

Colegio San José Obrero





Constellation
of the Commons

Date of the interview
March 22, 2019

Location
Seville, Spain

Collective's name
Colegio San José Obrero

Name of the interviewees
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Miguel, you are the director of this school. Can you explain to us what type of center the San Jose Obrero School is?

The truth is that it is complicated to describe this school and I have never thought to define it. A school with a variety of important children. This school currently has four hundred students. Of those four hundred students, fifty percent are of foreign descent from over thirty nationalities. This diversity makes it hard for this school to stay afloat, but when you experience the day-to-day routine, it becomes simple. When people come and have these criticisms about our school, I ask them, "In what ways are we a difficult school?", because I do not see these disciplinary problems or see the detrimental problems in the students learning deficiencies. Labels are unhealthy and very toxic; it does not matter how the school was labeled. The labels are given by outsiders who see that there are foreign children and say that it's a school for the Chinese, for the Gypsies, etc. This is most harmful because it creates a stigma that is difficult to get rid of. We become the "school of the Gypsies" before the school of foreigners.

What qualities would you use to describe the school?

I see it as a lively, active, school that when you walk in through the door you identify quickly with it because everyone inside the school welcomes you with open arms. It is a flexible school due to the faculty's treatment of designing schedules, enforcing the curriculum and being flexible with families. Our focus is with the family from when they first arrive throughout their time with us. We are flexible with the plans, projects, and programs of the groups that want to work with us. We are an accepting school. A school that is open to the neighborhood and open to the community.

When did the first wave of students from the Gypsy community come in? What was the reaction?

That was in 1997 and they came in large numbers. In a class where there were twenty-five children, two or three entered, each one from the settlement of Vacie. They were children who had never been to school and were of all ages. This school took on fifty-eight children and, evidently, neither the staff nor the school had the resources to accommodate these children. So, what happened? In a short amount of time the school, which had around seven hundred students, went through a five-year recession where the student body was cut down to three hundred and fifty students. The parents took their children to another school because this was the school for Gypsies. I don't blame them. A war was happening here, and this war had been happening from the year '97 until about 2002. It was very sad. There were teachers who left, teachers who asked to transfer because they couldn't handle it. All

they talked about was the problem of the children from Vacie and other problems, but there were no solutions. I believe that there were no solutions for the reasons I mentioned earlier. When the school began to recover with the students from the Vacie settlement, more foreign students began to arrive. As I mentioned before, the school was left with a small population of less than four hundred students. There were less and less students until the foreign students arrived, which started an increase in students. The foreign student body has saved the school in terms of registration. They have taught us to rethink what we are capable of doing with the new students who came from different backgrounds, some of them immigrants. We didn't start from square one like we did when the students from Vacie came. We knew that the students were different and had to be treated in a different way

This has been the fate and the luck of the school. I consider myself lucky that I have been a part of it. I believe that the school and myself were fortunate enough to live through this. Often the ups and downs of education make it so that the principals stay for four years and then leave. There is no continuity in the process. This also sets the school apart. Not because it was me, but because there is a correlation between the work I did and its success. Additionally, I could also provide a common teaching style that is worth keeping around for the duration of the school.

How did you become the principal and how did you prepare for the responsibility of leading?

Well, I was a PE teacher and in 2002, the district called me and asked me if I wanted to be the principal of the school. The district decided this because, at that time, nobody wanted to be the principal of San Jose Obrero because it was a disaster. So, I gave them my objections because I couldn't imagine going from a gym teacher to a principal. I didn't think that I had what it took to lead, much less in those times. There were also other people who wanted to be the principal, but they were not sure if they would stay for long. Finally, the district decided that I would be the principal. Since I ended up as the principal, I had to start from square one. How do you do this? How do you become a leader? There was no class for that. Now there are classes on how to become a leader, but I don't think those are worth much. I believe that leading is learned in the classrooms and hallways. This is the way. You are leaving your mark in the way you do things. I think that my way of leading is to give space to the staff so that they feel comfortable. For example, if a project comes from an entity such as Antropoloops or any other that we are currently working on, you know that the school is open and that the staff will receive it well. All of that is normal here, which can't be said as easily for other schools, because I give space to the staff, which allows them to feel comfortable.

How does diversity play out in this school?

If you reject diversity, it is a handicap and a problem. Now, if you try to get to know, understand and comprehend people that come from outside your community, you are giving them an identity. Doing so allows them to become a part of the school and the culture. This is crucial because the school is for everyone and they have to feel like they are a part of our community, even if they do come from Colombia or the Philippines. They should feel like the school is supportive, which is important. When you are cultivating the principle of identity and belonging, the families feel comfortable with the school and support the work of the school and the faculty. I think that this is one of the achievements of the school. This

diversity that results from challenges changes them into opportunities. I believe that this interaction between diversity and the projects that are being done at the school is what allows the inclusive initiatives to be successful at the school.

The richness that diversity adds is amazing and we know that. We know and we take advantage because the diversity enriches so much. We have been creating a work system for each project that is very unique. That is to say, we have always started by working with one or two classrooms or a certain grade with a specific project, and that project has always been added to other courses, levels, and academic curriculums. Then, what starts as a music project is expanded and by the end it is more than a mere music project. It is a project in which most students participate, and families are able to talk about where they came from. In one of my fifth-grade classes for example, we look at Google Maps to find the students' home countries, where they are and where they come from. In other words, we are doing geography, math, music and this integrated project is what makes all of the children feel a part of the school community. We are not only talking about the individual geographic location of each student. We are all around a musical project and today I will explain it, tomorrow you will explain it, but it is part of the San Jose Obrero music project, and that is a music project that will unite us all. That is the great wealth of the school and that is what has given us so much success up to this point. That is, being able to change all the problems of diversity into advantages.

Do you think that your work in the school has had an effect on the neighborhood?

With all of the changes that have been made to this area, in the Carrasca and Cerezo neighborhoods, there has been a very important change in population, there is an important heterogeneity, there is interculturality that is palpable. I think that we have had some influence, so\}} that the neighborhood is a peaceful place. It is not a neighborhood with great difficulties, it is not a neighborhood where there is danger, or where there is fear. No, it is a normal neighborhood. The residents open their stores, one from Pakistan, one from Ecuador, one from Bolivia, and it works out. Although they might have their own groups, they respect each other, and that respect is fundamental to the community.

Rosalía said the other day: Imagine a child. A child from the third-grade class that will celebrate his birthday at home. The boy is Ethiopian and invites another child who is Chinese, another who is from Nigeria, invites his friend who is from Bolivia, invites two or three who are Spanish. On that birthday, in that apartment building, five continents are coexisting around a birthday cake and that cannot be mandated by law. This happens by living together, sharing together, and nurturing it every day. This is what we do here. We have not designed a detailed plan that is conducive to this type of community because that is impossible, but I do believe that somehow, we have accidentally made this a norm within our school. The secretary, Mercedes, gave this example the other day: "I took a student out of class and asked him how many students were of color in his class and he didn't know." That is, he is continuously coexisting with twenty-five classmates, you ask him how many children are of color in your class and he says, "well, I don't know."

Are you satisfied with the development of your educational model?

You see, I am very optimistic. I think that the attention that we give to all students is an individualized teaching approach and this is what makes us unique. The

treatment of each child is a world, that each child is different, that you have to treat each child as he is. We do not claim that they are all the same. I think that the biggest problem is making that differentiation: the Muslims on the one hand, the Pakistanis on the other, and the Romanians on the other. I think this is wrong. I think one has to forget this because the labels are sickening, they are very toxic. I believe that here we have to work with people, and we, from a three-year old child up to a twelve-year old child, work with children and that's that. It doesn't matter if his name is Manolo, or if his name is Hassan, or his name is Vladimir or whatever it may be, we work with that child and give them all the support they need. If the child needs more affection, we give it to him, and if he needs us to talk to his parents, we do it. The other day, a Romanian father who makes his living playing the saxophone on the street came to the school and he is considered family to us. I believe we have a very important duty of public service and this is often what saves us. I am very proud of my school, as you can tell when I speak about it.

In what type of neighborhood is your school located?

This is a unique neighborhood that has been adapting to immigrants from all over the world who have arrived over the years. The people from Morocco were the first to arrive, then from all over the area of Maghreb, and later on people from South America, Bolivia, and Ecuador. They come in waves. For example, right now, there is a wave of people coming from Venezuela. We have never stopped receiving people from different countries. We also have European children from Romania, from the Philippines, from Bangladesh and from Nepal. Here, diversity is very powerful, and the neighborhood has changed a lot. Yes, the physiognomy of the neighborhood is not the same as it was twenty years ago. It is true that the jobs are still lower-class, more precarious than before because many of them have to do with the struggling economy. A lot of the work is in private homes and this makes it so that the families struggle to get by. It makes me feel good knowing that many of the families who come are no longer families that arrive and leave. They are families who stay here in the area. That generates quality relationships because families identify with the community that they are a part of. The neighborhood is creating certain dynamics of strength and I like that. More shops are opening and there is more life.

How was the proposal received for having the collective Antropoloops work in this school?

Well, they arrived and told us that they were going to do a musical anthropology project about the music of the world that will take advantage of the diversity of our students. We are also going to learn about all of these geographical aspects through a screen and music. How could we say no? Apart from the fact that this is a unique opportunity that we have never seen anywhere else, it is a project where music intervenes with physical education, mathematics, and language. The administration is involved so there are a lot of people participating beside the group Antropoloops. Other than Antropoloops, there are many other people involved. Supporting a project such as this is in line with the dynamic of the school. Look, we work with children individually, one by one, and in a project like this, individuality is maximized. Each child does their part of the project and then when they work in groups, apart from their individuality, they are working in a collaborative setting. We are combining individuality with cooperative and collaborative work, plus the musical aspect that Antropoloops gives us. So, when they do their cooperative-collaborative activities, they are great. In addition, they are learning music and

learning other super interesting content that is being developed through this project, which I think is great. Thanks to them and their design, we can use their activities. One of the major problems that schools face when doing this type of project is time constraints. Many times, the problem does not come down to economic resources, it is about having the time to develop all the work. This is challenging because as teachers we do not have the time for this. So, when someone tells us, "Look, we are going to come and do this variety of activities, which will be carried out in this way and we will be the performers and the participants of said activities." For us, that is a dream. It is fantastic. In addition, the children feel comfortable, they are happy, they are having fun, and they are learning. Isn't that what education is about?

What results do you expect to come out of the collaboration with Antropoloops?

Well, above anything, I hope that the children will see that they have been happy. That they see that they had a good time and also learned something. If you aren't having fun or enjoying yourself, you will not learn. In the past, you didn't learn from enjoyment, but because of coercion and competition. There are two ways of learning: either for enjoyment or for fear of failure. We choose to enjoy and enjoy learning. When one is doing something they enjoy and that excites them, they learn from that too. It is so much easier to work this way, instead of working fearfully.

Before Antropoloops came to the school, was music an important part of the school?

Yes, this school works a lot with music and when Antropoloops started the music project, the children could see where they came from, the music of their country, or an area where they live. This, to them, is strengthening their culture of origin and is also creating the culture of the San Jose Obrero School where all the musical puzzle pieces come together to make one culture. And that is what they live: that part of their music, part of the puzzle, is here and that everyone forms the music of San Jose Obrero, which is us.

What problems are you able to identify in a current, formal education?

Separating education and teaching seems to be a mistake, in my opinion. To continue living in what was structured in the 19th century after the industrial revolution, and to remain a school of the industrial revolution, which is what we are, seems to me to be a mistake. If the music does not fit into that structure of industrial revolution, then we try with these projects to break that rigid structure to make sure that music intervenes in and energizes other subjects. This way there are no subjects, only knowledge. The schools have to go backwards. I think that schools need to turn this around, right? We have to tell our students to think critically. Tell them this, and then once they leave primary school, still very young, they will be able to buy a train ticket or read a label and know what they are eating. That is to say, that we develop skills, that we develop abilities, that we develop competencies so that these children are capable of being autonomous once they leave school. They will be independent, autonomous and have an autonomy and value that gives them strength in the face of adversity. That is the only thing that we ask of them, and it is very important.

Interview with Ana Perez

How would you describe the San Jose Obrero school?



San Jose Obrero is difficult to define on paper and in two words because I would tell you that it is a school that is made day-by-day. It is a school of 400 and some students are born here, but of a foreign background, and from more than 30 nationalities. So, it is a school that is very unique, but a school that is made day-by-day. It is a school where we take advantage of cultural diversity as an enriching factor. We take advantage of this cultural diversity. As a teacher, I am the first to admit that the teachers are the ones that are learning at San Jose Obrero with this brutal mix of nationalities that we have here. So, it is a living school, where the teachers, students and their families all interact together. Here, we share everything and learn everything from everyone. From the minute you walk in the door every morning, you are learning. Every day at work is different because you cannot stick to a certain learning or teaching style. We are teachers, and of course our goal is for our students to acquire an adequate level of knowledge. That is a basic principle of any teacher. But, having the circumstances and special characteristics that this neighborhood does, we cannot have a closed curriculum where the same treatment is given to every student. Here, you are getting a child in November, another leaves in January and/or a family comes from China or Nepal half-way through the semester. Anyway, you cannot have a general model of learning for all of your students. What they mean by individualized teaching is that you have to learn every day to improvise a lot of what you do. You have to make things up as you go because you are faced with situations and circumstances that no one has explained or taught to you, because it is something that you have to learn on your own by living it. So, I think that is what a lot of us learn here: to work day-by-day with the children. They are learning, but we also have to learn with them, at their rhythm. I think that is a little bit of what is lived here, inside of this center.

From what you've told me, do you think that being a teacher at San Jose Obrero is a hard job to carry out?

Well, it is a hard job to carry out. Not because of the cultural diversity, but instead, because of the stories and the socio-economic circumstances that these families have to go through. They have to fight daily for their lives. They are families that you have to work with day-to-day, so it is hard because you really live their stories. These students carry their stories. Each one has their own, and you are a part of their story. It might be difficult, but at the same time very comforting, and these children are very grateful because they are very much in need of the affection that they find here. So no, it is not a difficult job to carry out, but it is true that the circumstances and stories of these children do affect you. I do not see that my work is difficult, but very heart-warming, because you can learn every day. You arrive every morning and every morning is different. You never know what you are going to have to face every day. You never know what is going to arise during the day, because many things do, and you are going to have to improvise and solve problems throughout the day. This is a little of the life that I live here.

In what neighborhood is the school located?

It is a lower-middle class neighborhood of working families. What happens is that right now, you could walk down a street in the neighborhood and you would be impacted by the large amount of diversity that there is, and the number of cultures and religions. It is complicated, and it is the ignorance around this reality that scares people from outside. Here, in the neighborhood, I think that at first this transformation happened when the neighborhood began to introduce cultural differences. Those families that were arriving, including children from the shanty-town of Vacie, also

impacted the families here at the school. So, all of that ignorance is what many times held us back, but I think that we have learned how to coexist. I will give you an example: Last year, a choir was created at the school for Christmas. It was a choir made of fathers, mothers and families. You were able to see that within the choir there was a mother from Nepal, a mother from Morocco with her veil, another South American, all singing Christmas carols. It is impossible to imagine, and you might say, "How could that be?", well, it is. They have learned, shared and mixed naturally. What could originally be seen as a factor of segregation and conflict, the neighborhood now lives with, accepting it as something enriching in the neighborhood.

What role has the school played in the transformation of the neighborhood?

The school has played a very important role. I don't think that we have noticed because it has been gradual. The school has changed a lot since the beginning, since about 10-12 years ago. It has changed a lot because the school has functioned well as a cultural center and a neighborhood association. It is an open school because we do not just work with the children, but we also have to work a lot with the neighborhood, the families, social services and with the different associations that there are in the neighborhood that work with us. So, it is a school that is always open, even on Saturdays, for any organized activities, such as a spring party, a flea market or a neighborhood meeting. This school is the cultural center of the neighborhood, because they do not have any other place that brings them together. It serves as a revitalizer for some families and as a meeting place. So yes, it has played a very important role. This school is open, but open for real, because it has to be this way. Here, there are families that come for registration, who come from Senegal, Cameroon, Romania and do not speak the language, who many times do not know how to read or write in Spanish, let alone their own language. So, you cannot say that the secretary's schedule is from 12-2, because then the family that is working all day at precarious jobs, or a stay at home mother, will not be able to come because the secretary's schedule is at 12. The school has to be open and flexible. I would say that the word that slightly defines the school and our way of interacting is "flexibility." You have to be flexible on everything: your objectives, in tutoring parents, in the grouping of children. You have to be flexible outside and inside of school hours. You have to be open at whatever time, and if they come to see the principal, or me, as Director of Studies, you have to drop everything at a moment's notice, and attend to those parents that are coming. For this reason, I tell you that we live day-to-day, and that every day walking through the door, you have to understand that you will have a list of things to do, but that it is very likely that something different will come up and that you will have to drop what you are doing at any moment. This is our style of work, but there is no other way. There is no other way.

What does diversity bring to the school?

This diversity brings us so much. It is such an enriching factor. Here, you do not see... I don't know how to explain it. We do not take advantage of the diversity. This is a school where there are children, just like any other school, where there is a lot of diversity, but you do not say that you are going to work at diversity or that you are going to do such an activity. No. Here we live diversity. You walk out onto the porch and a girl from Ethiopia arrives, who does not know Spanish. You then see a Chinese girl who is teaching her Spanish, because she has been here a few years already and they are friends and you do not need any students to serve as mediators, but they do anyway. We do not have a strategy. When they ask us how we do it, we answer that we do not do anything. It is just that kids are kids and they live in their stories. They tell you their

stories, their lives, and they are used to sharing their stories and their lives with other children. I will give you an example from last year from my class, because that is what I live and what I feel. There was a poetry contest, so they had to learn poetry. I had a boy from China who said, "If you want, I can recite my poetry in Chinese," and I had a girl from the Philippines who said, "Well I can in Tagalog," and yet another child from Morocco said, "I can in Arabic," and finally, another child from South America said, "I can in quechua." One activity, that in the moment was about poetry, transformed into another activity so rich, so different, without me even saying anything. It was them, themselves, who proposed it. I had no objective. That is our work dynamic. This is not to say that we worked at diversity, but we lived it, because it is a norm in our center, so we take advantage of this richness. I think that it is a wealth and we learn a lot from it.

What happens when the children finish their studies at this school?

The fear that we often have is in the transition from our school to secondary school. It is true that there is a certain drop-out rate, and there are some students who lose their good study habits, but we already have students who are getting out of secondary school and making it to university. So, little-by-little, there are some, but not all, as it is very complicated. It is complicated because some families have very difficult situations and it is necessary to keep in mind that they do not have the same opportunities that other children have. For example, in their homes, many children do not have internet, or they do not read because they are not empowered to do so in their home. Many are not familiar with Sevilla. You take them out of the neighborhood, and they feel like they are in a different city. So, in this school, we work very hard through projects and promote a lot of opportunities to experience parks and museums. It has been a few years since we did a learning and service project. In this project, they had to make a budget and spend it on visiting sites within the city, since they do not normally have this opportunity. So yes, it is true that the school does intense work with these children who are slightly cut off after they leave the school. Each time, they become more conscious that they can do it. That by working and trying hard, they can achieve, but it is true that there is always a group that stays in the middle of the path. Here, we are fighting and trying to make sure that this does not happen. This is a lot of working with the families and the neighborhood, a task that includes doing workshops with the parents and speaking with them a lot. This also includes working with the associations that work with us because these children later have a connection outside of the school that supports them to do their homework, to work and to go on excursions with them on the weekends. This is needed because many families work all day and cannot be with their children at this time. Here, we have students who are 11 and 12 years old and carry a key to their house, because at 2 pm there is no one at home waiting for them. They even prepare their own food. So, it is difficult for the work that you do, many times, to continue because it really depends on the circumstances that they are in and the social changes are very slow, as we know. This is very difficult. The transformations are very complicated, and there are a lot of factors that intervene. It is hard because, little-by-little, we are changing the mind-set that we have about certain realities that we live in. It is very important that we recognize these realities. I think that it is the ignorance of not knowing what resources are available that, many times, does not allow you to help or to be there to share in experiences with people.

When you talk about this individualized teaching school, what do you mean?

Well, individualized teaching means that we understand that each child is a different world and that we are all different. Not because we are from Romania,

neither from China, nor Africa, but we are different. So, every boy and girl needs unique treatment and learning. We cannot come to the classroom, open the book, and say, "Everyone come to the front." We cannot do this because each child has their own rhythm and their own needs. Behind every boy and girl are many stories and you cannot get there and treat the idea the same for everyone. Instead, you have to respect the rhythm of learning for each one. Here, the key word is "flexibility." Adapting to what is asked of you by each child. When looking at the groupings, for example, a boy or a girl could arrive, who might be in 5th grade by age, but has not been in school. All of the teachers have a clear idea that they will be in 4th. Through the reinforcements, supports and adaptations that we have to make, we have to adapt the curriculum, objectives and contents... we are constantly changing. This is a little bit of what it means to have an individualized teaching style. We try to make sure that every boy and girl receive the learning that they need in that moment. There is no other way in this center that works for us, we have to work.

In what ways would you say that this school is different than other schools?

In most schools there is a management team that runs things but here what happens is that it is a faculty of teachers that are suggesting activities, projects, etc. We are continually collaborating between teachers. This is happening at our school and we did not even notice, but little-by-little we have been changing until we have reached where we are right now. At other schools it is not this way. It is proposed from one point of view and infrequently. Here, it is the faculty of teachers that make suggestions as they see the needs and potential. Then you can think of twenty thousand stories that arise from one day to another.

Is the participation of boys and girls encouraged in this center?

We put a lot of emphasis on class assemblies and dialogues. I, for example, have a mailbox for suggestions where they can put their topics, ideas that they want to share and things that concern them. I tell them to write about whatever they want, things that worry them or things that they are interested in. Then we do class assemblies in all of our courses and there, the boys and girls talk and tell stories, put out their ideas, their worries, etc. And then I, as the Director of Studies, have a commission of delegates that meets monthly who tell me what they talked about in those assemblies: the concerns of the children, what the school is missing... and at the end of the course, we send a written letter to the mayor or the delegate depending on what we see. This way, the children can see that they can participate in their school and in their neighborhood, so we do that a lot. There is a lot of work meant for them to give their opinion and participate in what the school is.

How do the teachers work here?

Everyone works in their way and not all of the teachers follow the same path. Each one has their own way of working and their own way of doing things, but it is true that we do have a lot of coordination meetings where we talk about all of this and where we share everything. We have to talk a lot amongst ourselves because new situations come every day that we have to comment on daily. We also share our ways of working individually, we also have to share because many things happen to you that are good that the rest of the people should know. This is a little bit of the dynamic at the school.

Why do you insist so much on teamwork?

Teamwork contributes to autonomy, responsibility, things that are not actually in the curriculum. We believe that the alumni should leave this school center with these abilities that respond to our way of working. To me, I am more interested that my alumni leave with these capabilities that are most likely not considered in the curriculum, but that will later on serve in their life and that are social skills of relationship building, of autonomy, of the capability of expression, of dialogue, of finding solutions to their problems.

How is the center's collaboration with the Antropoloops project going?

Everything that I am telling you, they are relating through music. They are developing many of these types of abilities because they are working on many activities in groups, they have to problem solve, come to an understanding to move forward in the sessions and, more than anything, very important, they are working on bodily expression, something that is not given much importance in schools. For all of us, we struggle a lot in expressing ourselves orally and bodily and this is being worked on very well. The boys and girls have a hard time with this because they have to lose that embarrassment in front of everyone else. Expressing themselves freely is very hard for them and I like it because they are living it. I have already seen that they are changing a little in this aspect. When we first started the project at the beginning of the course, until now, they have finally been losing a little of the fear and expressing themselves through rhythms, for example, because they have to move their bodies, their arms, which embarrasses a lot of them. I have seen that this is helping them and then impacts the other subjects because it is helping them be, to let themselves go, to lose a little of the fear of others, to know how to talk to others, and this is very important and I believe that at other schools, this is not much of a priority because, in schools, we are more accustomed to writing. We have done a little bit of an evaluation this trimester of what they have done and what they have learned. They have told us, in their own way that they have liked everything, but the best part is that they have enjoyed themselves and they have learned to be responsible and to work with their classmates and that sticks with me. For me that itself is very important.

