

# report



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# VESS model

## A person-based educational transformation

by Ana Moreno Salvo

### INTERVIEW WITH ANA MARÍA FERNÁNDEZ AND GILBERTO PINZÓN

**S**ome time ago, you created the VESS model of institutional transformation. What made you do it? What are the hallmarks of the educational model you are proposing?

**Ana María Fernández (AMF):** The VESS model was created 35 years ago out of a personal, or shall we say family, need. When our children were born, we suddenly needed to understand what was happening in education. We began to realise that there was little educational innovation and that schools were still offering the same education that we, our parents and grandparents had received. We became quite concerned and began to realise that education needed to transform its outlook.

It became our life mission to

understand that the transformation of education must be institutional and has four dimensions: it should be transformed from the institution and its educational policies; from the paradigms of teachers who teach according to how they see the student in the future and their own professional responsibility; from the students themselves, how they empower themselves and grow; and from the vantage point of education as a social transformer that therefore works with families, in a community.

**It should be transformed from the institution and from the paradigms of teachers and students**

This is the origin of the VESS model (Vida Equilibrada con Sentido y Sabiduría, or Balanced Life with Meaning and Wisdom), which seeks to understand why everything we do, all the decisions we make, are based on our emotions. This is true of how we think, how we work and how we make decisions in different situations in life. VESS is a cutting-edge model: it is based on the neuroscience of learning. It is an eclectic model because we do not believe that there is one absolute truth. There are many fascinating approaches and lots of research on learning and didactics, pedagogy, psychology and leadership that are important for this educational transformation.

It is a strategic and systematic model because we believe that the student is a learner who undergoes

# The VESS model is cutting-edge, eclectic, strategic, sustainable and human-centred

a process and receives support, just like the adult. To change the adult's paradigms, to make the adult learn, we have to help them to become a learner. We do not want a school to depend on just a few people who know but to achieve a change in the institution's internal engine.

This model is human-centred, not curriculum-centred. To have balance, we have to learn certain subjects, we have to read about certain topics, we have to understand our context, we have to have a purpose in life, and we have understand the why and live with wise actions. We are absolutely convinced that this starts in childhood and is experienced throughout the

school years.

In short, the VESS model is cutting-edge, eclectic, strategic, sustainable and human-centred.

## The education sector has been going through a critical time of transformation for years. How do you think that is affecting educational institutions? What about the teaching profession?

**Gilberto Pinzón (GP):** Our educational model is more a process of questioning than transformation. It is a more reflective and analytical process. Also, I think the word "transformation" is rather hackneyed. Many people believe that educational innovation is about introducing iPads into the classroom, while its core essence remains exactly the same.

In some places there are offshoots that are trying to effect this educational transformation. Technology is coming at us so fast

and in such a significant way that there seems to be no way to oppose this current of transformation.

Education is still a bit outdated, disconnected from reality. The world is going one way and schools are still teaching the way they did 30, 40 or 50 years ago.

I think the teaching profession needs to look outward a bit more. We tend to focus on the world inside our four walls and don't realise what is happening outside.

**AMF:** The VESS model offers a model of change, a process that consists of training leaders and teachers that allows room for implementation and support. The VESS model has had a

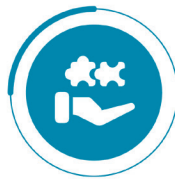
## The model is centred on humans who learn, have a purpose in life and live wisely



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## I am a teacher, I have a real concern each person and I collaborate in the construction of society and in the development of the individual

positive impact because it manages to generate a pace of change. We become learners and give ourselves permission to reflect in order to learn and to open the door for colleagues to visit us in our classroom. In the VESS model, we work a lot on opening up. There are schools that have had training in certain subjects and others in others; there are schools that have teachers who have made a lot of progress and transformed themselves, while others are still very much mired in traditional education.

It is a respectful model that transforms people and paradigms. We know that it has prompted changes in the lives of many teachers that go beyond the educational dimension. This model affects both the institution and the individual, plus it builds a culture of VESS thinking.

One of the things we find with educators with the model is that it professionalises their work so that they begin to bring more meaning and purpose to what they do. I am not just a math teacher, but I have a real concern for this person: I collaborate in the construction of society and in the development of an individual. And I do this in a way that will have repercussions for the rest of their life. It is an awareness of the value of our role as educators.

**In your experience supporting so many institutions on their path of transformation, what do you think are the keys to progressively moving forward somewhat**

### successfully?

**GP:** The first thing is to have a purpose and a clear sense of what you want to do. In its processes and challenges, transformation requires enormous clarity of purpose: why I want to transform myself and the end goal of my transformation.

The first key is purpose: the motive and the “end goal”. The second has to do with the question of leadership. We see institutions that are navigating a positive process and others that are having major difficulties implementing the transformation process. The big difference is unquestionably the leadership. When there is leadership, the direction, commitment and meaning are clear. The leader is able to transmit it and to infect those around them, to motivate and support them.

The last fundamental factor is that the educational community being exposed to this process has to understand that it is a process, not an event. When the “end goal” and “why” are understood, the transformation process is properly structured and the team is involved, with the understanding that this is a medium- to long-term undertaking.

### **What does the teacher training in your training process consist of? In your experience, what is the key to achieving the lifelong learning motivation and attitude in teachers?**

**AMF:** Each individual has different entryways to motivation. The first thing is to understand the principle of differentiation, human variability. We can't expect the whole team to be motivated simply because we brought in a motivator. This is a process in which there are different types of resistance, so we have to discover each person's entryway.

Our trainings have a practical component, as well as a lot of reflection. We believe it is very important for educators to be able to live the experience that

they are going to transmit to their students. For this reason, we create practical and reflective workshops with different levels of difficulty. We provide training in visible thinking routines using Harvard University's Project Zero approach, which is a great foundation for us. We talk about concept mapping, habits of mind, the culture of thought, strategic planning and assessment, character building and emotional education, as well as mental health. We were taught to talk a lot about “emotional education”, but that is not enough, given that we educators have to understand mental health and character formation from the theory of mind, in short, from systems thinking.

But it doesn't happen all at once. Our trainings are strategically coordinated in such a way that teachers can experience a process and not feel overwhelmed. I believe that we educators are now overwhelmed with a bombardment of theories, approaches and models. Part of what we are trying to do is to present it in a gradual, comprehensive way.

Our training programmes are strengthened by supporting the leaders. The leader is fundamental in the transformation; it is essential to work with them in this training and support.

**Nowadays, there is a lot of talk about educational coaching, co-teaching, pedagogical reflection of the teaching team, etc. What do you consider to be the keys to continuous improvement for teachers? What techniques,**

**The difference is the leadership When there is leadership, the direction, commitment and meaning are clear**

## methods or strategies do you think are the most effective?

**GP:** This is somewhat complex because we are going to deconstruct the model that has been implemented for centuries, which is deeply entrenched in each of us. Now we have to rethink everything that happens in the classroom. We have to create essential support strategies, such as coaching. This can be done virtually, with well-organised and well-planned sessions where teachers can chat, ask questions and help in the transformation process.

Face-to-face coaching helps a lot, even if it initially generates stress on the part of the teacher and the institution. Everyone knows that in the end it is for their own benefit. We want to promote everything from a positive point of view, from the perspective of people celebrating the transformation process, despite its difficulties, and introducing mistakes as an inherent part of the learning process.

Connecting it to the other question, about how we get them motivated, it is about generating a reflection on why I am doing what I am doing, why I chose this profession. The goal is not just to teach multiplication tables or explaining the French Revolution, but to help students to better understand the world and themselves. So, one of the objectives is to redefine the teaching career and the teaching profession. This is often motivating, because one of the elements of motivation is having a purpose in life, and mine is to help transform and impact lives. It is a motivating element that has to be kept alive.

**AMF:** I would like to add two things that I think are fundamental to

**We want to introduce mistakes as an inherent part of the learning process**

the VESS model's approach to this transformation. One is that we are intrinsically motivated when we find purpose in what we do. We are also intrinsically motivated when we see that we are able to do it. If you set a goal that is too high, it will be difficult to motivate someone. If, on the other hand, we advance step by step and see the results while being allowed to reflect and see how this effort is really generating a change, then we feel satisfied. The awareness that we can do it is fundamental to motivation. It is extremely important.

The second factor I wanted to add is related to the issue of coaching. I think there is a lot of talk about coaching today. In our view, a mentor is someone who sometimes gives you answers, but at other times they may simply guide you in a reflection and help you build it. In addition, we believe in "co-coaching", if we can call it that. That is, a space for reflection among educators. Our style of coaching is with groups, as opposed to the old truism that it should be private and one-on-one. If you look at John Hattie's research, you will see that one of the indispensable factors in the success of educational transformation is collaborative work among teachers. So, part of the support we promote is conversations among teaching teams who reflect together, help each other and do not become dependent on the outside person acting as a "coach".

The idea is that when we are no longer there, the autonomy that has been developed will allow the teams to continue looking at each other, reflecting together and "co-coaching" each other. That's why we believe it is essential for each institution to have its own trainers, and we offer them training.

**One important dimension of academic achievement and the positive impact of education on children and youth is the family. What is the role of parents in the**

## One of the objectives is to redefine the teaching profession to help transform and impact lives

### VESS model?

**GP:** They are very important, if not all-important. As I said before, we are attached to an old model that has marked us, which we want to change and, in fact, are already changing. Soon parents see that their children are talking, working and developing differently. This means that parents have to be fully involved; they have to be participants. Within the VESS model there are specific strategies and practices to involve parents in the process so that they understand what we are doing, that it is a culture of thinking, that these are habits of mind and that you don't memorise but understand things, and so on. Within a culture, all the stakeholders that are part of that social group have to be included, and parents are an important and essential part of it. In the VESS model, children present their progress and results. In the past, teachers would meet with families and tell what or how the child was doing. Now the child is the one who meets their parents at school in a special setting. They are called "student-led conferences", and the children are the ones who tell how they are doing.

**AMF:** The model proposes spaces for lectures, spaces for reflection with families, units of inquiry or work projects to be done by students who have to figure out how to impact the community (be it family, neighbourhood or outside community). We want the school not to be a strange laboratory where people don't know what's going on outside, but a safe place where they learn how to discover the world around them, which is a universal

## Students meet their parents at school in a special setting and tell them how they are doing at school

community.

We founded this model, we are passionate about it and we have seen results. But beyond our perspective, there are thousands of educators who have experienced the transformation model with VESS, and it is a pleasure to see educators

who were just getting by on inertia rediscover the passion and vocation that led them to study education. This is a huge achievement. The conversation with families is different when educators experience the transformation process. There is a greater respect for the teaching profession because you are no longer the one who delivers information that students can look up on the Internet but a trainer of people who understands how the brain works. For us, it is essential to understand how it works in order to professionalise the teaching profession. As an educator, I am proud to say that this is already

happening in many institutions. It is more complex in some than in others, but nonetheless it is always achieved. This is my last message: people who are hesitating should be encouraged, they should be encouraged to transform themselves. Education is much better when you transform yourself.

