

OJO DE AGUA, ANOTHER WAY OF UNDERSTANDING LEARNING

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Abstract

Since the traditional school as we know it today was established as an educational system in most countries, there have always been alternatives to it, all of them with different approaches. In this article *Ojo de Agua* is analyzed, an educational space created in Orba (Alicante, Spain), where education is understood as a process of self-learning, which is the student himself who mark the rhythms and interests in guiding his own development.

Keywords: Alternative education, self-learning, curiosity, democratic school, creativity

Introduction

Imagine a place where curiosity is the engine for self-learning of children, where individual rhythms of development of people are known and respected and where playing, spontaneous activity and experimentation not directed are seen as the only effective strategies for learning. This place exists in the small village of Orba, in the province of Alicante (Spain). Since 1999 it has been running the educational project “*Ojo de Agua - Learning Environment*”, and it has not stopped growing since.

It was in that year when its founders, Marien Fuentes and Javier Herrero, following the birth of her daughter, and together with another first-time parents, decided to embark on this project to create a space that would meet the educational needs of their little one, as well as other families that decided to join them. As of today there are almost 60 children aged between 3 and 17 who flock there every day, to share hopes and dreams in an environment where they feel respected and loved. And this term *environment* is the one preferred by its creators, opting for it deliberately as opposed to "school", since the latter is loaded with connotations to avoid as a place where children are taken to be taught by adults. However, the name of environment is intended to encompass a suitable place to the needs of

children, free of adult expectations, in which the appropriate conditions exist for them to connect with themselves, their deepest and real needs, so that they can discover and decide for themselves what they really want for their own life (Greenberg, 2003)

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When searching for sources of inspiration of this educational project, we found one of the most influential in the German educators Rebeca and Mauricio Wild, creators in 1977 of the Pestalozzi Experimental Center in Ecuador. This center had as its defining features, among others, the choice of the learning content by the students, the absence of grades or school life without classes. It also emphasized the special involvement of parents, the importance of adult education and teamwork horizontally rather than authoritarian structures. The center closed in 2005, although much of the information has been collected in several written works, among which is "*Educating to be: experiences of an active school*" (Wild, 1999), where as a result of this innovative educational project, parents and educators are informed how to create an environment in which the children remains full of curiosity and grow self-confident and with their environment.

Another author who has also exerted a powerful influence on the genesis of Ojo de Agua is the American Daniel Greenberg, who in 1968 founded Sudbury Valley School, a democratic school internationally well-known located in the northeastern United States, in the New England region. Today there are over forty schools following this model located throughout the world. Like the original base, their educational system depends on students individually deciding what to do with their time, and learning simply as a result of the experience rather than by class or standard study plan. Students are given full responsibility for their own education and the school is managed by a direct democracy in which students and staff have equal rights and duties. All experiences of this school during these years have been reflected in numerous books and articles, among which include "The Sudbury Valley School Experience" (Greenberg, 1992) and "Free at last" (Greenberg, 1995), which has been translated into Spanish and edited by Javier and Marien.

As the creators of Ojo de Agua say, in addition to the authors cited above, the vision of this school has been influenced by thinkers such as John Holt and his movement of unschooling, the educator David Gribble (who now coordinates the International Democratic Education Network - www.idenetwork.org), the physicist Fritjof Capra or the biologist Humberto Maturana.

One of the most crucial words in this educational experience is "curiosity". It is assumed that everybody learns guided by this natural

curiosity, which leads us to take an interest in various topics that we explore encouraged by our own interest. And what better way to combine the effort required for any learning with our own will to do so. It is also important to note that learning is not only knowledge acquisition, but the whole process in which learners are involved. In addition, this learning process can only be developed by oneself, since this transformation and internal development into contact with the external environment is something that nobody can do for someone else.

That is why from Ojo de Agua it is understood that a non-directive education knows, understands and respects the vital processes of children and therefore believes that playing, spontaneous activity and undirected experimentation are the only effective strategies for development. Thus, authentic learning starts from the needs and interests of children and develops at its own pace. Main elements of traditional educational institutions are rejected, believing that they are contrary to the processes of learning and human development: mandatory classes, grades, division by subject or age segregation.

The place where the educational project Ojo de Agua develops consists of a plot of almost 25,000 m², where traditional areas of pine, olive or almond grove share the space with other areas of productive gardens. The main house where most of the interior spaces are is designed with a bioclimatic approach, giving vital importance to wood as construction element, collection and use of rainwater, and the use of renewable energy sources such as solar energy. Around the house we can find anything from a naturalized pool to a sandpit, a sports court or a chicken coop. All of these places are adapted to provide a safe and hazard free environment, and usage rules are agreed among all in the assembly.



Figure 1: View of Ojo de Agua

Inside the building there are two floors of 270 m² each, where eco-design criteria combine different spaces, such as large and small work rooms, library, dining room, bodywork room with a wooden floor of 50 m²..., all linked by galleries lit by large windows.

Ojo de Agua is available during the week from Monday to Friday from 9 in the morning to 2 in the afternoon, although these times are flexible, trying to adapt to the circumstances of each family. During the evenings and some weekends, activities are conducted with families in order to strengthen ties and deepen the development and training of these families as primary centers of learning.

As for accompanying adults, there are now in the *environment* six working full-time and three part-time. The role of these adults (a preferred term to avoid the definition of teachers or educators) is basically to respect the activity and initiative of children and respectfully accompany their maturation as human beings. Being shown as they are, without trying to guide, direct or suggest activities or knowledge, is how these adult foster self-learning potential in all of us. That's why many of the adults living in Ojo de Agua have required a process of adaptation to this view, as we are accustomed culturally to unconsciously directing the children. When one of these children shows an interest in any matter that they want to develop, then the adult is available to assist in this searching process, providing support as needed. When needed, the adult must agree with the dreams of children (Otero, 2006), developing observation skills to identify their needs and interests, to listen and serve to their goals and ideals. This implies an intense process of personal work for adults.

Children who come daily to Ojo de Agua guide their own learning, carried away by their natural curiosity as motivation or needs arise. No curricula or educational curriculum to follow, but each person is free to decide what he wants to do, and when, where or with whom he wants to. This flexibility is far from the approach of traditional school, where a particular rhythm is marked and those who do not adapt to it are excluded. That is why more and more families are wondering if formal education is the best education for their children.

Today's society sees the learning process as something inseparable from teaching, to be taught by experts and professionals in classes and classrooms in official schools. In this type of teaching, usually given in a unidirectional way, the process can become confused with the aim of education. When it comes to learning new knowledge, once the child sees and relates the usefulness of their own daily life, a special motivation to light the way of learning will emerge. But if this knowledge becomes the purpose of education, the lack of interest and disillusionment appear, and teachers of our time complain about it.

One of the purposes of the *environment* is to provide many opportunities for learning to take place by itself, and young people to find activities that are full of meaning for them. And, throughout this process there should be complete trust of adults, families who decide to go for this model of personal growth, believing that children are innately prepared to make the right decisions and self-direct their learning.

In this attempt to provide many opportunities for children to experience training as emotionally and physically healthy people, The creator of Ojo de Agua have designed a wide variety of places where you learn and play. It does not matter if these spaces are indoors or outdoors, whether you interact with books or materials from nature. In the words of Javier Herrero (as cited in Terol, 2015): *“All spaces, both indoors and outdoors, are considered learning classrooms. Children are always learning. They do not come here to learn, but they learn to live here. So we like to say Ojo de Agua is a place where we try to create the conditions for boys and girls to realize their dreams. This is not to make the best within themselves, but to allow this to emerge”*



Figure 2: Children playing with construction blocks.

If any day you decide to stroll through the atmosphere you would find a variety of activities taking place simultaneously, most of them spontaneously raised by the initiative and curiosity children are experiencing. Reading books, magazines and comics in the library, playing in the water table and outdoor sandpit, designing laboratory experiments, crafts, playing percussion instruments or guitar, building sets ...these are some of the favorite activities in Ojo de Agua. There are no predefined classes or workshops, but if a child or group of children show interest in any particular activity and need the help of an adult to carry it out, then yes you can make this commitment a more regular workshop. This is the case, for example, of theater workshop, woodshop, language learning, literacy, photography,

mathematics, modern dance, mythology or any other activity that arouses the curiosity of young people.

One aspect to highlight is the importance given from Ojo de Agua to the non-separation of ages of the children, each group chooses with whom they interact?. As in everyday life people are not separated by years we have here the free grouping needs or interests are encouraged. And it is when the level of knowledge or maturity in a group is not the same, that you can observe the effectiveness of peer teaching. The efficiency is that the explanations are simpler, difficulties are seen from a child's perspective (and not from the perspective of an adult), and there is less pressure throughout the process. Older children are seen as role models for younger children, while children serve to develop in those who are older instincts of care and protection.

It is noteworthy that all the operation and development of the life of Ojo de Agua is governed by an assembly that is held weekly. In this assembly, where adults and children have the same rights to speak and vote, daily living are discussed, and hence depart operating decisions or patterns that govern everyday relationships. All are aware that rules and regulations for proper coexistence are needed, and they are focused on respect for self and others, safety, care of materials or cleaning shifts and work on the farm. The decisions made at the meeting are in constant creation and can be modified at any time. This is how it manages all participants to comply with rules (and their consequences when not met) and understand them as theirs.

Conclusion

Regarding the legal status of this and other educational initiatives there is much discrepancy. It is usually considered that they are in a "alegal" situation, since Article 27 of the Spanish Constitution *guarantees freedom of education and the public authorities guarantee the right which assists parents to have their children receive training recognized religious and moral that agrees with their convictions*. Moreover, the Universal Declaration Of Human Rights in its Article 26 states that *parents have the preferred right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children*. But all this is subordinated to the development of the Spanish education legislation, which sees education as compulsory from 6 to 16 years, in approved centers. That is why from centers such as Ojo de Agua do not offer any certification or degree. However, often there are young people who wish to continue their higher education in official centers, so from this center students are supported in the preparation of evidence, search agendas and content, and thus generally have no problem overcoming them.

The phrase attributed to the famous scientist Albert Einstein: "*The only thing that interferes with my learning is my education*" could sum up the

philosophy of Ojo de Agua. As a final goal, it is always pretended to give priority to the curiosity to learn what you want, as you want and when you want, without tampering or guiding this process. The adults function is, as already mentioned above, to promote an environment of learning of possibilities. And most importantly, the promoting families approach the development of the project with admirable humility, not taking anything for known and as a Spanish poet said: “*haciendo camino al andar*” (*making the road by walking*).

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