

THE FOUNDATION OF THE SANT JAUME AND SANTA MAGDALENA HOSPITAL IN MATARÓ, CATALONIA'S EIGHTH-LARGEST CITY IN POPULATION TERMS, HAS UNIQUE EXPERIENCE OF SERVICE-LEARNING, LEADING TO THE CREATION OF ITS LOCAL SOLIDARITY AGENDA. IT HAS A WIDE RANGE OF APPLICATIONS, BUT IS BASED ON VOLUNTEER PROGRAMMES, CHARITABLE EXCHANGE AND VALUE EDUCATION.

## “Through service-learning we all gain”

Sergi Rodríguez



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### **What is the origin of the Local Solidarity Agenda? How has it evolved over the years?**

The Local Solidarity Agenda is a clear commitment to developing solidarity initiatives across the different spheres of social and social health care action. Mataró Town Council commissioned the Foundation of the Sant Jaume and Santa Magdalena Hospital to improve the internal solidarity of the capital of the Maresme region. The project is implemented by means of a participatory process over the course of six months, through personal interviews and technical seminars, along with group dynamics involving people and organisations connected with the fields of social initiatives and social healthcare. The outcome of this task is the citizens' solidarity commitment (the Agenda), approved on 6 July 2006, which has three key strands: voluntary action, social exchange and education in values. Signature of the commitment means that the signatory, whether an organisation or an individual citizen, is voluntarily choosing to do something to achieve active

solidarity (volunteer schemes, donations, exchanges, awareness-raising campaigns, etc.) thereby contributing over the coming years to achieving the communally established goals.

### **To what extent is the service-learning methodology involved, and how is this applied in the social health care context?**

The value education strand is implemented by means of service-learning initiatives. Organisations working in the social health care field provide their facilities, their knowledge and their experience to the young people who, through their educational institutions, wish to put into practice a range of values: solidarity, responsibility, civic action, the ability to make a commitment... This participatory process, the Local Solidarity Agenda, allows organisations in the social health care field to express the different needs which they have in common and which must be addressed. Take the example of websites. Many organisations do not have one, and do not



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have the knowledge or resources to get one. We turned to the Miquel Biada High School in Mataró, where they have a course entitled Digital Contexts. One of the skills which the students are required to have developed by the end of the course is to know how to make a website. We suggested to them that, since it is something they have to do, rather than addressing irrelevant issues they should instead produce websites for charities which actually need them, or for a disabled person. Based on this starting point, the students, quite apart from the skills which they need to develop, are required to step inside an unfamiliar reality, researching, exploring and forming

relationships: Parkinson's, cancer, mental illness, Alzheimer's, different types of disability... And there are plenty other examples like that: television programmes have been made about 60 different organisations in the city, and then broadcast on the local TV channel; there has been work on organising blood donation campaigns...

**What are the keys to the success of the project, and the basis for the success of service-learning in Mataró?**

I would say the networking, the mutual support based on resolving the needs of organisations through service learning, the fact that young people are given choices, the chance to see that dedication and effort generate socially useful results, and ultimately the fact that organisations in the social and health care sphere incorporate education into their projects. From a more qualitative perspective, the keys to success are connected with the positive complementarity between the Department of Education and associations, active and socially responsible participation by young people and organisations, the generation of experiences, mutual utility, the creation of ties of social support and the new meaning which is given to learning.

**Has networking, or the exchange of experiences rather than theory, helped give the scheme broad acceptance?**

The key factor achieving broad acceptance of service-learning is the teacher, as this type of project often involves additional effort on all sides. When the teachers see that the young people are not simply learning the technical skills involved in a subject, but also experiencing social dedication and understanding different realities while contributing to their own development, they feel much more

motivated. Learning more about the subject here becomes an essential element in helping others. Mention should also be made of the efforts made by the organisations, which have to adapt their timetables to the subject and have to be present to accompany the participants throughout the process.

#### **What are the results of the Agenda in terms of organisations taking part, or users benefiting?**

Since it was first set up 14 educational institutions have taken part, and more than 70 organisations, many of them in the social and health care sphere. By the end of the 2010-2011 academic year 94 projects will have been undertaken, involving more than 3000 students. Every year the Foundation introduces more than 500 people to such solidarity initiatives. The expectation for 2012 is to involve 42 organisations across the town, with 95% of social and health care institutions making use of our volunteers. Of them, 240 people are involved through the Exchange, while most of the individuals receiving support are dependent elderly people or those suffering from some illness. Some 360 people are involved through the Time Bank, where they exchange their skills and their time to improve quality of life. These exchanges can serve to improve the daily life of a great many individuals in a way which would otherwise be impossible.

#### **Is education perhaps the most effective way of creating a new culture of solidarity, to replace our current more individualistic approach?**

Organisations have knowledge and experience which cannot be lost. This is often undervalued, because they do not see themselves as educational agents, but the people who

make up these organisations are undoubtedly the greatest experts, in terms of the values which motivate them and the skills which they possess. It is very important for them to explain their reality to schools, above all through activities where the benefits are mutual. Through service-learning we all gain. Young people need to be offered the opportunity to express solidarity, to do something for someone else without asking anything in return, simply in order to experience a feeling of well-being and satisfaction. That is a wonderful thing. They can later decide whether they wish to repeat the experience, become a volunteer. But they will never view the people suffering from an illness or disability (sight, hearing, mobility, etc.) in the same way. That helps break down stigmas. Education is the way to put it into practice.



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