



Universitat de Barcelona

UNIT 1

INTRODUCTION: SCIENTIFIC BASIS IN LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Training in Learning Communities



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This unit covers initial and general aspects of Learning Communities, demonstrating their plurality and placing them in the context of the current information society. The functionality of Learning Communities is clarified using the foundation of scientific evidence, rather than educational opinions based on assumptions.

Successful Educational Actions (SEAs) are also defined as proven by the international scientific community and their contribution to improvements in the learning of students, both boys and girls, as well as the coexistence at a given educational centre is addressed.

This training material presents the concepts and ideas most extensively developed in publications and scientific articles and those which are explained in the Learning Communities project presentations and seminars and in the awareness-raising phase. The content of these units is based on more in-depth published material.

1.1. Introduction to Learning Communities

‘Schools as Learning Communities’ is a project based on a set of Successful Educational Actions aimed at fostering social and educational transformation. The educational model itself is in line with international scientific theories which emphasise two key factors for learning in today’s society: interaction and community participation.

Learning Communities involve everybody who, either directly or indirectly, has an influence on the learning and development of students, both boys and girls. These individuals include those from the school staff body, members of related associations, local district organisations as well as relatives, friends, neighbors and volunteers.

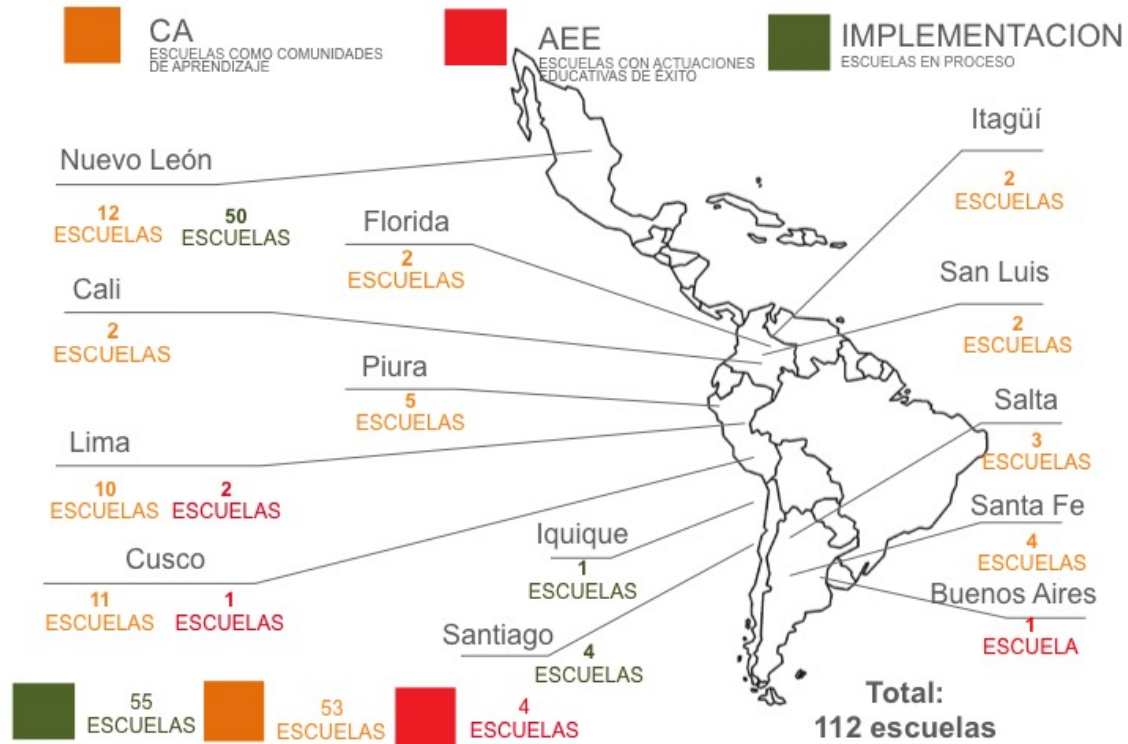
This proposed transformation in practice is orientated towards an ideal scenario in which the school and the education community as a whole work together to turn difficulties into opportunities and improve the living conditions of all boys and girls. The transformation begins with dialogue and evidence-based practise among the whole education community and the project ultimately achieves double objectives: overcoming academic failure and strengthening a sense of community and true coexistence.

The Learning Communities project started in Spanish schools in 1995. Nowadays there are over 600 schools implementing Successful Educational Actions all over the world in

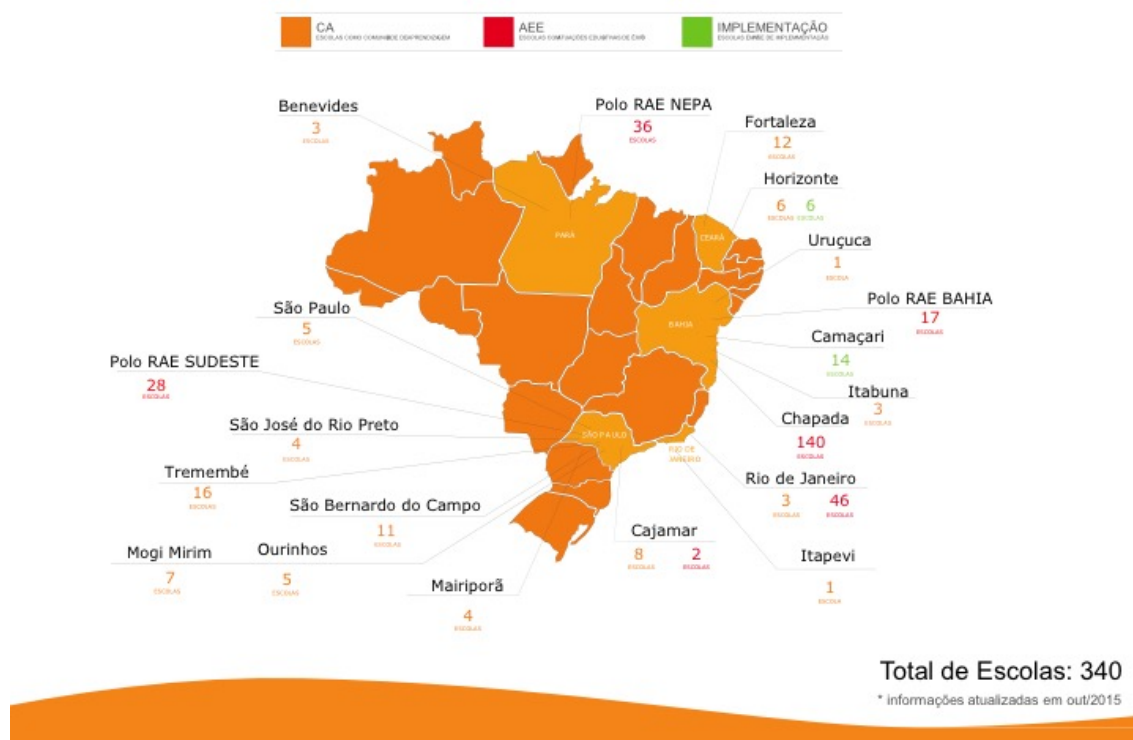
early years, primary and secondary schools in a wide variety of countries and also contexts.



Escuelas en América Latina



Escuelas en Brasil



The following links provide information on schools as Learning Communities across the world:

Spain:

http://utopiadream.info/ca/centros-en-funcionamiento/lLista_cda/

Latin America:

<http://www.comunidaddeaprendizaje.com.es/escuelas>

Europe:

<http://seas4all.eu/>

The first ever Learning Community was an adult learning establishment in La Verneda-Sant Martí. It was founded in 1978 when residents of the district of La Verneda in Barcelona formed a school with the aim of making education accessible and enjoyable for each and every local resident. An article about La Verneda-Sant Martí was published in 1999 in the world's most prestigious university education periodical, the

Harvard Education Review, entitled *A School Where people dare to dream* (Sánchez Aroca, 1999) (*Una escuela donde las personas se atreven a soñar*). A Spanish education project had never before been published in this journal.

In the 1990s, CREA (Community of Researchers on Excellence for All) at the University of Barcelona initiated the implementation of the Learning Communities project in early years, primary and secondary education centres. This project was based on outcomes from the research of the international scientific community as whole and prominent experts in various fields across the world. Throughout the years since then, enthusiasm and support for the project has been maintained as has essential collaboration with key participating universities, governments and organisations. As a result, the project makes real the research and comes ever closer to creating a better quality educational system and a better future for students, their families and teachers.

The CREA¹ research centre counts on the participation of some 80 researchers in a variety of disciplines (sociology, economics, education, psychology, biology, anthropology, communication, history, law and politics) who are from various countries and who have a variety of cultural, religious and socio-economic backgrounds. CREA works closely with researchers at some of the most prominent universities in the world (Harvard, Wisconsin and Cambridge, amongst others) and holds seminars with leading experts in key subjects and disciplines. Such individuals include Paulo Freire, Judith Butler, Michael Apple, John Searle and Jerome Bruner. CREA has coordinated several projects of the European Commission Framework Programme (one such project is INCLUD-ED that we herewith explain). Furthermore, CREA is leading or has led 27 research projects within the R+D National Plan. Each piece of research shares the goal of developing evidence-based knowledge which upholds the hypothesis that its outcomes decrease social inequalities. Apple (2012), in his book *Can education change society?* (*¿Puede la educación cambiar la sociedad?*), refers to the work carried out by CREA:

It is also present in the work of CREA in Barcelona, where educational efforts with immigrant women enable new alliances to be built that allow mutual respect over religious differences, give women a sense of cultural power, and create the possibility of women's agency in other areas of their lives. It is also very visible in CREA's equally creative efforts with youth and minorities groups (Soler, 2011). Many other examples could be given here. Making this success visible, in essence acting as the critical secretaries of these "movements in formation" is an important act of support. It is also a crucial way of interrupting the feeling that there is little that can be done that has lasting benefits. Nothing could be further from the truth) (Apple, 2012, p. 158).

¹ <http://crea.ub.edu/index/>

At present, schools as Learning Communities are located in various cities and environments (García, Lastikka, & Petreñas, 2013). They are both in cities and their surrounding areas as well as in rural areas. Some of these centres are located in areas which experience severe social-economic problems —poverty, unemployment and social unrest— and others are located in middle-class or upper-middle-class communities. There are also centres in which over 80% of the student body was not born in the country or is from an ethnic minority group, including Roma. However, some centres have very few students of different ethnicity or nationality. The initial motivation which each centre had for making a transformative change varied. Some felt a need for change due to poor results or seemingly unsolvable social problems. Others desired improvement in results in an existing satisfactory environment in which community participation would never be a problem. In summary, current schools as Learning Communities around the world vary hugely in their needs and objectives, their pedagogy, beliefs and approaches, and their management and staffing structures.

In centres dealing with problems such as poverty, an atmosphere of discontent, poor sense of community or high levels of absenteeism and poor results, changes achieved through the Learning Communities project are more significant. However, it must be stressed that Learning Communities can be implemented all types of schools in all contexts to achieve higher educational excellence, improvements in social cohesion and the practicing of community values.

The following websites are recommended for finding out more about Learning Communities:

www.comunidadesdeaprendizaje.net

<http://www.comunidaddeaprendizaje.com.es/>

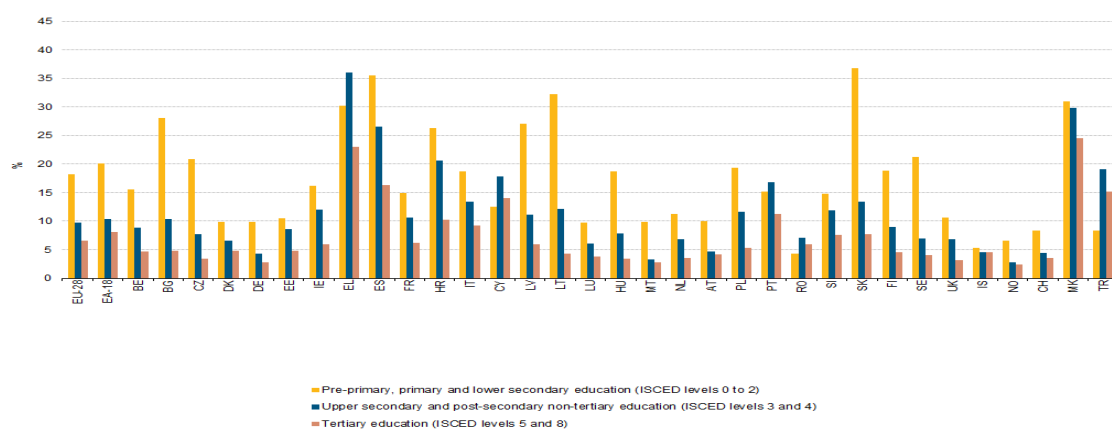
1.2. The information society

An industrial society dominated the 20th century. However, towards the end of the century a new type of society began to emerge in which information was at the core. Even though this post-industrial society is now well established, many ideas about learning and day-to-day educational processes are entrenched in the old industrial society. Therefore the key challenge for the project is to help bring educational centres into the current information society while continuing to help them to understand the relevance of its science-based theories.

In the industrial society, individual and organisational success was linked to availability of material resources and production. In contrast, in current society, success is dependent on availability of intellectual resources and information and possessing skills in information selection and processing (Flecha, Gómez,& Puigvert, 2001). Learning how to process and use information are essential and demonstrates the importance of education as never before. The opportunities that children of both sexes have ahead of them depends greatly on the qualifications they may ultimately achieve and their ability to make the most of a world full of information presented in many forms of media in various languages and dialects etc.

Figures below clearly show there is a close correlation between acquired training and employment opportunities. Here, the average unemployment rate in EU-28 for those aged between 25 and 64 who had attained at most a lower secondary education was 18.2%. This was much higher than the rate of unemployment for those who had obtained a tertiary education qualification (6.6 %) (Eurostat, 2016)².

Figure 1: Unemployment rate by educational attainment



² From: http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Unemployment_statistics

This correlation can also be observed not only in employment rates, but also job status, job stability and earnings. In the EU, the median gross hourly earnings of employees with a high level of education (EUR 16.3) was almost 50% higher than the figure for those with an average level of education (EUR 11.3) and 70% above the level recorded for employees with a low level of education (EUR 9.6) (Eurostat, 2016)³.

Figure 2: Median gross hourly earnings by level of education (EUR, 2010)

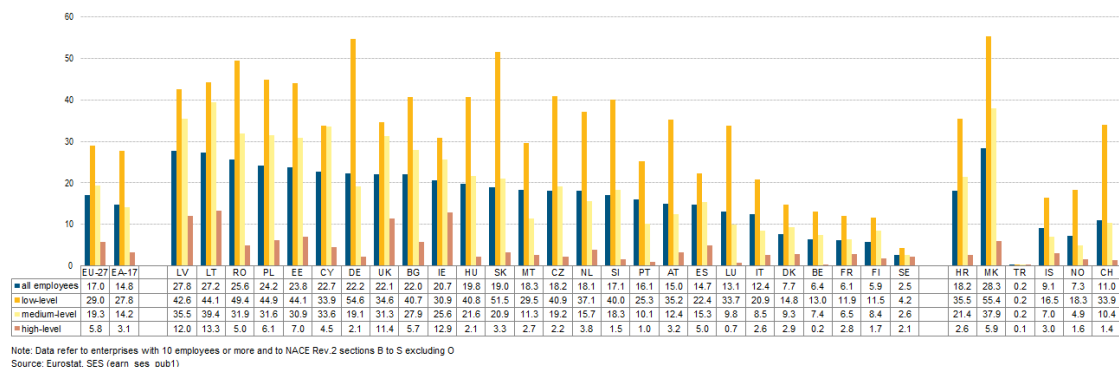
	Total	Low	Medium	High
EU-27	11.9	9.6	11.3	16.3
EA-17	13.2	9.8	13.3	18.6
BE	16.4	14.0	15.1	23.2
BG	1.5	1.1	1.3	2.3
CZ	4.4	3.2	4.3	6.6
DK	25.0	21.0	23.5	28.6
DE	15.4	9.8	15.1	25.0
EE	4.1	2.9	3.5	5.5
IE	18.3	15.0	16.5	22.9
ES	9.4	7.8	9.1	13.5
FR	13.7	11.4	12.6	17.6
IT	11.9	10.0	12.7	19.5
CY	9.4	8.0	7.6	15.3
LV	2.9	2.1	2.4	4.3
LT	2.7	1.9	2.0	3.8
LU	17.8	13.5	16.9	26.9
HU	3.4	2.5	3.2	5.5
MT	7.5	6.1	7.7	10.9
NL	15.3	11.5	14.9	21.4
AT	13.0	9.8	13.0	19.2
PL	4.0	2.8	3.4	6.9
PT	5.1	4.1	5.3	11.8
RO	2.0	1.3	1.7	3.3
SI	7.2	5.2	6.6	12.3
SK	3.9	2.6	3.7	5.6
FI	16.0	14.1	14.3	19.0
SE	14.9	13.7	14.3	15.9
UK	12.6	9.9	10.5	16.4
IS	10.0	8.4	10.1	11.9
NO	25.0	20.4	24.2	29.2
CH	22.4	16.4	21.1	32.4
HR	4.8	3.5	4.4	7.5
MK	2.5	1.6	2.0	3.3
TR	2.1	1.9	2.2	4.5

Note: Data refer to enterprises with 10 employees or more and to NACE Rev.2 sections B to S excluding O

Source: Eurostat, SES (earn_ses_pub2)

³ Taken from: http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Earnings_statistics

Figure 3: Proportion of low-wage earners by educational attainment



Another key feature of today's society is the mixing of a wide range of cultures, religions, lifestyles, family practices, community identities and languages which become increasingly diverse with each passing day. There have also been changes in our working practices, organisational structures and how we choose to interact. Ideas of hierarchical authority and power are being questioned and, more importantly, rejected. Knowledge experts in the knowledge sector have lost their monopoly and been replaced by leaders of corporations who have begun working together. Regarding learning, this is gradually less dependent on what is being taught in classrooms, to move forward and include what students learnt in many other spaces such as schoolyards, school canteen, libraries, scouts, streets, home, internet and others (Diez, Gatt & Racionero, 2011; Elboj, Puigdemívol, Soler, & Valls, 2002).

However, educational organisations and educational reforms are currently failing to respond to these changes and accompanying challenges and most of them still work with the original model inherited from an industrial society. Actions, such as separating out groups according to learning level, segregation into separate classrooms and expulsion from classrooms or schools have for many decades been proven to generate inequality as well as social and educational exclusion.

If centres are to ensure that each and every student develops successfully within an information society, it must be done with an honest look at their current circumstances and an awareness of the society students are likely to find themselves in future decades. Any resulting action must then be based on the evidence-based educational research which is available today.

1.3. Scientific basis of Learning Communities

Traditional teaching and learning practices provided by schools must be rooted in evidence-based theories which are accepted by the international scientific community. Learning Communities are no different and are founded on theories and practices which are proven to be educationally successful.

From assumptions to evidence

One of the main reasons why today's schools cannot respond to the real needs of their student body and the challenges which an information society presents is due to the fact that a lot of practices, and strategies currently undertaken are not based on scientific evidence and knowledge. Also, many educational reforms and practices are not based on theories recognised as being effective either. In an interview, Ramón Flecha stated that education in Spain, in many instances, has been based on assumptions.

'For example, someone says that the meaningful learning of Ausubel has to be enforced and even so this statement has not been endorsed by any highly regarded university in the world, neither is it scientifically supported and it becomes considered in Spain as a tenet'. (Casals, 2012: 21)

Recent PISA reports indicate that results in Spain show that the policies and measures which have been implemented have been neither good enough to improve the academic performance of the student body nor been successful in lowering the dropout rate.

As shown in the charts below, data from the PISA evaluation in Spain⁴ demonstrates how marks in Spain in maths and reading skills are maintained in the period 2000-2012 but with results below those average results achieved with OECD actions. The same trend occurs in the sciences which, although showing some recovery in recent years, the chart shows they are always below the results average attained with OECD actions⁵.

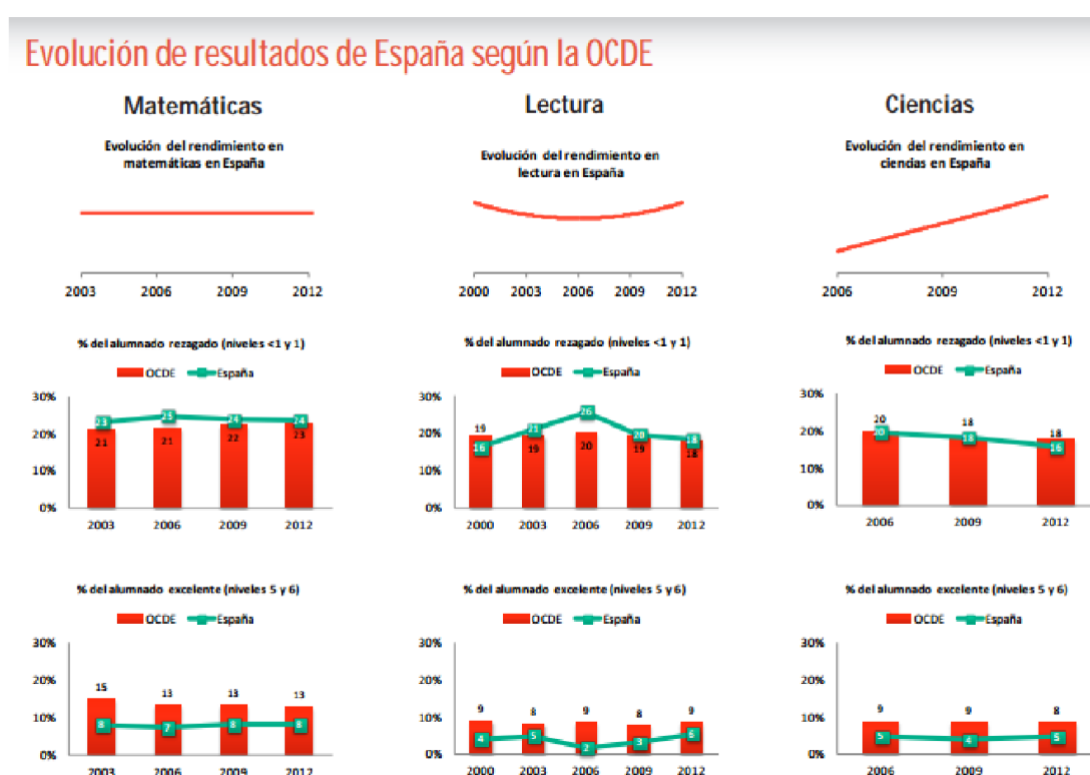
4.<http://www.mecd.gob.es/dctm/inee/internacional/pisa2012/boletin22pisa2012.pdf?documentId=0901e72b8178aae2> [checked on 26th April 2016]

Figure 4: PISA results for Spain, 2012

	Maths	Reading	Sciences
OECD average	494	496	501
EUROPE average	489	489	497
SPAIN	484	488	496

Source: Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport (2013)

Figure 5: Evolution of PISA results for Spain according to OECD



Source: Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport (2013b)⁵

In order to alter such trends, educational processes and activities cannot be based upon the assumptions of supposed experts, on commonly held *bona fide* ideas, or on the opinions of teaching staff, they can only be based on evidence-based research from the international scientific community.

⁵ Based on Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport data report.
<http://www.mecd.gob.es/dctm/inee/internacional/pisa2012/boletin21pisa2012.pdf?documentId=0901e72b8178650b>
 [checked on 26th April 2016]

In the introduction to the book *Dialogical Learning in an Information Society* by Aubert et al. (2008), a clear comparison with medical disciplines is made: '*What do we expect from a doctor? That he/she gives us the treatment that everywhere in the world has proved to be the most effective at overcoming our health problem. We do not want that the treatment is based on his/her expertise, but on the expertise of millions of doctors across the world. We do not want that they are using forty-year-old theories, but those being compiled nowadays that, no doubt, benefit from the knowledge and procedures provided by their predecessors*' (Aubert et al., 2008: 17).

The information society uses access to international resources which enables it to maintain close contact with the international scientific community and their research into education and social research. This then provides an effective framework of reference from which to create successful educational actions.

The international scientific community

The international scientific community consists of internationally renowned published experts, both men and women, in various scientific fields in top research programmes at the most prestigious universities worldwide as well as publications which have the most influence and highest impact (scientific magazines are indexed in a database according to reputation and scientific rigour).

Scientific reviews: There are a great many magazines in the educational field. Many of them publish articles on experiences and practices in education. Scientific journals, on the other hand, abide by procedures to guarantee the rigour, scientific validity and novelty of the submitted results, using peer review processes (not knowing the identity of the authors). Currently, the journals held in the highest scientific recognition are those indexed in the *Journal Citation Report* (JCR). Articles on Learning Communities and Successful Educational Actions have also been published in such journals as the *European Journal of Education*, *Qualitative Inquiry* or the *Journal of Psychodidactics*.

Scientific articles can be consulted in specialised **data base** such as ISI Web of Science or ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center). On the other hand, the Journal Citation Report is an organised selection by quartiles of the highest scientific impact journals indexed on ISI or ERIC and focused on the

field of educational research. Although gaining access to journals via the aforementioned sites can require payment or subscription, increasing numbers of scientific magazines are being made available on open access. This is the case in *PLOS ONE*⁶, the world's first multidisciplinary open access journal, which provides a platform on which to publish primary research including interdisciplinary and replication studies as well as negative results. With the same philosophy, *SIOR*⁷ (*Social Impact Open Repository*) is an open access repository on which to display, share and store the social impact of research results.

The top universities in the world: There are various rankings which assess universities based on, for example, research output, innovation, and quality of publications. One of the most well-known of such rankings is the *Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU)*. Universities such as Harvard, Stanford, MIT, Berkeley or Cambridge, appear in the top few of each of its lists. The websites of these universities provide us with access to their current and proposed activities and projects of their research centres, teams and researchers.

Research programmes: Not every project or piece of research shares identical scientific validity. Many public administrations or private entities such as foundations, companies and so on, entrust research to trustworthy people without assessing the scientific rigour of the project in question. Furthermore, results and conclusions can be biased towards the particular political or economic goals of those who finance such research. Scientific research programmes include external evaluations prior to approval and, increasingly, also evaluate grant projects. In Europe, the multi-annual programme Horizon 2020 (2014-2020)⁸ of the European Commission is the most important supporting research programme. With a budget of 80,000 billion euros, Horizon 2020 promotes research, innovation and competitiveness in order to respond to social, economic and environmental challenges in European society.

⁶<http://journals.plos.org/plosone/>

⁷ <http://www.ub.edu/sior/sior.php>

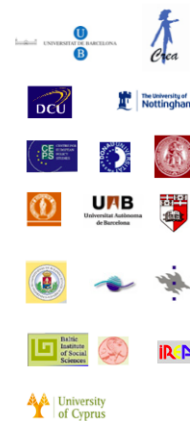
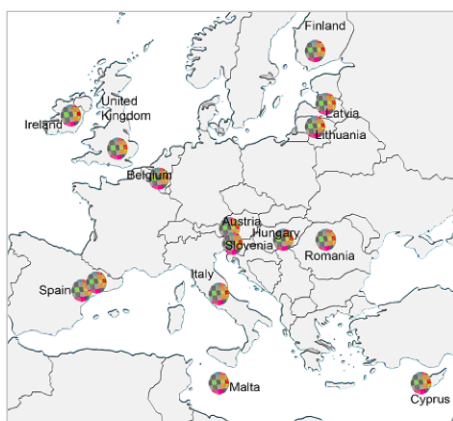
⁸ <http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/horizon2020/> [checked March 2016]

INCLUD-ED Project

Within the 6th European Research Framework Programme, *INCLUD-ED (Strategies for Inclusion and Social Cohesion in Europe from Education, 2006-2011)* was an integrated project about school education which was

provided by the European Commission with the highest level of resources and range of scientific input of all Framework Programme projects up to that point. Furthermore, INCLUD-ED was the only social sciences and humanities project in the 10 Framework Programme success stories

selected by the European Commission for their impact⁹.

INCLUDE-ED Consortium

INCLUD-ED was conducted over five years (2006-2011) by a consortium coordinated by the research centre CREA in which 15 partners from 14 different countries participated, involving over 100 researchers.

INCLUD-ED analysed the education strategies which contribute to overcoming inequalities as well as promoting social cohesion and the education strategies which generate social exclusion. INCLUD-ED reviewed the main theories and scientific proposals on the aforementioned topics from across the world. It also examined education reforms in all EU member countries and the activities undertaken in education centres which achieved education success, both in schooling and social cohesion, despite working in challenging contexts. 22 surveys were carried out on specific cases and six other linear cases, the results of which were followed up over four years. The project particularly focussed on five vulnerable groups: people with disabilities, cultural minorities, immigrants, children and women. It also focussed on four areas linked to exclusion: housing, employment, health and political participation.

One of the key features of INCLUD-ED was its approach, that of its communicative methodology (Flecha & Soler, 2014). This approach was characterised by its continuous dialogue between researchers and the international scientific community on the one hand and the numerous social agents, particularly the people whose groups were being studied, on the

⁹ http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-11-520_en.htm [checked March 2016]

other. The dialogue allowed for sharing, verification and stronger interpretations as a whole throughout the research process which enabled a lower vulnerability to mistakes and working from biased standpoint. Such issues are commonly a problem in research traditionally undertaken with vulnerable groups.

Aside from being made available in scientific publications (over 60 articles were added to *JCR* and *SCOPUS* and 36 articles were included on other databases), INCLUD-ED results were submitted to the European Parliament as well as other forums in various political spheres, thereby making a remarkable political impact. The European Commission, the European Parliament and the European Council have accommodated INCLUD-ED results in many resolutions and communications¹⁰. In the reference documents, they recommend the implementation of Successful Educational Actions (SEAs) and schools as Learning Communities.

Conclusions of the Council on May 11th 2010 regarding social scope of education and training:

10. Promote successful inclusive education approaches for all pupils, including those with special needs, by making schools learning communities in which a sense of inclusion and mutual support is nurtured and in which the talents of all pupils are recognised. Monitor the impact of such approaches, in particular with a view to raising access and graduation rates of learners with special needs at all levels of the education system. (European Union Council 2010: C 135)

Communication: Tackling premature school drop-out: a key contribution to the Europa 2020 agenda, January 2011:

Schools as 'learning communities' agree on a common vision, basic values and objectives of school development. It increases the commitment of pupils, teachers, parents and other stakeholders and supports school quality and development. 'Learning communities' inspire both teachers and pupils to seek improvement and take ownership of their learning processes. It creates favourable conditions also for reducing school drop-out and for helping pupils at risk of dropping out. (European Commission, 2011: 7)

¹⁰ <http://creaub.info/included/impact/includ-ed-political-impact/> [checked March 2016]

Recommendations of the Council, 28th June 2011, relative to policies to decrease premature school drop-out:

1. Developing schools into learning communities based on a common vision for school development shared by all stakeholders, using the experience and knowledge of all, and providing an open-minded, inspiring and comfortable environment to encourage young people to continue in education and training. (European Union Council 2011: C 191)

Apart from these three resolutions recognised by the EU regarding Learning Communities, there are a further two recognised by the European Parliament. The first one is **about the education of the immigrants' children** in order to ensure access and the continuation of the immigrant student body and cultural minorities within a quality education system (European Parliament, 2009). The second resolution relates to **the inclusion of Roma people** to combat any form of social and educational exclusion towards Roma people and prioritise inclusion projects which foster educational success and contribute to the participation of Roma students' families (European Parliament, 2011).

In those training materials we frequently refer to the INCLUD-ED results, which are available to those professional involved in the educational or community field at any time at: <http://creaub.info/included/>

1.4. Successful Educational Actions (SEAs)

Within the international scientific community, there is significant data available providing information regarding how some educational procedures generate inequality, failure, and resource inefficiency while others, on the other hand, generate efficiency, success, equality and resource efficiency. Assumptions are likely to promote activities which do not generate efficiency or equality whereas evidence fosters actions which generate improved results with better use of available resources.

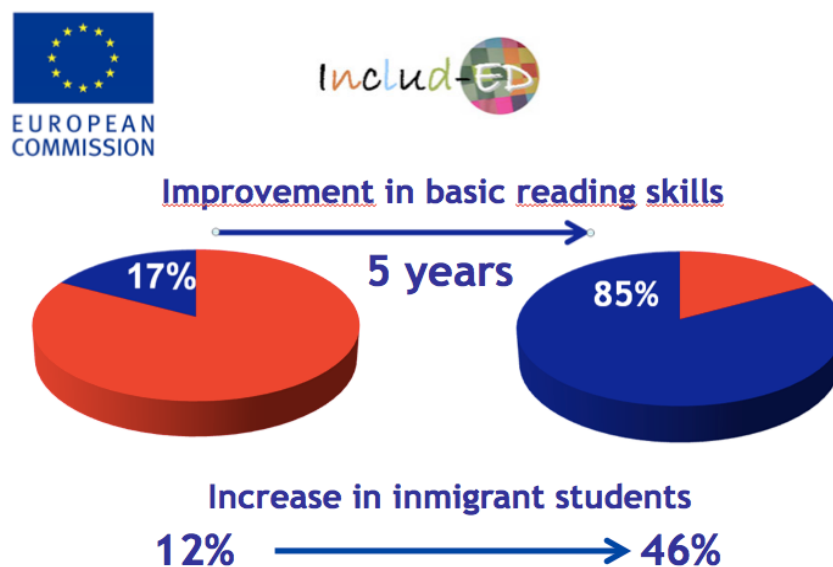
Successful Educational Actions (SEAs) as a term is not synonym for 'good practice' as the latter is frequently used to refer to activities which may have little scientific evidence to prove they contribute to success. Also, "good practice" or even "best practice" are some times focused and can be explained within a very specific situation. Successful Educational Actions on the other hand are valid and applicable in all contexts and situations. (Flecha, 2015)

The basic principles in regarding an action as being successful are:

1. The action generates improvements in academic results of the whole student body.
2. The action can be implemented in various situations which means that irrelevant of where they are applied, they achieve similar results.
3. The two preceding items have been proven in scientific research which takes into account everybody involved in the educational community.
4. The three preceding items have been endorsed in publications of the scientific international community.

The following chart shows an increase over five years in the percentage of students in one particular INCLUD-ED school who achieved basic reading skills after the implementation of Successful Educational Actions. Furthermore, over the same period of time, the proportion of immigrant students at the school almost quadrupled. This fact is extremely important as it shows that the cultural background of students have no influence in academic results, as the implementation or not of SEAs.

Figure 6:



Source: Learning Communities web site. [checked on February 2016]]

Learning Communities carry out Successful Educational Actions recognised by the international scientific community which have been proven to contribute to the improvement of academic efficiency and school coexistence.

Successful Educational Actions (SEAs):

- ☐ Interactive Groups
- ☐ Dialogic Literary Gatherings
- ☐ Family Education
- ☐ Participative Education of the families
- ☐ Dialogical model for conflict prevention and conflict resolution
- ☐ Dialogical pedagogical training of teaching staff

The above SEAs have proven their efficiency in various types of schools located in districts with varying profiles. Each Action in itself contributes to improve academic efficiency and coexistence and the combined effect of the implementation of all of them serves to increase these outcomes further. However, at times, there is some confusion with other practices bearing the same name which have not been endorsed by the international scientific community. In order to avoid such confusion as far as possible and the utilisation of certain 'labels' for practices which can sometimes even be contradictory to Successful Educational Actions, the following units explain in detail each Action. In some cases a chart is provided which clarifies examples of exactly what the Action is and, by the same token, what it is not.

To find out more:

Flecha, R. (Ed.) (2015) Successful Educational Actions for Inclusion and Social Cohesion in Europe. Berlin: Springer.

INCLUD-ED Consortium (2009). Actions for success in schools in Europe. Brussels: European Commission

Sánchez Aroca, M. (1999). La Verneda Sant Martí: A school where people dare to dream. *Harvard Educational Review*, 69(3), 320-335.

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