

Colegio Vital Alsar





Constellation
of the Commons

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Name of the interviewees
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Who are you and what's your relationship to this center?

Fernando: I'm Fernando Diego, I'm the principal of the school and I'm the father of a little six year old girl who's starting elementary school. My relationship to the project is that I've been here since the start, creating with other teachers and parents a different space for shared learning.

María: I'm María Ribero, I have a ten year old girl in fifth grade and same as Fernando, I've been with the project since the beginning, creating this beautiful story.

Why is the project named Vital Alsar?

Fernando: The Vital Alsar Center is named after a very well-known navigator from Santander who spent his whole life exploring. His motto is to bring peace wherever you go. He travels by sailboats without motors. He's known for his long trips all over the planet and has been well known here for twenty years. Before, the school used to be named The Racetrack of Bellavista because a century ago there was a racetrack in this part of Santander, in Cueto.

María: In fact, there used to be tracks where this school is, and the races would pass by here.

We are in a public school. At what moment did the idea of this initiative for social transformation through public education come to you?

Fernando: This school was born approximately fifty years ago as a public school for Santander and we've been here for eight years. Initially, we had a process of community reflection, amongst many people that have been looking for a different type of education but still through the public schools. And here we are eight years later...

María: Yes, we've been here eight years developing this project. When we started meeting to rethink public education, we were looking for a school. We were informed that they were thinking of closing this school because it had been losing students throughout the years and they were going to close it and transform it into an educational space for adults. We presented to the administration the possibility that instead of closing the school they could let us carry out a different project, and they said yes.

Fernando: Yes, because in this school the student body was from one neighborhood: a slum environment that was very deprived at a social, economic, and cultural level. The students were children from that area. There was no electricity, no water, no sewer system, and kids turning

fourteen would be dispersed to other schools. We took advantage of the opportunity to create a project of social transformation and committed to what we had been looking for. The school administration publicly announced that they were going to close, and because of this, we talked with them and were able to take over the school. We thought that instead of closing it, we would develop a project and the kids wouldn't have to go to other schools, and it would offer a chance for other families to participate in this different educational space that what we were dreaming about.

For many of the groups I talked to, 15M (the anti-austerity movement in Spain) has meant a moment of reorganization, of reinvention, of strengthening. What has this moment signified for those who are part of this project?

María: Something that made me laugh was a moment when I was teaching normally, to whoever came, and a woman was observing and said to me, "I really like this, but my spouse doesn't want to bring our kid here because it's a school of "podemitas," or members of the Podemos Spanish Political Party. (laughs) It was very funny to me. I would say no...

Fernando: Let's see, we participated in the movement..

María: Many people were in it...

Fernando: But we participated on a certain level. It wasn't a movement that had repercussions for Vital, but we lived this hope for change, to empower us, to say, "Hey, we don't like how we are living, we don't like this society or where it is going. We want a new society; we want a change." And from there, well, it's all connected. There were families from here that formed part of 15M but there wasn't a direct connection with the assemblies that were held here. Yes, there was a connection at a personal and ideological level, and we are still participating. We will continue to look for common elements of change and social transformation from all of it.

How and where was your initiative created?

Fernando: We originated as a movement called "A Volar" (Let's Fly). Before we had the school, we were a collective in which we reflected about education and we had already made three commissions. One was on pedagogical reflection; to create and sustain common principles. The other was on establishing connections with the government and developing connections in the public sphere, and doing it effectively. The last one was on raising awareness regarding how we could help people better understand and create unity among participants. We already had that in our DNA. We believe that the more people there are, the easier it is, at least in terms of the transformative element. We also learned that groups with more than eight people working together are very complicated, because there is too much divergence. We needed someone who would tell us how to work, how to make it effective and how to not have the feeling of spending hours and hours talking. That was what was happening to us, without creating anything, without reaching agreements. It's all about organizing our ideas and reaching something representative that inspires change and better unites us.

How have you managed to organize yourselves both nodally and horizontally in an institutional context?

Fernando: Well, we counted on David Pino, who's now a technician of the Andalusian

government, but at that time he wasn't yet. He participated in social movements helping to create cooperatives throughout the horizontal movements. We got here with some of our own ideas, but they were not functioning at an organizational level. But, we got lucky that one of the fathers, Tito, the president of the AMPA (Association of Mothers and Fathers of Students), had a relationship with David through his work. He brought him on two occasions and he gave us two workshops to help organize ourselves and really get on the same page to create this movement, instead of doing what we had been doing, which was the opposite. That helped us create a reflection process that was "Rethinking is Vital," four years ago. Through this process, we established a community-wide process of project development with objectives for the first and fourth years. From there, they suggested 19 different committees and we organized ourselves based on the topics of those committees through nodes. Also, the Head Council was created. The thing is that we have a way of organizing ourselves into distinct groups of people, whether they be teachers, families, or outside people who want to collaborate on the project. We had goals that would span from one to four years. And here we are. They are more or less being achieved by the people who support them. Not everyone can participate in the same way by coming here or through email because they each have their own situation, and everyone participates from their own space.

María: When we made this reflection process that we call "Rethinking is Vital", we did it mostly because it was our fifth year, and we wanted to stop and see where we were. We wanted to see how all of the people who had joined throughout those five years were doing and if they had the same goals that we had started with or if we had to change our goals. Upon the arrival of David Pino, we realized that we were a project on the defense; we had been fighting each other for five years, but also defending ourselves against the administration that was very hard on us, especially on the teachers. But in the end, if they attack the teachers, they attack all of us. The idea was how to transition from a defensive project to a project of growth, by looking toward the future without fear. This process helped us realize that what was there was already stable, that we were five years in, and we started to demonstrate that it was possible, that it can be done. Right now, I think that objective has been accomplished because we now have a hundred boys and girls; three years ago, that was a goal for the fourth year. In addition, the people who join feel like they belong to an open, stable, and organized project. For us, three years ago the feeling was, "We're going to close any day!"; we were always scared and worried. It was greatly needed, to stop and reflect, and from there is where what Fernando says about our new organization of nodes, committees, and working groups comes into play. With respect to the head council, which is a word we don't like, the original idea of the head council is to have some project protectors (that seems beautiful to me), some people who have clarity about what this is, what they are doing here, both teachers and families. They can count on them outside, to count on the people that join and take care to ensure that they don't get distorted on the day to day. And I like project protectors much more but it was just as poetic for the documents [laughs]

Fernando: A council of protectors [they laugh]

Can you tell us how you (Fernando) came to be the principal of the Center?

Fernando: Well it's very strange that I'm the principal of the Center, because in that process teachers were needed. I was doing my training, I had just gotten a position in a school in Laredo, in a class with two-year-olds. There were very few of us who

had managed to get a position. With the teachers who were previously here, the administration gave them the possibility of continuing here and developing the project so that they didn't have to go to other centers or move to a different place. But they were already close to retirement and preferred to choose something different, so they went to other nearby schools, including public schools, and different teachers asked for positions in this Center. One day, Ramon Ruiz came along, the general director who provided the opportunity to start the Center- you always have to find people that in a certain moment would open the door to a different possibility, and in this case he was the politician who took a chance on Vital. In the first meeting, he told us "everything that you folks have reflected on, the principles that you are looking for, fall within public education." I remember perfectly how he knew our principles and had consulted the laws. And he was saying, "everything fits within public education, and within the current policies," which at that time was the Organic Law of Education (LOE). So that's where a negotiation process started and it ended up providing us with the opportunity to develop the project. In January, we started to talk with them, and in September, we started.

When you talk about the communication exchange that you have had with the Public Administration, what sector do you mean?

Fernando: The Public Administration basically is the Secretary of Education in Spain. Every community is autonomous, each community has its own educational policies, that's what governs education. It's true that the law is a national law, but then each region has its own policies. They implement it in one way or another, always respecting the national laws of the state. It's the Secretary of Education that you always have to address if you want to undertake a project. Especially if it's public, that's essential, because public schools require teachers who are civil servants, because the public requires official teachers. Civil servants must fill the positions, and additionally they can't be temporary; they have to be certified for permanent positions or else the project can't be developed.

You mention teachers who compete in a competitive examination. Can you explain what a competitive examination is?

Fernando: A competitive examination is a public contest in which all the teachers apply and compete to get a job, a position that's for life, and you never lose it. In this case, it's to become a teacher. In my case, it was to become a teacher for children from zero to six years old, although, in our region it's only from two to six. And then there's elementary school, which would be students from six to twelve years old. Everyone who wants to be considered for such a position has to pass the exam. This competitive examination has two phases: one being various exams and then, once you pass them, you add some merits, those being the merits that you can have for studies, research, training, and positions you've held. Everything is taken into account and the ones who end up with the highest scores have a position for life.

Were the teachers who came to this center a part of the group that envisioned the project?

María: Among the people that we had gathered to define what type of education project we wanted to have, within a public school, there were already teachers. There was Fernando, María, but there were more. Some already had their positions, they had passed the exams, so what they did was request a position

here on a temporary basis, except they were able to keep extending it.

Fernando: That's right. A person has their definitive place in a school, so then there were three people who had their place and decided not to continue here. Then we asked who among us wanted to form a part of this project and eight teachers opted for the job position. In the advertisement for the center, the following is written: "We are a public school for continued learning that wants to educate students to become healthy, critical, reflective, and sharing people in this world. In this process, we intend to have the educative community be participants because diversity builds society". That's an unusual description in the context of public schools. What type of school are we?

Maria: We imagined a school where our sons and daughters- I'm going to talk as a family member- could come to a place where they were respected and where they could freely develop. A place where we could use all the things we put into our project. A place to make them critical, reflective, to have the capacity to decide, to rethink what they want to do and to know how to decide to do it. And clearly, under public education, this isn't offered. In public education, at least here, what students have access to is an education that is very traditional, very 19th century. Students sit at their desk and stare at the board, listen to adults who just read from a textbook, and then they go home and do homework and exams. All of this since they were 7 or 8 years old. Where is the space for integral development that is necessary for all humans? Where is the space to analyze what happens in the news, what happens around you, social situations like yours but also those that are different, to look at it from a critical perspective, to act in solidarity, to develop empathy and to learn how to think and to even learn how to learn? Then, when we started to develop those basic pedagogical lines that we'd like here, we all tried to reflect. Some of us got better, some of us still haven't gotten there yet, but since then there's a horizon that we aspire to, and that we're constantly working towards. Year after year, we have been getting better; the first year was chaos, the second more chaos, the third a little less and right now we're almost reaching, I'd say, all of the goals that we gave ourselves.

Fernando: From the start, we wanted the children to be agents of change. And to be an agent of change you can't be the same as everyone else. And to not be the same as everyone else, you have to be yourself. And to be yourself, you have to create the space so that the children can find themselves, and bring out the best of them. This is what we were looking for the whole time, to create this space so that they can be themselves, and from there, change their space. Give them another possibility.

Fernando, can you speak about your experience as an educator in the field of public education? What problems have you found?

Fernando: My experience as an educator has been different in every institution that I've been in. There are some that have given me more, they have given me the space that I needed to create things and therefore I could give others the possibility to create, and there are other institutions that don't leave you as much. Within public education, I've only been at a school in Laredo, another local school, and I was lucky to find a management team that allowed me to create things. I chose to be with little kids. I wanted to be with two-year-olds, because you tend to think that while spending time with little ones, it doesn't matter what they do. That's what I used as a strategy for personal development, because being in a place where you have to do the opposite of what you think is very hard. They gave me the possibility of creating that space and then the Administration gave me the possibility to make it here. Creating what you

believe in is essential. If the management team and the public Administration don't allow you to, developing a project is more complicated. You always have the possibility to create something different and that depends a little bit on yourself, of what you're willing to do and gaining publicity, because in the end it's a matter of exposure. When you take a chance on changing things, you expose yourself, but if you do not want to expose yourself, out of fear and previous experiences, for whatever reason, because everyone has a different reality, and if you have someone unwell, it's not your moment, well, it's more difficult. But if you allow that exposure, anything can happen.

I see in the Center's description that there's a clear commitment for emotional education and for educating in the building of effective relationships. Can you describe what you're referring to with "emotional education?"

Fernando: For us, emotional education is everything. It's not about talking about the emotions you have, it's not talking about what happened today. It's a large part of the lives of these children at the school as well as the adults. It's not just for the kids, because if the adults are good, we have a space for ourselves and it gives us the possibility to be better. Emotional education is in everything. It's true that we have predetermined spaces for collective or personal reflection, spaces where students can go to have a moment to themselves if they need it. We're not all fine every moment of the day. We get angry; there's conflict. We also have policies on what to do if there's a conflict, but this policy and this space are not supposed to be above one another. We value everything about emotional education, absolutely everything. We can't create space for learning if someone isn't ok. If someone is sad or upset with a friend, we see that- it's what the student is feeling and it's not usually permitted in the learning process. This is why we give emotional education so much importance. The main thing is to be as you are, and then we handle the rest.

What kind of traditional education inspires the Center?

Fernando: The traditional education that it draws from is from everything and from nothing. We say that we are continuing to learn. We are open to whatever horizon or whatever pedagogical reflection sparks our attention. It's part of the school, it's been years- its continuous work. But, on the other hand, we're our own selves. The reflection process is collective. First, from the staff, but also from the families, and then in our own way of organizing ourselves,-which is through nodes and committees with their own objectives- we combine everything. The basis is active teaching in which each child and each adult creates their own personal learning process. And from there it all fits. We don't like to categorize ourselves. We aren't Montessori, Reggio Emilia or Amara Berri, which are systems that function very well. But if we implement these systems within what we are, in the end we would be lost and not be able to give every child the best possibilities they could want, because we see that there are kids that require something more systemic or others that need to move around and are chaotic. So, we try to create a place that meets each of these styles and constructs a personal process.

One of the most important pillars of the Center is diversity. Could you explain what the Center intends by diversity?

Fernando: When we talk about diversity, we're basically talking about Lev Vygotsky. We believe that diversity allows enrichment and the creation of much bigger things than otherwise. The more homogeneous the group, the less possibilities there are for learning because in the end, you see less, hear less, and there are less models.

We start by grouping ages; we have three groups for children and two groups for infants. We also believe that there has to be a possibility in which the model allows growth. The model has to be close, as Vygotsky says, because if the model is very spread out, if you put a three year old child with a ten year old, of course he's going to learn different things, but there's going to be such a big jump that many won't be able to understand. Then we have homogenous groups because we believe in models of close but also diverse learning. The more possibilities that a child has to see something different, hear something different, the more it will carry on into their life, and that's going to favor reflection. "Ahh, this one does this with that. Ahh, this one listens to that. Ahh, look how this one dances." For us, observing is learning. When a child stops and looks, they still continue to learn. They teach us that if you don't do you don't learn, when you actually only learn from who you are. The very presence of a child in a space is changing everything. It's allowing others to create something different and to be something different. It's from there that we understand it as an active methodology. It's from there that we create heterogeneous groups in which there are a couple of groups of different ages that allow them to make reflections from which they can also learn. The children that come to this school are from wherever. Yes, it's true that there is an administrative process in which we don't choose the children who get admitted; it's an ordinary process and they enter here like any other school. They apply and it depends on where they live, on rent, if their siblings are in the center, on where their parents work, since they have a series of considerations. That's how we get them. For example, in this final process, a family has come from the Canary Islands and another comes from France. And we have people from the north of Spain, children from Galicia, Asturias, Leon, Bilbao, and Catalunya. It's getting harder and harder to get accepted, it's true, because we are already full to the ceiling. Before, it was easier to get here because we had more open spots and, since there was no competition to enter, anyone who applied, entered. Now, we have 102 spots, and that helps us to take care of the children, to accompany them. We don't want to grow, because of the accompaniment; we want to know every part of the Vital process is for the children, what they do, what they like, what they don't like, know how to address them, know if they require space when they're angry. A school with ten boys, ten girls, it can be done. But with a larger school, it's true that it isn't as easy.

How many full time teachers are there in this Center?

What educational profiles predominate?

Fernando: In this center we have nine teachers; most of the jobs are already covered with definitive personnel and others leave for the competitive exam that happens every year and their positions are covered by interim teachers. In the end, the jobs aren't made definitive until the project is set up and the time is maintained. We don't know what's going to happen with this school. We started with fourteen boys and girls, now we're at 100. Then, over time, those positions will become definitive and will always be covered by a teacher from a certain field and who won't change centers.

María: For schools like ours- I understand that the interchange can be complicated for every school- but when there's a very concrete educative project, developing it while changing teachers every year is very difficult. In fact, the first years, when nobody knew us, it was almost impossible to find harmony among the staff. Now we're quite well known in the region to the people that come here and, in fact, many people are eager to get in, but it has been very hard. Years ago, the staff was divided between people who took a chance on this education and people who didn't. Having a stable staff is a basic thing to develop for an educational project for change.

What type of training does a person have to have in order to be an educator in this center?

Fernando: The teachers that enter our school are required to have participated in the contest, but after that the training is that of any other teacher. But they would have to also have previously known the process of reflection and really be looking for this. Because in the end, this is neither better nor worse than any other educative proposals. It's just another option and we believe that this option has many other opportunities for the families and the teachers. Being able to be inside a project that permits you to come in, to accompany your children, and where everything is transparent isn't something that the whole world understands...nor how we see coexistence and respect. Because you can talk about respect but we can have differences in how far respect should go. There might be a situation- there are many day to day situations, with children- in which we act a certain way, understanding different respective things. For us, it's to permit children, to give them everything they require in that moment, and to not try to lead them to what we think is best for them. That's our point of view, our understanding of it. And because of that, there would be many examples. And then there's also the line between faculty and family and the differences there. We're continuously talking. We spend hours talking and talking, and we respect each teacher. If you go to a classroom here, you're going to see within the project it developed in one way, and in another class, it developed differently. This is also enriching because here there are different children, different teachers, different families, and this diversity also allows a child to learn how to locate or be in a space that functions off of what they need.

Maria: I'd like to add that in respect to the question about the training for the teachers, I think that it comes down to the theoretical training they get from the university that lacks deeper training on how to act. They arrive with no experience with accompanying children, the major part of the job, and unless they had decided to prepare themselves more, their training isn't sufficient. I don't agree with the principals (they laugh) that this is the better option. It's clear that we're developing how we can think the best, but I believe that this is the path that you have to take for education in general. Not every school does one thing. It has to be a reflection at the global level on how we're going to educate the children of the world because it's clear that it's not working. Of course, our opinion is our opinion, but yes, you should start to talk about pedagogy in other aspects of the university, so that when people leave, they will be encouraged to make changes at other schools. Because the truth is that the biggest agents of change are educators. The families are here to support, sustain, and accompany, but most of the change is in the educator's hands. That's where I want there to be an unconventional change.

The Center attracts attention for its defense of a model of evaluation from observation. Could you explain this model?

Fernando: Our model of evaluation is developed on the basis of observation. It's true that we are asked about it a lot, especially when faced with the public service inspection. They're searching for objective proof of how the child is doing. My question is, does doing an exam, on a certain day, really show you what a child does and doesn't know? How much easier is it to know what the child knows or doesn't know by daily observations of what the child does? And it's true that you also have to develop a tool that reflects what the child has acquired. It's not only the product, but how they relate, observing how they solve problems and what tools they use, if they

search for what to do, and all of this is done without judgement. It's about finding out what each child requires to create, to be able to develop their lives, to develop their way of being, and to keep learning. This is our philosophy: observing the children develop what they need. It's also important for us because it allows us to see what we aren't doing. I also see that there are many kids in the classroom, 22 to be exact. Being with 22 kids isn't easy. I know that under the administration, they told you that they're lowering the class sizes, but I'd tell them to look in the classrooms. If you really want quality processes that accompany and are able to support what each child needs, it's difficult to do with a large group. Finally, it's an economic problem, I know, but the Administration should be able to reflect on a process to earn more money. We get pamphlets, letters, videos, and examinations that we don't need and that aren't based in any of our necessities. This money-I'm speaking for us because for other schools it may or may not be valid- serves no purpose for us. So, we should use the money or resources for what they really are for, which is to accompany the children or create a process of reflection for the teachers, wherever it's necessary.

Maria: I'd add that the children don't need to be evaluated for anything. It's a thing that we adults have invented in order to know if a child is a seven or a three, therefore, I would take them out of the educational system until graduation. They and the public center are obligated to comply with the law and the law requires Fernando to monitor in a computer program if my daughter is a seven, or a three, or a nine. What we have done here has made this possible to escape from that. Of course, the children are free from this trial. They never know, unless a family member decides to tell them, what grade they have. I find what the teachers do to be precious work, I hear it and it excites me, it's that they make this observation and they have to put it into a final grade. I have no idea how they do it, it seems impossible to do that, but nothing is delivered to the children. Families are now given a general report by PDF of how children are doing in terms of competence, of how they have acquired skills and that seems to be enough judgement, but within there it's not the worst. Then there's a computer program that in Cantabria is called YEDRA, where you can access and see your child's grade in different subjects. Here, most families have never looked at it. It's our little rebellion, because if we don't believe in it, we're not going to look at it. It's true that when they reach the sixth grade many families decide to see how they're doing, because it has to change and you need to think about how you're going to make that step. But it seems to me that this is something that the system has invented, that the adults are the ones who should be evaluated. Why should a nine or ten year old child be? We're going to evaluate the teacher, to see how they're teaching. It's formatted like this to see why you're slipping through these little cracks and to make things more human.

Fernando: Yes, without a doubt. Putting in the grades is the most difficult process because at the end, you're giving out an opinion, and we want to be a space that's free of judgement to the world. It's like how different one is at sea or with children- you don't feel judged. On the other hand, in a meeting of adults everything is opinions and opinions. We want to be that space in which everyone can grow in the absence of judgement. Ideally, the administration would be able to generate the evaluation processes that we're doing, how we're doing it, how it can improve, what every child requires. Obviously, it's going to allow you to improve, be better, or see what shortcomings there are, to see if a child requires something, and those evaluation spaces allow you to also reflect about each child, including those who don't cause problems, because you aren't with them as much. Beyond that, giving a grade, a report card, well, it's something that, from my point of view, I don't believe in anymore.

I read in the descriptions that ecology is another one of the backbone elements of education at the Center. In what way is it present?

Fernando: Ecology in the Center is part of the day to day life. It's true that we are still distancing ourselves from what we don't want to be. Since the Center is not yet sustainable, we have a lot of waste material, but that's serving us as well so the whole community is conscious about what we do and how much waste material we're generating. We organize ecology around nodes and there's a committee of both adults and children that watch over it. They create posters that explain where to recycle, what to throw out, what to bring to recycling bins. They go throughout the classrooms explaining what it consists of. We have a garden project in which they plant what's in season -although it's true that with global warming it's a mess to know what grows in every moment, but we follow the meteorological tables and we learned through the yearly seasons what to plant and what season is closest. But this also serves the children by knowing what care the earth needs, what you can do and what you can't. It's about being with yourself, being yourself, and being with the environment. We also have a marvelous teacher that develops the content within the field of natural science and we're doing it in a transversal way, we're conscious about what we're doing not only for a moment, but throughout the whole day.

María: I find our garden project to be very interesting. When we first got here, the school was surrounded by asphalt. There was no green anywhere. There were two interesting projects, one for a garden and one for a forest. The forest project has taken 8 years to achieve because the asphalt around the school needed to be removed in order to be able to have a forest. It took us 8 years because economically, the cost was very high, and we presented the idea for many years to different public competitions and we finally found one that said yes. We're going to see if we can get this started this summer because things are going slow. And then the garden; the first year we lifted an area of asphalt to put in green space, but it was constantly destroyed because the Center is the place for street parties in the neighborhood. So, there wasn't a way to get the garden moving forward. For me, I think the idea that Laura, a science teacher, came up with this year is very beautiful. The idea was to talk with one of the neighbors, who lives close to the school and has his own little garden, to see if we could plant our garden there too, and we would take care of it. He said yes, so now the children go to the neighbor's garden to plant and nothing has been destroyed all year because it's on this neighbor's property, so it's closed off. But apart from having a garden that isn't being destroyed, it's also allowing us to open up to the neighborhood, which is one of our ongoing projects. It's hard to not be a family with anyone in the neighborhood. Most of the neighborhood doesn't even know we exist, that we're even here. So, we're going to welcome the ties to the neighborhood that the garden has brought us and also the ties that the forest will bring because we want to open up the neighborhood. This lets us care for the environment at an amplified level because it's not just us, but our whole neighborhood.

