their emotional presentation. Students, professors, university representatives, colleagues from La Verneda, and others who had come to remember Paulo Freire were moved by every verse of Lorca's poetry, by every image from the lives of the presenters, and by the educational experiences the writers conveyed in their words. Some even said the presentation created a kind of catharsis. I think it provided a perfect fusion between reality and dreams, between literature and life, thus breaking down the wall between academic and community cultures.

In the literary gatherings, people's dreams of reading literature become a reality through egalitarian dialogue. In such gatherings, their opinions are valued without any stigma, regardless of their status or their educational background, and they are free to speak in a language in which they can freely express themselves. The whole group selects the classic books they read. After reading the book at home, participants meet and discuss what made an impression on them. The project is based on group solidarity: all members must be ready to share their feelings and reactions with the rest of the group. After all the ideas are expressed, participants discuss and come to a collective interpretation of the reading, rather than a "correct" interpretation provided by the teacher. It is in this way that dialogic learning, the learning that emerges from egalitarian dialogue, becomes possible.

### **Democratic Participation**

The dialogic dynamics generated at the class and activity levels are representative of the school's dialogic organization. La Verneda School is managed collaboratively by educators and participants who work together within an organizational structure that allows everyone to express their needs, interests, and ideas.

For instance, participants at the school have organized two associations, *Ágora* and *Heura*, to develop their initiatives. *Ágora* represents participants in the school's decisionmaking process. Recently, *Ágora* has been important in creating new guidelines for an adult education curriculum that is broader and more consensual than the national curriculum proposed by the Spanish government, which did not take adults into account. Through *Ágora*, participants have been able to get involved in designing specific curricula for adult secondary education.

*Heura* is a participants' association of women struggling to overcome the barriers they encounter as adults and as women, since women face more cultural barriers than men.

This association tries to make women's voices heard. For example, Heura collaborated in the 1999 Women's Conference held in Barcelona.<sup>10</sup> It developed a paper about women's social participation, and also contributed to the debate by talking about women's representation in public spheres. Heura argued that even in today's environment, with the dramatic increase in the number of female representatives in public decisionmaking bodies, there is still much to do in order to make *all* women's voices heard. It stressed the need to consider the difference in the economic and cultural status of these female representatives, who tend to belong to higher social ranks, and that of the female population as a whole. Heura works through committees, and all participants contribute their personal experiences to the association. Heura's presence has helped introduce topics related to the world of women to the school.

Another example of La Verneda's democratic participation is the school's management. The management is organized into three open-discussion panels that function as the school's decisionmaking bodies: the Assembly, the School Council, and the Monthly Coordination Meeting. All of them are made up of teachers, volunteers, and participants.

The Assembly, which meets once a year, is open to all teachers, participants, and volunteers, as well as to representatives from the neighborhood and the Community Center. It also may be called as needed between these annual meetings. Direct democracy is practiced in these assemblies. This decisionmaking process, which has also been promoted in many other community movements, allows everybody to present problems in order to solve them together. The School Council meets every one-and-a-half months and is the forum where the school's operation and guidelines are discussed. The Council is comprised of one participant representative from each class, representatives from among educators, school committees, participants' associations, the Community Center, and VERN.<sup>11</sup> Participants can raise all types of questions and concerns, propose and discuss new activities, and create committees. Furthermore, the management of resources (human, material, or economic) is discussed publicly. Decisions on the use of public resources are made in different ways, but they always take into account the school's general principles. When a need is detected, it is presented at the Monthly Coordination Meetings. A commission is then formed, which works according to the priorities and criteria established at the larger meeting. The final decision is always the Council's. Public resources can be provided by local, regional, national, or European Union governmental bodies, or by some foundations. Resources are then applied to specific actions to produce results. In this way, we seek consensus on every question. Sometimes, however, such agreement is not reached easily, and further discussion on a question is continued in the different groups in order to devise new solutions. Thus, we achieve consensus through the dynamics of dialogue and seeking understanding.

An example of this consensus at work is related to an issue widely discussed in Spain in recent years: immigration. This debate is most significant in Spain, a port of entry for many North Africans into Europe, given the construction of a collective European identity. The issue of immigration also affected the debate about our school guidelines, as people took different positions on it. Right in front of the school, for instance, there is a police station that is in charge of controlling "illegal" immigration, and participants have different opinions about this type of control. However, we all agreed that, in spite of differences of opinion regarding immigration and related issues, the school would be

committed to admitting everybody because education should know no frontiers. Consequently, we never ask about the residency status of any applicant, leaving the doors to education open to everyone.

This working procedure requires that everybody involved in the everyday operation of the school attend the Monthly Coordination Meeting (COME), at which participants and educators coordinate different activities, announce important information, and reflect on our teaching-learning practice and educational innovations. A different committee is appointed every month at the meeting to prepare the following COME. As part of its duties, the committee creates an agenda for the meeting, provides handouts with information to be disseminated in the classes, and prepares a discussion activity. Discussion is usually prompted through a variety of techniques — such as use of a sketch, a text, or a videotaped scene from real life at the school — and is carried on in small groups. At the end of each meeting, each group reports to the plenary and formulates conclusions, comments, and recommendations that will help to shape the school's philosophy, guidelines, and methodologies. On the first Tuesday of every month, about one hundred people gather in the COME — a level of commitment and collaboration that I have not seen in any other school I have visited.

For example, in January 1999, when a commission of women was working on their presentation for the Women's Conference, some proposed to focus the March COME on women's issues. At the beginning of the meeting, a member of the committee introduced the importance of adult education for women to the audience and three different ways it could be approached (equality, difference, and equality of difference). Some specific cases from the school were given as examples. We then worked in small groups to seek solutions to the problems presented. Then, each group explained what they had discussed. As a result of our discussions, we agreed that the school would follow the equality of differences perspective.<sup>12</sup> Since then, all our actions have been guided by the criteria developed at that meeting.

Throughout the year, participants and educators also take part in professional development activities, evaluation of the school's programs, and generation of new ideas. It is understood that fostering the learning process is the responsibility of both participants and staff. By extending the opportunity of professional development to all of us, the school emphasizes the fact that everybody is able to participate in the decisionmaking process. This is the key to being successful as a school, as well as to attracting new participants.

The most important professional development activities are three intensive workshops devoted to reflection and learning:

- The first one, early in the academic year, is primarily devoted to educators' professional development — full-time teachers and part-time collaborators. One of the workshop's goals is to share our current knowledge and expertise with the new volunteers, as well as to improve ourselves through training.
- The second one, which takes place around February, is devoted to the continuing assessment of the project, as well as to the generation of new ideas. Educators and members of the participants' associations spend a weekend working in a house off campus. This workshop includes presentations, reflection activities, and discussions of different topics.

- The last of these workshops, which deals with the final evaluation of the academic year, is held during three full days in July. Working in small groups, we discuss how the past school year went and delineate prospective guidelines for the next year through a process of dialogue, making sure that participants express their needs and make proposals. The workshop ends with a plenary discussion, at which all the groups assess how the school's curriculum matched the participants' interests over the previous year.

### **Overcoming Strategies of Power**

In our school, solidarity and equality are more than mere concepts; we put them into practice through our democratic procedures. When democratic practices increase, however, multiple pressures and threats arise.

We have frequently faced people who wanted to impose their way of doing things. Those who use pressure to push what is often their hidden agenda tend to describe all groups as self-interested and to then use this assessment to justify their own egocentric aims. This approach causes confrontation and leaves no room for dialogue, mutual criticism, or deliberation about the best options for both the school and its participants. Those who use pressure to achieve their goals often try to put themselves above the rest by emphasizing the differences between participants and teachers, and to dominate and control everything according to their own interests.

For example, in September 1994, before the start of the new academic year, a group of teachers started to devise a "strategy for change," with a focus on the class schedule. Schedules had always been made collectively and with the diverse needs of local people in mind. During summer break, these teachers, who represented a majority of the full-time staff, met to lay out a new schedule. They did not submit it for discussion, and they tried to impose it on the rest of the teachers at the beginning of the fall semester. The new schedule expanded class hours for the higher level courses, which failed to take into account people's working and parental schedules. Many classes were scheduled for 9 A.M., a time when parents are taking their children to school, or 5 P.M., when they pick them up after school. The plan also reduced night classes. In other words, the schedule did not serve those who were to take the classes, but those who were to teach them. The teachers' idea of change did not emerge from the school's usual decisionmaking process, but from their own interest. Soon it led to a separation between the teachers' place and that of the students.

This could not change our project, however. Opposition to the new schedule grew quickly: many participants, teachers, and volunteers, with the support of various neighborhood organizations, fought the goals and procedures of these few teachers. Eventually VERN called a special School Council in order to discuss the issue, to hear the arguments of all parties involved, and to solve the schedule conflict. More importantly, this hearing was to take place within the school's discussion and decisionmaking bodies. As expected, the teachers' group did not want to explore alternative solutions; instead, they criticized the process and disregarded anything the Council decided. The rest of us remained committed to our democratic procedures. Those teachers were moved to another school where their interests were better represented.

I have an emotional memory of the first COME we held after this conflict. One of the most senior participants stood up at the plenary and explained the new scenario. Now we had fewer people who worked full-time at the school, but the goal was to at least provide what we usually offered. After hearing her words, every person who was at the meeting — the remaining teachers and volunteers, current and former participants, members of local organizations, and local neighborhood residents — stood up and said what he or she could do. The reigning sentiment was, “This is everybody’s project and we must go ahead; we will do whatever is needed!” It was an emotional moment.

Many of us at La Verneda School have read or attended a performance of the play *Fuenteovejuna*, a classic of Spain’s literary Golden Age. Playwright Lope de Vega presents the struggle against authoritarianism and injustice. Villagers fight against a rapist, a King’s subject taking advantage of his *droit de seigneur*. In the denouement, the whole village rises and fights as if they constituted a single voice under the lemma, “*Fuenteovejuna, todos a una!*” [Fuenteovejuna, all together!]. This was the key in our struggle at the school: all our voices became as one in naming what was fair. The people in our neighborhood knew what they wanted, knew how to fight for it, and knew that their strength lay in solidarity.

We are now about a hundred people collaborating at the school. Among us are eight full-time teachers — four hired by the public administration and four by the Ágora and Heura associations. Most of those who volunteer are former participants and members of the community who live in the neighborhood; some come from the university environment to the school as part of a field experience. The very nature of the project generates involvement in it. The nature of participation would not be the same if the school had not been born as a result of people’s debates and actions in the local associations and their struggle to improve living conditions in their neighborhood. Emerging from a grassroots tradition and being shaped continuously by the community, our project is committed to maintaining its participatory orientation.

For this reason, La Verneda is embedded within a network of local organizations, each with different and complementary social roles, all committed to community development. Ágora and Heura, the school’s participants’ associations, together with thirty other associations, groups, and collectives, form the VERN Coordinating Committee. This umbrella organization analyzes and provides solutions to the neighborhood’s social needs, whether they relate to urban development, public health, culture, sports, or related social values, such as the fight against xenophobia and other types of discrimination. Only through dialogue is it possible to know the abilities, interests, and needs of others. It follows that the best way to overcome discrimination is through intercultural dialogue. VERN’s work is organized through committees, which coordinate neighborhood demands, information sessions, workshops, seminars, and local celebrations. In this way, all of the agencies participate in community development. Among the projects La Verneda-Sant Martí community promotes through VERN are the preservation of the neighborhood’s old town, which had been targeted for demolition due to urban development plans; the construction of a new underground line and the improvement of public transportation in the neighborhood; a plan to eliminate architectural barriers in the neighborhood; and the creation of a committee for local youth groups.

## Opening Doors

The democratic organization and opportunities that La Verneda provides have opened the door for many people. Throughout my ten years of involvement in the school, I have met many people, but there is one I want to single out. He came to La Verneda to obtain the *graduado escolar* degree he was not able to earn as a teenager.<sup>13</sup> He was one of those kids referred to as a “dropout,” who is not expected to go further with his studies. When I first met him, he was teaching Catalan language courses at La Verneda as a volunteer collaborator. He had already obtained the *graduado escolar* degree, passed the access-to-university exam, and was studying pedagogy at the university. At La Verneda School, he had found the human and material support he was unable to find in the educational system before. He is now a professor at the university and soon will receive his Ph.D. He continues to collaborate with the school, teaching adults as he did fifteen years ago. He decided he had many resources to help others who, like himself, could build on their own abilities and go a long way. When he teaches at the university, he never tells the soon-to-be educators in his classes about people’s *failure*, but about the capabilities inherent in every person, as well as how cultural intelligence opens new perspectives to many learning forms. We often refer to him as a role model, but he says that his was not an individual accomplishment, that he would never have gotten there alone. There was, he says, a bigger project backing him, and working together made it easier to open doors for all.

Working from a perspective of community also means working from one of solidarity to promote dialogue and increase people’s opportunities, focusing especially on those who have more obstacles in their way. When they are perceived as participants, people become cultural creators, rather than cultural consumers. At La Verneda School we struggle to bring down the barriers that impede equality by promoting participation at all levels, from activities to improve basic living standards to intellectual and political debates.

We saw vividly how participants are breaking down cultural barriers in a collective effort that took place in April 1997, when Jürgen Habermas came to Barcelona to lecture on *The Intercultural Discourse on Human Rights*. A group of participants from La Verneda School attended along with an audience made up primarily of university students and professors. When Habermas finished his talk, Mariana, one of the participants at La Verneda, dared to raise her hand and ask a question about the working rights of women.<sup>14</sup> She phrased her question in a way that revealed her unfamiliarity with the academic discourse usually spoken in the university’s lecture hall. Some of the professors felt a little uncomfortable; some even giggled. I became indignant and restless, but Mariana spoke for herself, “*No hablo como una intelectual, pero sé lo que me digo*” [“I do not speak like an intellectual, but I know what I am saying”]. Responding to Mariana, Habermas applied the proposal of universal dialogue he argues for in his work — that everyone has the right to argue in her/his tone and language. He began his reply by saying, “This is a brilliant and critical question.” Many in the lecture hall changed their expression; their grins froze on their faces and a general atmosphere of approval suddenly began to spread throughout the room.

In October 1998, Ulrich Beck visited the University of Barcelona. At the end of his talk, I met Mariana, and she told me, “*Si Habermas no me hubiera tratado de esa forma, hoy no hubiera venido a escuchar a Beck, aunque haya leído cosas de él*” [“If Habermas

had not treated me the way he did, I would not have come today to listen to Beck, although I have read things by him”]. We shared this anecdote with Beck that evening, and his face revealed his satisfaction and emotion. He said, “Jürgen must know about this, I will explain it to him!”

### **A Wealth of Possibilities**

At La Verneda-Sant Martí School, it is important that everyone involved be able to express their opinions. It is also important that the school have enough flexibility to pursue new projects and ideas. Our community is trying to prevent the school from becoming the private domain of a minority of people with technocratic and corporative goals, rather than democratic perspectives. That is why the school promotes grassroots groups and movements in which individuals are advocates of their own ideas and actions. One of last year’s initiatives was therefore the creation of an organized national movement of participants in adult education.

A few years ago, the participants’ associations began meeting to organize discussions about the effects of the new Spanish educational reform in the field of adult education. They met with other participants’ associations in the region, and together created the Federation of Adults’ Cultural and Educational Associations (FACEPA), which set out to make the voices of *all* the people involved in adult education heard. This Federation is organized into working committees, and a few people work full-time to take care of everyday issues. Funding comes from specific activities or intervention projects at the local, national, and European levels.

Many times we, the education “professionals,” take over all possible fields of action in the belief that we are the only ones who know how to develop educational initiatives or, even worse, that we are the only ones who can be in charge of such initiatives because it is “our field.” As a result, education policies in general and adult education policies in particular are practically colonized by education professionals, thus barring participants, who supposedly are the main characters in education, from taking part in the game. For example, in the case of Spain’s Adult Education Act of March 1991, it became evident that when all the people involved can take part in the decisionmaking process, all views are collected, as all agents involved were part of an open discussion throughout the process until the Act was approved. Otherwise, the view of the “technical experts” on the issue will be only one, partial perspective. FACEPA counters such assumptions by coordinating efforts of participants who have much to say about their education and by working to make these voices heard.

One of the most important projects FACEPA initiated is the drafting of the Declaration of Adult Education Participants’ Rights. The draft began in Catalonia, Spain’s Autonomous Community where Barcelona is located,<sup>15</sup> and its goal was to create a text that echoed the claims and needs voiced by *all* adult participants regarding their education and to establish common standards of action. Many schools for adults in Catalonia sent drafts to FACEPA’s headquarters, where participants drafted the organization’s first proposal. Other Spanish Autonomous Communities followed the same process. Later, a nationwide symposium took place to discuss the proposal, work on the different sections, and ensure that all the important questions were addressed in the final version. The symposium ended with a Declaration of Adult Education Participants’ Rights.

In the summer of 1997, representatives of Spain's participants presented the Declaration to UNESCO's Fifth International Conference on Adult Education. Since then, it has also been presented to different Spanish governmental bodies. This year, the European Union funded a project by which FACEPA will extend the Declaration to adult education associations in other European countries, following the same consensus-based method they used in Spain. FACEPA's goal is to be able to draft an International Declaration agreed upon by consensus, by all adult education participants worldwide.

## Conclusion

La Verneda-Sant Martí School for Adults started as a grassroots project and continues with the same orientation, supporting the voice of new movements like FACEPA. Such forums are open to everyone's worries, interests, and dreams, regardless of age, ethnic origin, gender, religion, or social status. To be part of such projects makes me feel more alive, more supportive, and more able to create.

People's dreams *can* become reality. Writing these reflections after ten years of involvement with La Verneda School makes me realize that nothing is impossible if, through inclusiveness and tolerance, we strive for common goals. I do not believe those who say that nothing can be done to change the world. I know that things can change, because people in my community dared to dream of this school twenty years ago. It became my reality through my participation in their dream. Since then, many more have joined in our struggles and today the reality of thousands of people is the result of that dream.

A few days ago a journalist was interviewing a young Maghrebi woman who has participated in a basic literacy class at La Verneda for six months. When he asked her what she thought she had achieved, her eyes opened wide, and with a special spark in them, she replied:

*Ahora que ya he empezado, soy feliz. Nadie va a detenerme.*  
[Now that I have begun, I am happy. No one will stop me.]

## Notes

1. Fátima, a participant at La Verneda-Sant Martí School, said these words to me after a meeting. Her name, like those of others mentioned in this article, is fictional. Behind each name, however, there is a real human being.
2. By participants we mean the people who are involved in an educational process as students in their adulthood (adult education).
3. Adults older than twenty-five who did not go to high school can gain access to the university by passing a difficult and selective exam popularly called "*Mayores de 25*" ["Beyond 25"].
4. In Spain, people associate in order to discuss and address their community needs. Residents' associations represent communities before the different governmental

agencies. They are a type of association typical of areas that primarily have problems related to poor public services and the like. These associations are concerned with education, health care, urban planning, and similar issues in their district. They are constituted from the bottom up, mostly by people of working-class background.

5. Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole, *The Psychology of Literacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

6. Henry Giroux, *Border Crossings: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education* (London: Routledge, 1992).

7. Aranguren wrote on ideas, on ethics in politics, and on women's liberation, all under Franco's regime. As a result of this, he went into exile in the United States, where he taught at the University of California in the late 1960s.

8. Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Reason and the Rationalization of Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).

9. During 1998, many events took place in Spain in commemoration of the centennial of Federico García Lorca's birth and in memory of Paulo Freire, who had just died.

10. *Congrés de les Dones de Barcelona* [Barcelona's Women's Conference] was held January 15–17, 1999, in Barcelona, Spain. It was organized by the Local Council of Women.

11. VERN, the Coordinating Committee of La Verneda-Sant Martí neighborhood organizations, works as an umbrella under which different types of organizations can be found: residents' associations, sports clubs, children's and youth clubs, cultural associations, mountaineering groups, etc. It was created to coordinate improvement initiatives for the community.

12. Alain Touraine, *Comment Sortir du Liberalisme?* (Paris: Fayard, 1999).

13. *Graduado escolar* was a degree that certified a student for successful completion of compulsory primary education (1st–8th grade) and was required to go to high school (9th–12th grade). Today, a new educational reform is being implemented in Spain. Compulsory education is now K–10th grade, and the *graduado escolar* degree disappeared, and *graduado en educación secundaria obligatoria* appears. However, there are new ways of selecting which students will go to high school (now 11th–12th) and which ones will go to vocational education — that is, who will go to college and who will go straight to work (or unemployment).

14. Mariana is a member of Heura and regularly participates in the literary gatherings.

15. With the advent of democracy, Spain's historic regions were given the status of Autonomous Communities. These regional political units were granted legislative and administrative powers by the Constitution.