# THEory into ACTion

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Vía Educación, A.C.: Promoting Citizen Competencies and Community Development

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Vía Educación, A.C. is a non-profit organization located in Monterrey, Mexico. It aims to improve people's quality of life by providing opportunities for social development through educational strategies. One of the founding members of the organization is Armando Estrada, who's a strong advocate for educational causes. His interest in education began early on when he was growing up in one of the poorest parts of Mexico, witnessing rural poverty and the differences in opportunities between people in the country and people in the city. He thought that if we wanted to improve people's life conditions, we ought to start through organizing, by collectively identifying needs and resources, and finding alternatives. He considered that organizing required training and skills development, which made him aware of education's importance in social development.

With this in mind Armando decided that he wanted to get a Master's degree, opting to study International Education, as he believed this could help him evaluate the differences between systems (e.g., economic, educational, etc.) and their relationship with the wellbeing of people. While studying he met many people who, like him, were touched by the idea that education can solve social issues.

Upon completing their education in Harvard, Armando and two of his colleagues came back to Mexico and started *Vía Educación*. Their first project focused on civic competencies (self-efficacy, empathy, participation, community organizing, democratic deliberation and peaceful coexistence). The project was called "*Aprender a Participar Participando*" (Learning to participate by participating) and was directed at primary and secondary school teachers, who received training from *Vía Educación* facilitators in order to develop civic competencies among their students, whose age ranged from 11 to 15 years old. This process was done within the civic assignments which were part of the student's regular curriculum. For this specific project,

Harvard faculty was involved, specifically collaborating on defining how the competencies could be taught and learned.

The development of the competencies occurred both in the classroom and through the implementation of participatory projects lead by the students and supervised by the teachers. Each project intended to improve a given aspect of the community, and students chose, after doing a needs assessment, which aspect they would like to focus on. The process of the program consists of:

1. Enabling a platform for social cohesion among community members
2. Identifying the community that the student will be working with (school, neighborhood, etc.)
3. Identifying a need within the community, through a needs assessment
4. Identifying the resources available and social capital
5. Developing an action plan in order to work with the identified necessity
6. Executing the action plan
7. Measuring its effects in the community and evaluating the project
8. Celebrating and defining next steps

The program has been implemented since 2005, and for the 2013-2014 period, 184 teachers participated and involved their 6,440students, who generated 184 participatory projects to improve their communities. The following video presents testimonials from teachers involved in the program throughout its implementation: [Development of Democratic Citizenship Program](Development of Democratic Citizenship Program)

As the program "Learning to Participate by Participating" continued, the need to work in different community settings arose, and 3 other programs were created; all of which followed the same series of steps from the first program: identifying a need and resources, developing an action plan, executing it and evaluating the results. The creation of the other programs permitted to work more directly with secondary youths in a program called "*Círculos Juveniles de Participación*" (Youth Participation Circles), with adults at organizational settings in a program called "*Círculos Ciudadanos para la Transformación Social*" (Citizens Circles towards Social Transformation) and with marginalized communities at a program called "*Red Comunitaria*" (Community Network).

The project's mission and values, such as empowerment and citizen participation, and its focus on social justice and community engagement, closely align with those of the field of community psychology, as each of the projects developed by the students, youth and adults aim to bring a positive transformation to the community.

*Vía Educación* is a way for the people to become active members of their communities and to help transform them with their views and concerns, through the implementation of participatory projects. Another plus is that instead of the team having to go to one school or setting once a year, this process promotes people to become facilitators of change in their own communities, which leads not only to empowerment of its members, but to sustainability. Such open communities help connect even the most disconnected communities.

In 2012 *Vía Educación* was evaluated by Filantrofilia, a national leader in third sector evaluations, and ranked 6th among 200 non-profit organizations in Mexico. The evaluation was based on the organization's reach, efficiency, efficacy, and return on investment. Additionally in 2013 *Vía Educación* was recognized as a human's rights advocate by Nuevo León's State Government.

It is Vía Educación's ultimate belief that through educational strategies and empowerment, communities have the potential to transform themselves and better their life conditions.

To learn more about *Vía Educación*, click on the following links:

- Video from the program  Youth Participation Circles (you can get subtitles, in the CC icon)
- Website: http://viaeducacion.org/
- Annual Report (2013): http://www.viaeducacion.org/descargas/annual_report_2013.pdf
- Idealist Profile: http://www.idealist.org/view/nonprofit/z6cDXN5Jn8Np/

*This is one of a series of bulletins highlighting the use of community psychology in practice. Comments, suggestions, and questions are welcome. Please direct them to Bill Berkowitz at William_Berkowitz@uml.edu*