Education and Social Change in Spain: from Crisis to Opportunity.

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Introduction

The current educational and social situation in Spain is particularly turbulent and problematic. The cuts implemented by the present conservative government's policies are directly attacking the very heart of our universal rights (health, education, housing, social welfare, employment…), and this affects the most vulnerable collectives in particular. In the case of children, for example, a recent report by UNICEF (2014) places the child poverty rate at 26.2 %, with an increase of 205,000 children at risk of poverty in the last two years. Such figures are hard to comprehend and accept in a society that prides itself on being at the forefront of welfare, economy and human rights.

This situation is exacerbated by strongly neoliberal education and social policies that advocate a change in the public system model. The cuts implemented as a result of the financial crisis are being used as an excuse to modify essential aspects of the education system and those related to the exercise of fundamental rights. These policies start out by discrediting public social organisations for their "lack of capacity" to sustain the neoliberal and capitalist social model. By way of example, the underlying view of these policies is that school should be aimed towards training for employment and the production system, in line with each individual's own "talents". Along with this, it is worth pointing out that, within this new political paradigm, education (inside and outside of the school environment, for children and adults alike) essentially becomes a luxury for the working class.

The situation of children at risk, and consequently of other social collectives, is placing the universal right to education into question. When compulsory education is geared towards preparing a person to be efficient within an economic, productive and financial system, which is segregating enough as it is, children in poorer socio-economic conditions are doomed to exclusion and segregation, and this is a vicious circle that leads to the imposition of appalling conditions both in the present day and, above all, for future generations. At this moment in time, we can already see many truly devastating cases: men and women who are pushed out of the labour market and who have no way of retraining to get back in. This situation entails serious social problems.

To this effect, the right to education is not only about guaranteeing a place at school for every boy and girl, or adult training systems that are alien to a given community's situation, but rather it is about generating the appropriate conditions to offset the inherent differences related to class. In other words, we need to create the best education centres for the areas with the greatest socio-cultural deficit, ensuring that these social organisations have meaning in the fight against segregation and social exclusion. We understand that this must be the main goal of education centres, and not simply to legitimise the social differences related to class, gender or ethnic origin.

In this paper, we present the ethnographical study carried out in a marginalised neighbourhood in Malaga (Spain)—Palma-Palmilla—in which social exclusion is not just a product of the current economic crisis but an integral part of its historical and socially constructed identity. The current situation has worsened the already unequal panorama, and has affected more individuals than before. As the aforementioned UNICEF (2014) report declares, what the economic crisis and the policies being developed do, apart from increase poverty, is to create a situation in which the poor get poorer. This study provides a context to understand how situations of poverty affect society's development and how we can generate practices and experiences that offer alternatives to the existing economic, social and cultural models, among others, that are imposed on society from the controlling higher powers and decision-makers.

However, within this panorama, much can be done, and there are genuinely deep and moving experiences that offer another way of seeing and living in the world. This paper arises from this more hopeful vision, and is mainly focused on the "Casa de la Buena Vida", which is a centre that was created by the people in the aforementioned district themselves, and which aims to change the historical destiny of this community and create the conditions to transform the collective. This centre coordinates with the other social organisations in the area (schools, health centres, police, etc.). From the very outset, education is one of its main areas of action, not just regarding its involvement with children and the fight against early school leaving, but also as a social action for individual and collective change for an entire community.

Methodology. Stories and autoethnography.
The research that was carried out as part of this paper took almost five years, from April 2009 to early 2013. It was proposed as an ethnography focused on the experience of the participants in the Casa de la Buena Vida and the account told by the main researcher (Pablo Cortés[1]) as a participant in this experience during that time. Therefore, the ethnography takes from the stories of some individuals as

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      [−] You can see the full research project in Cortés, 2013.

a means to get closer to the personal and subjective dimensions of that experience. Hence we move further away from more orthodox perspectives of ethnographical research that is more focused on understanding the cultural schema than people's individual and personal experiences.

To do so, we rely on an ethnographical perspective that is more concerned with the subjective aspects of culture and not just on the existing cultural patterns or structures. We propose this from two positions: on one hand, from the participants' personal stories, and on the other hand, from the researcher's autoethnographical account. Both have their own logic and construction processes. The analysis and comprehension of the focus of this study represents a new story constructed from both contributions that place us in a situation in which we can understand it, from the conceptual and theoretical construction that makes that possible.

We feel, as does Rosaldo (1993:11), that we need to look back at the case histories which are set in local contexts and marked by personal interests that are dotted with community perceptions. In short, it would entail allowing political processes, social changes and differences a place in the research and analysis of social and cultural realities, using the individuals' personal experiences. In other words, we understand that individual voices are an expression of the contexts in which they originate. Personal stories express the way in which individuals "read" the reality in which they live. As this author asserts:

> even when they appear to be more subjective, thoughts and feelings are always culturally classified and influenced by one's own biography, social situation and historical context (Rosaldo, 1993: 103)

Consequently, our aim with this research project is to understand reality through the theory that different participants have constructed according to how they read their environment. In this way, we can access the knowledge of the social, cultural and political context in which these theories have been constructed. So the interest does not lie in the individual as the ultimate purpose of the interpretation, but rather how this individual has interpreted his or her contexts and has incorporated them into their life and way of being, behaving and interacting in those contexts.

Along with these personal stories, this study also presents a section that we may classify as autoethnography. In this case, the researcher makes a personal reconstruction of his experience as a way to access the knowledge of the culture in the scope of the study. As Ellis, Adams & Bochner (2011) declare:

> Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno) […]. This approach challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others […] and treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act […] (#1)

From this position, emphasis is placed on *reflexivity* as a central element in the research study, where reflexivity is understood to mean the capacity of a human being to comprehend his or her action and the context in which it comes about. It is another way of accessing the comprehension of the reality, the focus of which is the individual carrying out the research and their experience.

In this case, the analysis is related to the researcher's autoethnographical story; the researcher reconstructs his experience, which offers us another analytical perspective. In this way, a puzzle or mobile mosaic is gradually put together, which enables us to understand the focal point of our research study.

A study of how the economic crisis has been experienced in Spain, and in particular in the Malaga district of La Palmilla, can only be understood from this subjective and the personal viewpoint of the different participants, including the researcher. The reality of this social situation is embodied in the individuals and makes sense insofar as we can understand how this reality is lived, explained and transformed from each one of them individually. For this purpose, the research study has comprised 4 essential methodological components that have shaped this perspective. These are:

- **The researchers' story by way of an autoethnography.**
- **Story through "embodied" anecdotes** [2] **.** Here we recount what the participants tell us (with their permission) at an informal moment (without audio recording), reviewing the narrated experience.
- **Micro-stories.** Here we have encounters with different types of participants, where a brief life story is extracted regarding the emerging phenomena of the observation.
- **Interviews**.

Below we are going to present part of the results of this research study, by using two different approaches: the first by means of a **contextual account** regarding the location of the experience (the Casa de la Buena Vida), and the second through an **account of the ethnography** itself, which includes the narrative work with the participants, the observations, interviews, etc.

Results of the ethnography
Below we are going to show part of the ethnographical process through extracts of

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[2]

It is interesting to recover the idea of a dense description, according to Velasco & Díaz de Rada (1997, 222), where they explain the concept of embodiment as "the dense description implies that one manages to embody the ethnographical statements in real people and in the experiences that have been lived through." In this case, I use it as a way to approach the environment in question and to give way to the experiences lived or narrated by others and which I have witnessed or told. .

the ethnographical story itself, combining some of the voices that have taken part in this study. From our position as researchers, it is worth pointing out that, when we first went to the Casa de la Buena Vida, we were particularly impressed by two things: firstly, the genuinely adverse situation of the people who live there (through their stories and their experiences that leave an indelible trace on their lives), and secondly, in contrast with the first, we were taken aback by the collaborative approach of a project that had only been set up just a few months before. It was striking to see the work they were doing and the chance for people immersed in grave situations of addictions and a range of social, health, cultural and other problems to actively take part in the construction of the project according to their possibilities, their motivations, etc.

We are going to give some detailed accounts that best reveal the context in which the Casa de la Buena Vida is set, as well as the district of Palma-Palmilla, through the participants' experiences and the result of our ethnographical work in the area.

The Casa de la Buena Vida as an example of social backbone in a context of socio-cultural marginalisation.

The Casa de la Buena Vida collective started out as a result of the AICGPP[3], a collective formed by the people from the Palma-Palmilla district who have come together to improve the context of marginalisation in which hundreds of adults and children find themselves. The key to this Association is that the promoters are local people from the neighbourhood (many of them have a past involving delinquency and drug addiction that they have managed to overcome) who decided to come together and turn their reality around. The Association started with activities aimed at boys and girls (through programmes against early school leaving), at teenagers (through intercultural projects) and adults (by mediating in conflicts); little by little, people from the neighbourhood and outsiders with different problems started to come together in solidarity in this initiative where one person's problem became everybody's reality.

This was how the Casa de la Buena Vida began. Towards the end of 2008, members of the Association and other people in the neighbourhood entered an old abandoned house to start an initiative where people in a situation of exclusion or with social problems could try to find a way out, and where the members supported one another in the face of urgent needs that were not met by local, autonomous and/or national bodies. It is a citizen project to create a space for collective co-existence, personal empowerment and decent, happy life development. In this sense, the Casa de la Buena Vida has become a mechanism (Yurén, 2008) and a community-based social movement that helps prevent, and act against, social exclusion and poverty, as well as the risks that these situations may entail.

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ᵀAssociation for the Integration of the Gypsy Community in Palma-Palmilla.

This mechanism (materialised as a collective), has one main objective: to set up cooperation networks between different social organisations in the area as a way out of the economic crisis and the historical deterioration of the district, making a firm commitment to procuring a happy, decent life for the people who live there. To achieve this goal, schools, social services, neighbourhood associations and other collectives both from within and outside the district, work in collaboration to generate new fair and participative social practices based on mutual support.

It is important to stress that proximity actions are carried out in which the people who have been in the above mentioned situations reach out to other people in a situation of serious social risk, and so, through collective responsibility, they generate the tools and strategies needed to strengthen their abilities and leave the route to social exclusion behind. This is a creative way, from the point of view of Villasante (2006), of tackling the individual problems that make up collective needs under the principle of solidarity.

This device is materialised in a home for the marginalised where around 80 people currently live and which, in turn, generates projects that the house members run alongside the technical volunteers to meet the district's needs. As part of this initiative, with the collaboration of different bodies, tasks like the above are carried out in teams around the districts of Palma-Palmilla through programmes entailing food distribution, schemes to fight early school leaving, socio-cultural workshops, intercultural projects, help for the elderly and much more. Consequently, apart from being a primary care mechanism, it has also become a socio-educational mechanism (because of its emancipating nature) that is very useful in meeting the needs of the people who live there. According to members of the Casa de la Buena Vida and the AICGPP (in which this mechanism is set), over 4,000 people are attended to as part of the networks created.

The Casa de la Buena Vida's management and coordination are based on the active participation of the people who live there, where the older members take on different lines of responsibility and action. They work, reflect and theorise on an everyday level,

> moving from a logic that entails convincing people that a problem exists and how to avoid it, to a logic in which, from a fact that has been acknowledged and identified as a problem by the people themselves, a joint action can be constructed. It is a complex process that needs to be constantly relaunched, without becoming repetitive and always remaining valid (Cortés & Villanueva, 2009).

To this effect, the Casa de la Buena Vida provides the need to think globally from a local perspective, in other words, to act from an everyday perspective with a common, shared objective that is social justice and improvement (on a personal and collective scale). In the case of Palma-Palmilla, it is not the lack of community

resources that excludes people but rather the detachment from those resources, structures and institutions that deal with managing that reality.

Experiences told

- #### Personal conflicts. The case of 'Toñi'.

The ethnographical research experience in Palma-Palmilla has been filled with personal and social conflicts that we have had to gradually locate, deal with and, on many occasions, overcome. The complexity of any human relationship is heightened further when you dig deeper into a situation and a reality that is very different from that which you have become accustomed to throughout your life.

One example was when we met 31-year-old Toñi, a Gypsy mother of three girls (13, 6 and 2 years old, respectively) and a boy aged 12, who has had relationships with three different Gypsy men who have fathered the children; her current husband is in prison. She sells heroin and cocaine from a doorway in the district. Her method for selling is by using her 13-year-old daughter: the customer arrives, pays Toñi, and she sends her daughter off for the drugs.

After observing this situation repeatedly, it is difficult not to feel a certain degree of revulsion towards this mother; I could not understand how a person could reach this situation of detachment, irresponsibility and lack of ethics in bringing up her children. However, we need to look deeper at this case. Jesús, alias Chule, coordinator of the Casa de la Buena Vida has this to say:

> What do you expect from a woman like Toñi? I know she does wrong, but at the same time she is also a victim; all her childhood has been involved with selling drugs, she doesn't know how to read or write, she only knows how to sell, it's her only means of survival. I don't justify her behaviour, but we can't really compare her ways with those of other people. For these people I would make proper insertion plans to help them find a decent job in exchange for them stopping dealing. The truth is that everyone knows (Chule).

There is a key element in Toñi's experience. Even if we accept the lack of ethics involved in selling a drug that leads to people's ruin, to the detriment of their own children, we must also consider the situation this mother finds herself in, without resources and with no greater concern other than mere survival. It is not a question of justifying the means and the causes, but rather the need to comprehend the act in order to be able to understand the code. However, it is also a matter of social organisations making a commitment and not allowing the situation to arise in which a girl who once was a child dealer is now the mother of a new child dealer. As we can see, the education system (taken in a broad sense as we noted at the beginning) falls far short of tackling socio-cultural differences and problems at the root. In this case, even though we should not generalise, the self-fulfilling prophecy is evident: "*depending on where you're born, you'll be one way or another*", says

Yuli, who used to be in charge of the commission for women at the Casa de la Buena Vida (she was helped in this initiative herself and later went on to form part of the active staff).

- *Social relations and cultures.*

Immigration is one of the most palpable and characteristic phenomena of the district of Palma-Palmilla, where a mixture of nationalities, colours and cultures is present on every corner. This is a reality that has different perspectives but also different consequences.

La Palmilla has the capacity to take in immigrants who arrive with nothing, to help out fragmented families... because part of the population who live there share the same series of codes related to need and shortage.

Nevertheless, there is also a clear spatial division in place, almost to the point of being considered ghettoes of different cultures, which also leads to cultural division and conflict, often resulting in clashes between different collectives. There are places for Africans, Romanians, Gypsies… and these spaces, which are, a priori, simply for cultural recognition, can easily turn into problem hubs.

What is true, however, is that slowly but surely we are seeing a slight change in these segregating practices in the new generations and in the new territorial, cultural and institutional situations in which they are moving. The children share school and social spaces (this is one area of progress in the Spanish compulsory education system), generating new forms of co-existence. Another key element where cultures mix is simply the bond of friendship and/or love between two or more people. Another interesting point is the access to different businesses, such as bars and clothes stalls, which enables cultures to meet and find out about each other from a positive perspective.

As we have explained, we can observe highly contradictory examples regarding the consideration of the Other in sociological and educational terms. The basis for social development is the capacity to learn from something different. Diversity almost inevitably brings with it unequal situations, and it is on this point that we once again stress the analysis of the central issue in this article: from crisis to opportunity. On this subject, Ana Cortés (resident in the district and collaborator with the Casa de la Buena Vida) expresses how Palma-Palmilla was culturally formed:

> The problem is the lack of education and information. We are stigmatised; Palma-Palmilla is where all the immigrants and drug dealers go, where nobody pays their bills or anything. That's the mentality. If you put Palma-Palmilla on your CV, you won't get hired even if you're the best person for the job. It's not just a problem for women but the kids too, and the men, the grandparents... everyone suffers the same, that's the problem. I think they built it just for the marginalised.

To this effect, the commitment to public schooling helps to generate different spaces but with the additional endeavour to ensure the members of the school community are successful. This is the channel we need to insist on. Ana Cortés continues on this line:

> I support my kids' education, and right now I'm on strike with the students, along with Jesús. You can tell a person by their education, both for their values and their training. If there are methods to educate children, with such a good education system as we had in Spain, with almost everything free, you have to make good use of that. That's why I'm so committed to getting the Gypsy people to use that free system, they have to go, they have to learn that kids need to go to school. There was a time when we couldn't go, all that changed when democracy came and we now have an obligation to go to school. Education is the essence that defines a person.

This question, in its analysis, can be extrapolated to other elements that have emerged in the ethnography, but which are not discussed in this article, such as male violence against women.

- ***Tough but common experiences: death and prison.***

The sense of loss from the death of a loved on (normally as a result of drugs) or from going to prison, are two major elements that occur over and over again in the experiences of many of the people who live in situations of marginalisation. On one hand, comments such as "*my dad and two brothers are dead*" (Mary), "*I've got 5 brothers up there above*" (Carlos) or "*my husband and my brother are no longer with us*" (Rosi), are commonplace. An awareness of death as a painful but common event is generated in these types of context. Andrés (member of the Casa de la Buena Vida) declares, "*thank God all my brothers are alive*", as something rather unusual.

Death has a component of social roots or ties with your family, with your community, your nearest and dearest, and symbolically it represents loss. It is a loss that people are constantly reminded of and is always present in their lives. At times it appears to be contradictory, because there are those who sell the same substance that killed their brother; others reject it for that very reason.

On the other hand, a similar thing happens with the subject of prison. It is common to hear expressions such as *I've done 7, I've done 15, I've done 3…* referring to years spent in prison. Prison sentences are wide-ranging and being put behind bars is not uncommon, it is an everyday occurrence. It is easy to commit an offence that leads you directly to prison. Furthermore, sometimes through lack of knowledge, people get sent to prison because they have not appealed in time.

This could have been the case with Denis who, towards the end of 2010, had an accumulated sentence for stealing food from a major supermarket. The sentence was a fine of four hundred euros or three months in prison. Luckily, at that time Denis had been rehabilitated from addiction (which was when he committed the theft to keep himself going), he was living with his mother, and he was also collaborating with the AICGPP. He was notified of his summons to Court and Denis went first thing to the local police station[4], following the protocol set in place between the AICGPP and the National Police, to allow sufficient time to act on the matter and avoid having to go to prison or stay in a cell.

When Denis arrived at the Court, thanks to the AICGPP's mediation and the fact that his mother was able to cover payment of the fine, he was not sent to prison. In this case, history did not repeat itself because Denis has been able to turn his life around.

In other words, loss (whether from death or a prison sentence) often becomes an almost inevitable fact for many people in situations of serious social fragmentation. When you are deep in the hole of marginalisation, with no solid, integral support (such as Denis had with the Casa de la Buena Vida), it is really hard to get out. The key may be to help people to equip themselves with the tools so that they can deal with the difficulties of life in an autonomous, balanced and reliable manner. It is a profoundly necessary educational process if we are committed to achieving a decent, happy life in the framework of a fair, democratic and supportive society.

Final comments about the results

One of the most significant phenomena that we found in Palma-Palmilla was the notion of daily life in the neighbourhood as a combination of different experiences, events and so on that make up such a peculiar reality in this district.

Firstly, it is interesting to mention the concept of time. Planning and any moments allocated for meeting, working (because of the type of work, such as street selling, markets…) do not coincide with the hegemonically established culture. Another, different way of understanding time organisation exists; it is not outlined in a long-term planning sense, but rather it is based on immediate possibilities. That is, the hopes and wishes for the future are very much present in people's accounts, but they have a tendency to do what they can at each given moment.

In this way of living in the present, every day comes with a wide variety of situations to deal with, and it is in this crossroads of experiences where a sense of "coming together as a neighbourhood" really takes shape. The factors that enable us to understand this way of living in the present could essentially be the following, among others:

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        ‑ Otherwise he could spend a whole day in the cells, waiting for the judge's notification.

- **Job insecurity**. Working to meet objectives and to maintain a family are elements that make it necessary for them to live in the present. If they can do something extra now, they will, but it is not feasible to plan it because they do not know whether or not they are going to be able to cover costs in the future.

- **Free time.** The neighbourhood as a hub of interpersonal relationships, where there is a place for people to enjoy communal spaces, the local residents usually see each other every day and stop to chat. Meeting up with someone comes down to walking around the areas where people usually pass through and trying your luck, where if you know the area, you're sure to bump into someone.

- **Spatial exclusion.** The area as a main hub of activity. There are many people who have no need to leave Palmilla for their day-to-day business. Everything they need can be found in the area, and even more so when there is a huge shopping centre and petrol station within the district. This element means that, except for work purposes, people don't feel they have to go outside of the neighbourhood to find what they need. The area does not offer the rest of the city anything that cannot be found elsewhere, and the "locals" also do not need to leave.

In this sense of a crossroads of experiences, it is also worth mentioning the cultural and social diversity that we find in the neighbourhood, with an established feeling of co-existence and identification. To this effect, it is vital that schools, social services and other institutions understand the neighbourhood's complex realities (times, rhythms and spaces) and are able to jointly act in keeping with these realities. In this sense, the problem is not early school leaving, but rather what lies behind it; it is not poverty (taken in isolation) but rather the factors that generate that poverty. Part of the people's stories with a fortunate development at the Casa de la Buena Vida has been the chance to form part of an integral system of dealing with their individual problems. On this point, Yuli is clear:

> I believe that, in my case, drugs make you stop being a person, stop feeling, loving, you don't give a damn about anything; you feel nothing and care about nothing (…) What keeps me going now is to better myself day by day and never go back to what I was. I don't want to forget what I once was, but if I wake up every morning it's because God has had mercy on me. I get up every morning to help others. Picking up kids, which was an obligation or a duty for me, taking them to school every day. That's what helped me the most, the boost I got from going round the houses and picking up the kids so that they wouldn't drop out like I did. Having alternatives and not just a simple chat about how bad I'm feeling.

Discussion of the results. From Crisis to Opportunity.

This project aims to reflect the consideration of power as a possibility within a context beset by marginalisation and exclusion. The experiences narrated above reveal the essence of education in a broad sense of a life and work project. Education requires and provokes critical thought and consequently facilitates other ways of being and behaving in society; generating and learning from situations in which dignified experiences develop is the essence of this idea.

The search for understanding as a way to learn and communicate is a key premise to constructing society and this is shown in the aforementioned experiences. Situations of socio-cultural disadvantage are steeped in an inherent tension between the logic of understanding the world, power relationships and the repercussions on a society's dignity. It is the maximum, catastrophic representation resulting from human creation of society. However, the conflict-based channel to turn this barbarity into a pedagogy of hope (Freire) is also a reason to be happy in the face of a necessary change in society, where education takes on an important and relevant role.

Below we have pointed out two necessary elements in our interpretation.

- **Structures and institutions**

When the State is conceived as a centralising instrument of management and social organisation, it is awarded the capacity to decide over society's needs and resource distribution. The dichotomy between *administrators – administrated* is a trend that gained ground in the "Europe of Welfare", from a welfare benefit point of view, which fostered citizenship practices that were applicable to homogenisation and passivity. With neoliberalism and globalisation, this trend (both in its philosophical sense and in how to organise society) on the *administrators'* part has been changing. The decision-making power regarding justice and law has found itself having to give way to the demands and pressures of market forces. This power reaches almost the last level of conclusive decision, bearing an influence even over elected governments, over citizens, and over economic flows.

Although this analysis appears, a priori, only to focus on structures from a functionalist point of view, we cannot overlook the systemic point of view when it comes to understanding what is going on both within and beyond those structures; that is, the social phenomena and relationships regain meaning as they refer to everyday life as that area that breaks away from the structures' programmed or controlled systems. "Here it is characteristically thought of not as a patterning of presences but as an intersection of presence and absence; underlying codes have to be inferred from surface manifestations." (Giddens, 1998:53). In other words, when analysing structures and human relations, one has to pay heed to the apparently hidden elements – to what is hidden to the eye.

In this system, we can fit in human relations in their broadest sense between structure and interaction, where the "modalities of structuration serve to clarify the main dimensions of the duality of structure in interaction, relating the knowledgeable capacities of agents to structural features." (64) This idea responds to the interaction between codes and their understanding.

Therefore, we can understand structures as part of the human condition to organise oneself, although it is impossible to avoid the cultural connotations of their formation. Ideology and societal paradigms lead us to configure systems according to cultural, social, legal, economic and anthropological dimensions, among others. These levels, apart from interacting with each other, are configured according to everyday acts and their unpredictability.

To this effect, one cannot ignore the perverse transformations of the systems themselves when it comes to setting inequalities in interpersonal and inter-system relationships. These cause confrontations in the ways of understanding social and human organisations, and are seen as the traditional ideological clashes, basically between socialism and liberalism.

It is interesting to retrieve the model that these experiences based on a high relational component follow. When the models concentrate decision-making at levels further away from the local sphere, they lead to ignorance and distance from the contingent reality in which people live; human action and organisation must come from the root and the nature of the people that form part of the organisations involved. This is the key to the Casa de la Buena Vida.

The individual frameworks that focus on that notion of human cooperation must, however, serve to guarantee committed and responsible models of social action, striving to achieve harmony and equilibrium (Gentili, 2011), where exclusion as a cultural and social phenomenon must be considered from the logic of social justice and not as an element of resignation or mere pity (compassion). However, this relational approach that we have raised seeks that democratically organised structure where, according to Santos (2005:198), "the ideological device for the struggle against inequality and exclusion is universalism"; not a homogenising and hierarchy-based universalism, but an open system that is based on absolutisation[5].

- **Education and social change**

> *And everything I've been through has also made me what I am; I've lost my father. You could be the same as me, or worse,* **but the hardest thing is to change like I've changed. It's harder to do what I've done**

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[5]

According to Santos (2005:198), "the absolutisation of differences becomes evident under the norm of relativism, which makes the differences impossible to compare due to the absence of cross-cultural criteria."

now, than to do what I did before, because I did it by myself. But I've been fighting and fighting to get where I am today. This is a fight, the other stuff comes out by itself. With your head all over the place, respect is different. Now I'm earning respect with my sweat, my brain, and wanting to do things well. (Semi)

As we can see in this fragment of Semi's life (Semi is a member of the Casa de la Buena Vida), the constant struggle for dignity, for a happier life, generates a feeling of personal fulfilment that has an effect on social solidarity actions; in other words, it is a commitment to being in a community.

In the case of Semi and other agents in the Malaga district of Palma-Palmilla, it is interesting to observe the vital landmarks to which they are submitted when it comes to transforming their lives and their environment. It is a form of social action that is constructed from the bottom, and which, in our opinion, can be connected with the idea of community movement. In fact, the AICGPP [Association for the Integration of the Gypsy Community in Palma-Palmilla] and the *Casa de la Buena Vida* collective, have made great efforts and shown great perseverance in creating a dynamic movement where personal and collective achievement is the key to the social action and prevention activities that they develop.

To this effect, education plays an essential role in social construction, but it is something that cannot be taught, rather it must be conveyed in the pedagogy of acts and ideas. Human beings, like nature, are conditioning factors of education, never determining factors.

One of the strongest and most deep-rooted new categories emerging out of this research project, as mentioned above, is the affectional ties and bonds which are established in a context of community and/or social action, and which must be based on trust, on authority and on mutual recognition. The intervening social agents (without forgetting conflict as part of the relationship) trust that what they are developing is the best option for their lives and those around them.

Contreras (2009) points out that education "is the place where the relationship takes place, the meeting point with the other. This is what it is primarily, and above anything else. This is what makes it be, what gives it the possibility to be." (9) In short, education is encounter, and it is at this meeting point where we change, mutually; to do so it is crucial to recognise the other's place, acknowledge others as bearers of knowledge, experiences, desires, needs and expectations that they bring to schools and colleges and with which they construct and reconstruct their educational experiences.

Relationships of this kind are not present in today's society as a hegemonic or dominant project, or at least they are not present in most of what goes on in everyday life. This idea is fundamental as a way of generating a base on which to build other alternatives to those that have historically been organised by sense,

work and social commitment. Without this base, it is impossible to bring about the generation of significant learning and knowledge or skills for those who are today building their own life projects. We are moving towards a logic of understanding ourselves as *functional organisms*, to use the term coined by Dubet (2004), that tear apart through conflict, when it comes to forming an organisation or community movement.

In this ethnographical case, channels have been generated through which the members can participate and voice their concerns regarding the things that they feel are necessary and relevant. That is the start of social action and personal fulfilment. This decision about fulfilment and social action, in other words, this responsibility and commitment, must not be placed exclusively in the hands of those who manage them, but they must be at the heart of social and citizen participation, and this is the alternative to offer real citizen opportunities.

By way of conclusion
The economic crisis is a good way for conservative governments to legitimise the implementation of exclusion and class reproduction policies. There is nothing remotely verified in educational and sociological research that can be used as an argument for the implementation of such policies. In fact, it appears to be quite the contrary. We understand that research studies such as ours highlight the structural inequality of a system that insists on its own reproduction at the expense of human rights and harmonious, democratic values.

What the voices of the people forming part of the research project are trying to say is that their situation is not a result of a personal option, nor is it something they desire or seek. It is the result of an established scenario that generates conditions that are particularly unfavourable for social change and promotion. The neoliberal society legitimises segregation in order to justify the social, professional, personal and economic success of those who always had the conditions to achieve it. The clearest way to achieve this objective is to attack the institutions that have, up until now, supported a fictitious fair society: schools, healthcare services, social services…

Collective action, as evidenced by our research, is configured as a major alternative to oppose this policy of segregation. After decades of rationalist modernity that believed that experts' action could manage to eradicate poverty and marginalisation, outside of the people involved in the situation themselves, collectives are now increasingly taking control over their own destiny and creating their own conditions for life, but also for struggle. To this effect, the Casa de la Buena Vida is a shining example of this change. The aim is to generate conditions to achieve personal and social autonomy, ensure effective social participation and the exercise of social, political, cultural and economic rights.

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