



EUROPEAN COMMISSION
Directorate-General for Education and Culture

Lifelong Learning : policies and programme
School education; "Comenius"

EDUCATION AND TRAINING 2010

Cluster "Access and Social Inclusion in Lifelong Learning"

Peer Learning Activity on "Schools as Learning Communities" (Measures to address diversity in the Basque Country)

Bilbao, 8th to 10th October 2008

Final report

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. FOREWORD	3
2. BASIC CONCEPTS	4
3. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	5
4. MAIN REPORT	6
4.1. THE POLICY BRIEFING	6
4.1.1. Organisation and priorities of the Spanish and Basque Education System	6
4.1.2. Use of languages	7
4.1.3. Vocational Education and Training (VET)	8
4.1.4. Extra support measures for schools	8
4.1.5. Learning Communities	9
4.2. SITE VISITS	12
4.2.1. A Learning Community in a secondary school in Mungia	12
4.2.2. A Learning Community in a primary school in Ondarroa	13
4.2.3. A Learning Community in a primary school in Irún	14
4.2.4. Special education intervention measures in a secondary school in Errenteria	15
4.3. LESSONS LEARNT	17
4.3.1. Main lesson learnt: Change is possible	17
4.3.2. Other lessons learnt	18
4.3.3. Challenges for the Learning Communities project	20
Annex: List of participants	22

1. FOREWORD

The Cluster 'Access and Social Inclusion in Lifelong Learning' undertook its fifth Peer Learning Activity (PLA) in the Basque Country, in Spain, between the 8th and the 10th of October 2008.

The PLA was jointly hosted by the Spanish Ministry of Education and the Basque Government. Apart from Spain, representatives from French-speaking Belgium, Germany, France, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Latvia, Romania and Sweden were there, including a number of non-governmental experts.

The PLA focused on measures to address diversity in the Basque Country, mainly implemented by its department for educational innovation. The flagship measure is the so-called 'Learning Communities', but other measures were also presented and discussed: linguistic support for immigrant pupils; specific educational intervention projects; curricular diversification programs and complementary schooling.

The first day of the PLA focused on the organisation of the education and training system in the Basque Country, on the reasons which led to the introduction of Learning Communities, and on other types of educational support that are being implemented in the Basque Country. The second and third days were dedicated to on-site visits to schools implementing the Learning Communities initiative or other types of measures.

The Spanish and Basque Governments; the Basque Education Department; researchers supervising the implementation of the Learning Communities project; the school establishments that opened the doors of their schools to us; as well as their principals, teachers, pupils, parents and community representatives, who engaged in dialogue, all merit our warmest gratitude.

Our special thanks go to María Luisa Puertas and Luisa Mari Jaussi, of the Department for Educational Innovation of the Basque Ministry of Education, and to José Ramón Flecha, of the Centre of Research in Theory and Practice that Overcome Inequalities of the University of Barcelona, for making this PLA possible.

2. BASIC CONCEPTS

Learning Communities

Learning Communities are basically projects that seek to transform school life through the development of permanent, integral and participatory education, with the aim of achieving some objectives which are deemed as desirable by the whole community (teachers, parents, pupils and others). While the specific objectives of each Learning Community can substantially differ from one school to another, their overarching aims are usually to improve academic results and school climate. In-between, a series of preconditions need to be achieved, such as raising expectations for all. Learning Communities can also involve external actors to the school, as well as activities outside normal school hours. Moreover, Learning Communities are normally associated with pedagogic innovation, since the 'old' pedagogic methods will usually not bring the desired results.

Dialogic learning

This concept puts dialogue at the centre of the learning process. 'Dialogue' is not merely understood as discussion, but it implies the promotion of cooperation, motivation, self-confidence and solidarity. Such skills and attitudes are deemed to be instrumental for learning across the curriculum. Dialogue is conceived as egalitarian –while an adult, usually a teacher, might steer dialogic learning, any pupil might have significant contributions to make.

Interactive groups

Interactive groups are small, heterogeneous groups of students in which activities are fostered by an adult, who can, but does not necessarily have to, be a teacher. The aim is that students help each other through an understanding that everyone has the capability to contribute to the resolution of the activity. By contrast to segregationist measures, interactive groups put the emphasis on heterogeneity.

3. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Cluster 'Access and Social Inclusion in Lifelong Learning' undertook its fifth Peer Learning Activity (PLA) in the Basque Country, in Spain, between the 8th and the 10th October 2008.

The PLA was jointly hosted by the Spanish Ministry of Education and the Basque Government. Apart from Spain, representatives from French-speaking Belgium, Germany, France, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Latvia, Romania and Sweden were there, as well as a number of non-governmental experts.

The PLA focused on measures to address diversity in the Basque Country, mainly implemented by its department for educational innovation. The flagship measure is the so-called 'Learning Communities', but other measures were also presented and discussed: linguistic support for immigrant pupils; specific educational intervention projects; curricular diversification programs and complementary schooling.

The first day of the PLA focused on the organisation of the education and training system in the Basque Country, on the reasons which led to the introduction of Learning Communities, and on other types of educational support that are being implemented in the Basque Country. The second and third days were dedicated to on-site visits to schools across the Basque Country implementing the Learning Communities' initiative or more traditional extra support measures.

The major lesson learnt by Cluster members in the Basque Country was that change is possible. Over the course of its work since 2006, the Cluster on social inclusion has often been confronted with schools facing enormous social and academic challenges. In the Basque Country, Cluster members were able to discuss with teachers, school staff, other adults and with pupils themselves, how the setting up of a Learning Communities project represented a major turning point in the life of single schools, and how it managed to improve crucial aspects such as school climate, teacher satisfaction or academic results.

Other lessons learnt concerned the following areas:

- Raising the quality of single schools can avoid their ghettoisation;
- Educational administrations can act as a catalyser, but to achieve real change the sharing of a project within a school is required;
- Innovative approaches do not necessarily have to be more expensive than traditional measures;
- Given the right conditions, the opening of schools, including classrooms, to external actors, can give substantial benefits;
- The guiding principle must be the development of an ethos of respect;
- Teachers' empowerment and motivation is a key factor;
- Inclusive education, as opposed to differentiated one, can bring good results for all;
- Frameworks need to be flexible – there are no 'one size fits all' solutions;
- Schools and education researchers should work more closely together.

4. MAIN REPORT

4.1. THE POLICY BRIEFING

4.1.1. Organization and priorities of the Spanish and Basque Education System

The Spanish Education Act (*Ley Orgánica de Educación, LOE*) defines the organisation and content of school education, as well as the distribution of competences between the central government and the autonomous communities. Autonomous communities currently administer the greater part of public expenditure on education, but the basic regulatory powers continue to reside in the central administration, which determines the essential orientation of the education system through organic laws. The autonomous communities have the power to fine-tune priorities by developing State regulations in their own legislation, as well as the executive and administrative powers to manage the education system within their own territory. *For more details on the system, please refer to the PLA background report.*

Quality and equity are two undivided principles in the Spanish education system, and the Spanish Education Act devotes to them most of its provisions. Some of the principles related to the issues dealt in the PLA in Bilbao are:

- a) Quality education for all students, regardless of their condition and circumstances.
- b) Equity to guarantee equal opportunities, educational inclusion and non-discrimination, and to compensate for personal, cultural, economic and social inequalities, with special emphasis on those derived from disabilities.
- c) The joint efforts of students, families, teachers, schools, authorities, institutions and society at large.
- d) Autonomy to establish and modify the organisational and curricular measures within the framework of the powers and responsibilities corresponding to the State, the autonomous communities, local governments and schools.
- e) Cooperation between the central government and the autonomous communities in the definition, application and assessment of education policies.
- f) Cooperation of the education authorities with local governments in the planning and implementation of education policy.

The priorities outlined by the Basque Government for its education policy are: quality education combined with the inclusion of all pupils; involvement and co-operation of all actors (pupils, families, teachers, school leaders, school staff, local and regional

authorities, civil society); and the commitment to the educational objectives set by the European Union for the coming years¹.

In recent decades the Basque education system has been performing well, quite above the Spanish average. This is reflected in good PISA results and relatively low early school leaving (14.5 percent, well below the average for Spain, even though still above the EU benchmark²).

4.1.2. Use of languages

Both Spanish and Basque language (*Euskera*) are official languages of the autonomous community. In 2001, in the autonomous community, Basque speakers accounted for 32.3 percent of the population, quasi-Basque speakers for 23.1 and non-Basque speakers for 44.6 percent of the population above the age of 2. Differences in the usage of language across the provinces are considerable. In the Gipuscoa province, Basque speakers account for 51.5 percent, quasi-Basque speakers for 19.7 and non-Basque speakers for 28.9 percent of the total population above the age of 2; whereas in Biscay the shares are 25 percent, 24.8 percent and 50.2 percent respectively³.

Language plays a central role in the organization of education, as the development of bilingual education is actively pursued⁴, in order to reinforce socio-cultural cohesion in the community.

Three linguistic models are available:

Model A: in Spanish, with four hours of classes in Basque as a language subject;

Model B: instruction in both Basque and Spanish;

Model D: in Basque, with four hours of Spanish as a language subject.

In the 1980s enrolment in *Model A* outnumbered *Models B* and *D*. However, as fluency in Basque is more and more required by employers, parents tend to opt for instruction in this language so as to ensure full bilingualism. In the school year 2003-2004 for instance, *Model A* was chosen by 8.1 percent, *Model B* by 30.5 percent and *Model D* by 61.4

¹ Structural Organization and Features of the Basque Educational System (2007), Gobierno Vasco, Departamento de educacion, universidades e investigacion. Servicio Central de Publicaciones del Gobierno Vasco

² The rate of early school leaving for Spain as a whole is 29.9 percent. The benchmark of no more than 10 percent early school leavers is set for 2010 for the European Union.

³ EUSTAT, Basque Statistics Office

⁴ The Law for the Normalisation of Euskera (1982), and Decree of Bilingualism (1983)

percent of parents of pre-school children⁵. As *Model D* is appealing to an ever growing proportion of Basque parents, *Model A* and even *Model B* are acquiring features of segregated education as they attract high proportions of children from socially deprived families (many of them Roma and children of immigrants).

4.1.3. Vocational education and training (VET)

Vocational training constitutes a strong feature of the Basque educational system. It was very successfully reformed in the last years. Significant efforts were made in order to improve the labour market relevance of VET, by establishing a close co-operation between enterprises and training providers. Large investments were also made in order to improve the technical equipment of training centres, so as to align it with the equipment used in enterprises. Besides that, the same centres that offer initial training also offer continuous training – this boosted the morale and motivation of trainers.

Thanks to these efforts, vocational qualifications became very attractive. The employment rate of VET graduates is constantly monitored – some 50 percent of pupils with initial vocational training find a job in the first month from graduation, and within six months 83 percent of graduates are in employment. Quality is constantly evaluated, and strict quality standards (ISO 9000) are applied in most training centres. Not surprisingly, VET in the Basque Country displays very low drop-out rates, as opposed to what happens to VET in many other contexts. The attractiveness of VET as a valuable alternative to general education is very probably a key factor explaining why overall early school leaving rates are quite low.

It should be noted nevertheless that, notwithstanding the very good reputation and outcomes of VET, there is a prevalence of children from lower social classes among VET students.

4.1.4. Extra support measures for schools

A range of measures are put in place for pupils experiencing serious learning difficulties. Such measures are either 'ordinary' – that is, implemented within all mainstream schools – or 'extra-ordinary', that is, they are specific programmes addressed to marginal groups and are only to be found in certain schools. The extra-ordinary measures were introduced when compulsory education was prolonged to age 16.

Adolescents in lower secondary schools (13-14 years old) who are underachieving receive extra support in mainstream school. They have an individual work plan, which replaces some mainstream classes with special classes. Thus, this measure entails some segregated teaching, even though the replacement classes may not exceed half the time in normal school classroom. The plan is followed by a tutor and under continuous

⁵ EUSTAT Basque Statistics Office, data for 2004

assessment. The aim is to meet the needs of children who may be frustrated because they do not cope with the progresses of the rest of the class. Among the pupils who are often concerned by this measure, there is a high representation of migrants and Roma children.

The PROA programme, addressing early school leaving, offers after school support to pupils who experience academic difficulties as well as assistance and guidance to schools.

Curricular diversification programmes are aimed at 16 year olds who have positive attitudes towards learning but experience difficulties in some subjects. These pupils receive 18 to 30 hours tailor-made teaching in small groups of up to 15 pupils. This measure is more flexible than the measure described above for younger cohorts, and much attention is given to cooperation with families. These programmes have proven to be highly effective as in 2007 some 970 out of 1084 pupils (90%) have obtained a leaving certificate. The majority have continued to medium level vocational training, while others accessed paid work having acquired a minimum school leaving certificate.

Complementary schooling programmes are also set in place for 14 to 16 year olds who have very significant problems at school. The aim is to bring them into vocational training. In the 2007/2008 school year some 550 pupils experiencing multiple problems at school, at home and in multi-ethnic environment, were enrolled into complementary schooling programmes.

Programmes for promoting multiculturalism have been set up in 2007 and some 48 schools are benefiting from additional staff to provide support to pupils who have recently arrived in the Basque Country. Primary schools with more than 25 percent and secondary schools with more than 15 percent immigrant children receive additional half full-teacher hours to provide language support and lessons about Basque society and culture.

Such measures are sometimes addressed the criticism that they may tend to add up to each other without constituting a real system. In addition, evaluation is, for the time being, rather limited.

4.1.5. Learning Communities

The Learning Communities⁶ are a flagship initiative implemented in the Basque Country (but also in other autonomous communities, such as Andalusia, Aragón, Castilla-la Mancha, Castilla-León, Catalonia, Extremadura or Murcia), aiming to ensure school success for all and to improve living together through the mobilisation of all key social actors around the educational project. The initiative in the Basque Country started in 1996 and is implemented today in 28 centres. The concept revolves around the centrality of learning in school life, not just for pupils but also for teachers and parents, and on participation. It was introduced in the Basque Country through a co-operation with

⁶ <http://www.comunidadesdeaprendizaje.net>

interdisciplinary researchers (sociologists, pedagogists, psychologists, among others) of the University of Barcelona⁷. The Basque government supports the introduction of the initiative by allocating funding (actually, the corresponding amount to what would have been given for the implementation of the classic extra support measures described above), and by giving guidance and support to schools adhering to the project. There is a dedicated team in the Basque government, which consists of a person in charge of the programme, along with three collaborators, and their role is to coordinate the initiative. There are also advisors in the support services for the schools, and a coordinator who works part-time in each school.

Learning Communities rotates around dialogic learning, which is a pedagogy aiming at promoting respectful and open exchange and solidarity between the actors of the education project, in such a way that increases academic achievement for all the students and overcomes school failure. It had been observed that previously established measures to address special education needs of some children were actually reinforcing segregation of pupils. Learning Communities, on the contrary, consider diversity and heterogeneity of backgrounds an asset instead of a problem, as they allow for the reinforcement of solidarity and the respect of differences. Pupils who have learning difficulties are kept in the same class with their age peers and if necessary are provided with more help in mainstream education (including more adults in the classrooms), rather than being segregated according to ability or directed towards special classes. Pupils, teachers and school leaders, parents, community stakeholders and education authorities are all involved in defining and building a project for the school, and are actively engaged in learning from each other.

The initiative is a flexible framework for multifaceted projects adapted to the specific needs of each school, involving a selection of methodologies responding to the specific situation of the school. The implementation of the initiative comprises several phases⁸:

1) The first step is a reflection and an open brainstorming on the motivation that could make change desirable. This is done through an intensive training (a total of 30 hours organized in an intensive way) for school staff where families and people from the community can participate. It consists of a training based on the theories and results of the scientific research. After this training, the school as a whole decides whether it wants to become a Learning Community or not. In order to continue, the project must be approved by the most relevant actors (teachers, principal, families, and administration).

2) Once a school decides to adhere to the project, all the stakeholders together (including, of course, pupils themselves) need to decide what to improve, both academic and non-

⁷ CREA, Centre of Research in Theory and Practice that Overcome Inequalities

⁸ The academic guidelines for the project's phases are developed by the CREA. One summary overview of phases is provided in English language is: Gómez A. J. and CREA (2002): 'Learning Communities: when learning in common means school success for all', in *Multicultural Teaching*, Spring, 20, 2 Staffordshire Trentham Books, page 13. Another inspiring contribution about Learning Communities is Aroca S. M. (1999) 'Voices inside schools. La Verneda-Sant. Martí: A school where people dare to dream', in *Harvard Educational Review*, fall 1999, 69.3, Research Library Core, p.320

academic-wise –that is, they describe what their 'dream' for the school is. Teachers, family members and social agents are requested to dream about the school thinking about what they would like for their own children.

3) Once all stakeholders have described their dream, the feasibility and the importance of each item is discussed, and a list of priorities is drawn. A mixed committee in which the relevant stakeholders are represented (school leader and teachers, parents and pupils, and possibly local NGOs and authorities) follows up the implementation of the different steps of the transformation of the school into a Learning Community. Besides the introduction of concrete and direct changes to, for instance, school facilities and organization, new pedagogical initiatives are also introduced, selecting them from a wide range of possible options. All the new pedagogical initiatives proposed by the Learning Communities project are oriented to get educational success for all and improve living together. Also, all of them must have demonstrated being effective practices.

Each school may choose which initiatives to introduce, and what weight to give them in relation to classic teaching methods, according to its needs and wishes. For example, the 'Interactive groups' (organized as a part of normal courses) consist of group-work among pupils, supported by a group of teachers and volunteers (the main teacher plus one or two helpers). Volunteers may be other teachers, University students in a traineeship, elder pupils, relatives, staff from NGOs or school support staff. They do not need to be experts in the subject – their role is rather to ensure that there is a good collaboration within the group. Pupils are gathered in heterogeneous groups – in each group there is one well performing pupil who can help the others. Each group carries out a short activity different from the other groups. This contributes to accelerate the learning because the students are working all the time in varied activities. Working together helps pupils to develop a sense of solidarity and an appreciation of the contribution that each pupil may bring.

Other activities, outlined in detailed in the description of visits, are for instance the 'dialogic literary gatherings', where pupils discuss in an open way about the content of books in meetings chaired both by a teacher and a pupil – this motivates children to read and fine-tunes their dialectic and expressive skills. Moreover, schools often promote the organization by parents of activities and courses, and they also organise training sessions for families. Such training has a double purpose: It helps children, and it also supports the development and well being of families as a whole as well.

The Learning Communities work, above all, on sharing goals among actors. Such goals and the way to reach them are identified through constant and egalitarian dialogue. The establishment of egalitarian dialogue needs to be built on respect and valuing of the contributions of each participant, and on the conviction that communication and knowledge exchange brings added value to all. It involves commitment and trust so as to transform difficulties into options for positive change.

The initiative also aims at raising the expectations of teachers, pupils, parents on what is possible to achieve. Such increase in expectations actually leads to better results (e.g. fewer drop-outs, more pupils proceeding to upper secondary education, etc.) By raising

the standards and the effective outcomes, the initiative has a clear magnet effect – schools become more attractive, the turnover of teachers and the decrease in enrolment stops, and thus the risk of 'ghettoisation' is avoided. At the same time, the fact that the Learning Communities increase the performance, and therefore the efficiency, of schools, makes it easier to obtain active support from public authorities.

4.2. SITE VISITS

The visits enabled participants to see in practice some aspects of the inclusive education activities. The visits focused on the Learning Community approach implemented in two primary schools (Ondarroa, Biscay province, and Belaskoenea, Gipuscoa province), and in one secondary school (Mungia, Biscay province), as well as on resources to respond to diversity (linguistic support, curricular diversification, specific educational intervention projects) in a secondary school (Koldo Mitxelena, Gipuscoa province). The visits allowed Cluster members to hear voices of people directly involved – teachers, pupils, parents and volunteers.

4.2.1. A Learning Community in a secondary school in Mungia

In the secondary school Mungia BHI in Biscay the Cluster observed interactive groups in different subjects. Such method is applied one hour per week in each subject. Pupils said that these classes are the ones they like most and look forward to. Between four and five pupils were seated around three groups of tables, and three adults (some of them professional teachers, but also other types of volunteers, such as family members, etc.) were moving around from one group to another. Pupils are assisted by adults in performing exercises, while helping each other in completing the tasks. There was an atmosphere of conviviality as adults kept the motivation of each pupil high.

At the end of each school week, teachers assess the progresses made and decide whether to advance with the programme or insist on some points that need more focus. Pupils are also involved in the exercise – they give their opinion on the difficulties they encountered and on what they appreciated the most.

The Cluster also attended a dialogic literary gathering, where a class with two teachers was sitting in a circle, and the discussion on the book (*Lazarillo de Tormes*, a Spanish classical) was moderated in an open way both by a teacher and a pupil. One pupil would volunteer to read a paragraph and participants would then discuss its significance and its relevance in relation to today's societal issues. Pupils were intervening in the discussion in a free and spontaneous way, and showed real interest in the discussion. They were not taking notes, but were completely engaged in reading, listening, and expressing their views.

4.2.2. A Learning Community in a primary school in Ondarroa

The primary school Ondarroa LHI is located in a Biscay area where unemployment is rather low. There is actually a labour shortage in some sectors of particularly difficult working conditions (e.g., fishing, where many Senegalese men are now part of the workforce).

In the areas that we visited, we did not see any urban segregation that could have an effect on education. However, we were informed that some schools in areas with a high concentration of Roma children also have successfully introduced the Learning Community concept. Immigrant children account for 5 percent of all pupils in this school. Basque is the language spoken at home by the majority of pupils. The school has some 400 pupils and 38 teachers and engages in dialogic learning both parents and some retired teachers.

The main reasons given by the school principal for choosing to take part in the Learning Community project was the wish to deal better with cultural diversity and living together. The school became a Learning Community in 2004. The principal had heard about the success of the approach, and she wanted to try it to ensure that no child was left behind in a context of increased immigration and of less social cohesion at the local level. In the first brainstorming phase, 98% of teachers and 100% parents declared themselves in favour of the project. The implementation of the project raised high consensus, as parents liked to be involved and it was felt that attitudes of children had improved. The improvement of results has also been dramatic.

Being a Learning Community meant for the school to link in a frame a set of activities that, even though not completely new, had been implemented in a scattered way before that.

The school created a 'mixed committee' on 'Living together', which established some rules for the school: all pupils have a right to express themselves; listening and respect are key values; problems are dealt with within groups.

Some examples of the involvement of the community: the father of a pupil took the initiative to help the pupils make a movie. He guided children through the entire process of planning, doing, and seeing an outcome. This took one and a half hours per week of his time and the activity was implemented within regular school hours, on Friday afternoons, as he could leave work early. Also the school library is taken care of by parents, in rotation. Another example is a retired teacher that we met, who keeps contact with the school and organises gardening workshops for one and a half hour per week. The level and frequency of involvement of volunteers may vary, but for instance 90 external people took part in the organization of a school celebration and some 20 to 30 different people were involved in various home-school liaison activities. As a long term objective, the school aims at involving parents in teaching.

It was asked whether there were security issues related to the involvement of adults external to the primary school. It actually seems that the school has never had such problems –volunteers are screened by the principal through individual interviews, and the discussion of proposed projects is considered to be sufficient both by the teaching staff and parents.

In this school, the cluster also visited some classes working in interactive groups. Children were divided into several groups with heterogeneous abilities, and three adults in the class rotated across the groups, proposing different activities in a row. It seemed to work well, with a good interaction among pupils.

4.2.3. A Learning Community in a primary school in Irún

In the second primary school (Belaskoenea, in the border town of Irún) it was stressed that the teaching staff could not fully understand why some children were succeeding and others not. Traditionally, teachers were ascribing school failure to the outside environment, such as lack of support by the family, poor neighbourhoods etc. A belief was predominant that there is no solution to school failure as schools have no control over the outside world. Teachers were motivated to try a new approach because they wanted to address the underachievement of some pupils, their absenteeism, conflicts between these students and teachers, and between teachers and parents. The school is now in its third year of operation of the Learning Community project.

Prior to that, the school was experiencing a dangerous trend towards ghettoisation, as the enrolment of Basque pupils was significantly decreasing, and the immigrant children composed a larger and larger part of the school population. There was an excessively high turnover of teachers, with only one third of permanent teachers, and it was difficult to find a principal for the school.

At this point, the school staff decided to engage themselves in the first phase of the Learning Community initiative – a thorough reflection on how the situation could be changed. They took a week off school, asking for trainees and volunteers to replace them during that absence. The result of this week of brainstorming was that they concluded that diversity of socio-cultural features of their school population was a treasure rather than a problem, and what was really missing was the capability of valuing such treasure. This was followed by a vote, through which the school staff and the parents decided to transform the school into a Learning Community. A new board for the school was selected.

The next phase included dreaming about what an ideal school should look like. All people concerned (principal, teachers, other school staff, pupils, parents, community leaders, NGOs such as Caritas, Roma NGOs, social workers, education authorities), including the youngest children (through drawings) expressed their wishes. It was remarkable to observe that the dream most indicated by the children was actually quite down to earth: they insisted on restoring some playing facilities for the younger children.

The second step consisted in analysing what aspects of the dream were realistic, and in setting priorities. The selected priorities concerned improving living together, embellishing the building and achieving a true bilingualism. Eventually, they passed to the planning and implementation phase. A mixed committee, formed by school staff and parents, supervises the main stages of implementation.

Pupils formed an assembly and, through long discussions, democratically defined a code of conduct for the school, which was endorsed by all and is revised every year. For instance, such rules indicate whether it is allowed or not to run in the corridors etc.

Numerous school projects were organised: opera, story telling by parents originating from different countries, a school magazine. Other activities are choir (indicated as very beneficial to integration), chess, drawing, reading in different languages, 'ambassador children' providing support to newcomers from the same culture of origin, football and games in the school yard, after-school activities such as judo, dancing, or IT.

Teachers receive continuous training in areas such as the improvement of living together, ICT and Basque language.

Teachers, on a voluntary (non-remunerated) basis, also give special classes to pupils lagging behind, two times a week after regular school hours. Local organisations, like a Roma NGO, also provide after school support. Besides, a tutorship scheme is in place, in which elder pupils tutor younger ones.

At the same time, improvements were made in the building – painting and electricity, and more attractive sports facilities.

The school does not have indicators for monitoring and measuring success, but there is general feeling of satisfaction among teachers (who stopped leaving) as the school atmosphere is convivial, their work is better appreciated by the community, and the flight of pupils towards other schools seems to have stopped, and even reversed as more Basque pupils are attracted to this school. The school appears, therefore, to be evolving as 'magnet school'. In the words of the principal, the single most important achievement of the project is the contact and involvement of parents.

A key factor in the success of the project is also, without doubt, the very good co-operation between the school, the municipality and the Basque Government. The importance of such transformation is well recognised, and the school is not left alone in this significant effort, but it is supported and provided with guidance if necessary.

4.2.4. Special education intervention measures in a secondary school in Errenteria

The visit to the secondary school Koldo Mitxelena BHI, in the province of Gipuscoa, allowed seeing in practice selected Special Education Intervention measures. We saw some aspects of cultural diversification through language classes for immigrant children.

In the 2001/2002 school year the school had 11 immigrant children, today there are 53 foreign students who account for some 10 percent of pupils of the school. Two groups of children of foreign origin may be distinguished – 27 are coming from Latin America and need to learn Basque, the remaining 26 are from several countries and need to learn both Basque and Spanish.

Foreign children are taken out of regular classes in view of receiving 3 hours each week of Basque language and those with special needs may receive as many as 10 hours each week of extra language courses. We visited a language laboratory in which the newly arrived immigrant children were learning Basque. The laboratory was equipped with state-of-the-art technology and was well staffed to assist some 15 pupils with very different levels of knowledge of Basque. One of the pupils aged 10 or so was illiterate, which posed a special challenge for catching up with his peers in regular classes. The school (through regional authorities) also offers interpretation in the class for newcomers, one day per week.

We also saw intervention groups providing training in manual skills as replacement for subjects in which kids are underachieving. Pupils who are seriously lagging behind in some mainstream subjects (for instance literature and science), and who are too young to be directed towards initial vocational schools, are taken out of classes and receive 8 hours per week training to acquire skills in gardening, masonry and cooking. These subjects were chosen by the school authorities because of the availability of jobs in those areas. We saw a cooking class as replacement class for those pupils who are not able to perform well in some specific mainstream subjects. It was attended by three adolescents who were assisted by one teacher. It should be noted that, when speaking with them, the kids explained that they were there because they were not good at school – the impression was therefore that they were living the experience as a sort of punishment.

Some Cluster members expressed concern that this practice has segregation effects which do not really benefit the kids. It was also noticed that many, if not all, of the pupils in such classes had some family and other social problems. It was suggested that all pupils should attend cooking classes in order to learn and valorise these skills. According to some Cluster members the three pupils engaged in a cooking class had no obvious special needs that would require segregated training.

Indeed, the Basque Education Minister, Mr. Tontxu Campos, who joined the Cluster for this visit and maintained an exchange of views with it, explained that these special classes give an opportunity to pupils, who would otherwise be at risk of dropping out, to excel in a practical skill which is attainable for them, and that this motivates pupils and encourages them to pursue mainstream education for at least 50 percent of school time. Children with special needs benefit from good diagnosing of what they need and what they can actually do – teachers said that at the beginning pupils feel bad about not succeeding and they try to hide it, but do not feel well because they cannot really cope. According to the school, these differentiated classes allow pupils to increase their self-confidence, as they see that they can succeed. The school considers that the adaptation of

the curriculum to actual learning skills is essential to ensure that they stay in mainstream education at least up to the age of 16.

The Basque Education Minister, however, also emphasised that the preferred line of action of the Education Department was to motivate schools to join the Learning Communities' project. This is something, however, that cannot be imposed from above – as it has been seen, a paramount condition for success is the commitment and motivation of all school actors. Hence, for the time being, most schools in the Basque country continue to apply the classical extra support measures.

4.3. LESSONS LEARNT

4.3.1. Main lesson learnt: Change is possible

a) The Learning Communities show that significant changes are easier to achieve than it could often be expected, at the condition that such changes are supported by the key actors and by the education authorities. It is worth underlining that the opportunity for improvement brought by the Learning Communities approach can be valuable for all types of schools, and not just those that experience some form of disadvantage. The following seem to be the key success factors:

- *Administration support.* The Basque Administration has been committed for a long time to spread this model, and to support it through the allocation of resources, in order to achieve school success for all children.
- *Autonomy in the definition of the project.* The school autonomy granted by the LOE and the Basque Law on Education allows schools to make use of their autonomy to identify and develop their own project that corresponds and caters for the needs of their pupils. In the visits it seemed that some schools used this freedom more effectively than others, which is fair and reasonable since 'the dream' might be different from one school to another. The main asset of the model is that it was 'their own dream'.
- *The commitment of the whole community.* Community commitment must be guaranteed too so that the project does not collapse. The involvement of the school staff, parents, retired teachers, community members, social workers, etc. was visible. Even though, in some schools that was more in sight than in others.
- *The commitment of the team leader* is also necessary in order to lead the changes, maintain pace and guide.

4.3.2. Other lessons learnt

b) Ghettoisation can be avoided by raising quality. This is not something coming only from this PLA –it is a well-known fact. But, during this PLA, the cluster could witness a concrete way of making this happen. Surely there are others across Europe, and this would be in itself a great subject for peer learning.

c) The educational administration can act as a catalyser – but to implement change at the level of individual schools, projects must be shared. Cluster work has often pointed to the need for education to be based on a shared project. If some key actors, such as the families, are disengaged, this deeply undermines the success of the project. The strength of the Learning Communities project precisely resides in the capacity it has to implicate all the key actors around a common 'dream' for the school. This requires first of all a change in attitudes: the project works if it is based on the conviction that all actors, teachers and parents, share the same goals. The principal of the Ondarroa primary school explained that, at the beginning, nobody would have imagined that involving the parents could have been possible – she said that it looked like science fiction!

Sometimes, schools find it difficult to bridge out to families also because there is an underlying thought that some families are not motivated to co-operate. Starting to work on the assumption that all parents want the best for their children is already a good step in bridging out. For families, the possibility of having a say in the decision-making of the school is an asset, which contributes to the attractiveness of the school.

d) Innovation does not need to be more expensive than traditional measures. In the course of the PLA, the cluster witnessed two different models of giving extra support to schools – the 'innovative' one, i.e. Learning Communities, and the more traditional one (extra lessons, curricular diversification for students with poorer results, etc.) Surprisingly, one does not really entail more expenses than the other for the educational administration. While it is right that across Europe many schools could achieve more with extra resources, the PLA showed that the same resources can actually lead to quite different results.

e) Given the right conditions, the opening of schools, including classrooms, to external actors, can give substantial benefits. In general, the Learning Communities make a great use of the support of volunteers. The importance and benefits of participation of volunteers had already been seen in Ireland – it is an important way for the school to open up to the community, to ensure a better involvement of parents and to get extra energies and resources.

f) An ethos of respect as a guiding principle. The visits (and in particular the observation of some activities, such as the dialogic literary gatherings) put into evidence the key principle of the concept of dialogic learning, that is respect. In the dialogic literary

gathering, for instance, books are not analysed in a formal or erudite way, but rather as containers of reflections about life. Thus, all pupils have something interesting to say, and the contributions of all are welcomed with attention. Treating children above all as persons gives them confidence and motivation. The same with all the actors around the project: school support staff, parents, volunteers. Feeling respected reduces fears, enhances motivation and the will to actively co-operate.

g) Teachers' empowerment and motivation is a key factor. Some schools underlined that the introduction of the Learning Community project blocked the flight of teachers from the school. Before introducing the project, schools were experiencing a high turnover of teachers as the negative environment had a frustrating effect. The Learning Community empowered the teachers, who found a renewed interest in their work and a renovated sense of mission, and therefore put new energies in the school and decided to remain. A too high turnover of teachers has a highly disruptive effect on the educational project and on the reputation of the school, often opening a vicious circle leading to the transformation of the school into a ghetto. On the contrary, highly motivated teachers and school leaders create a positive dynamics, making the school more attractive and enjoyable for all.

The introduction of Learning Communities does not necessarily demand a radical change in didactics – the main focus is on the organization of the class and the teaching. The visits also proved that there is no need to be apprehensive about having some helping hands in the classroom. On the contrary it enriches learning and takes away the rigid outlay of the classroom arrangement, allowing catering for diversity.

Actually, the most visible outcome of the Learning Community project that we could observe is an exceptionally high level of enthusiasm and commitment among the teaching staff. As already discussed in the Paris PLA, it often happens that teachers and school leaders unconsciously adapt their expectations on the basis of the socio-economic background of pupils. This attitude generates a self fulfilling prophecy – keeping ambitions low will depress motivation and therefore outcomes. On the contrary, it has been demonstrated, both by the results of Learning Communities and by initiatives such as the co-operation with SciencePo of some banlieue schools (see report of the Paris PLA, November 2007), that raising expectations will actually improve the achievements. Change actually starts happening when teachers and the other members of the school community change their perception of the school.

h) Focusing on inclusive, rather than on differentiated education, can bring good results for all. The Learning Community project is successful in keeping all pupils (at least up to upper secondary school) together, and in developing a sense of respect for diversity and of solidarity among children. This approach seems to help the personal development of children much more effectively than the other possible approaches based on differentiating the curriculum for weak students. In this respect, the Learning Communities approach can prove to be very valuable when pupils have different backgrounds (e.g. migrants). Speaking with the pupils who were in the differentiated classes in the school that applies this methodology, we could clearly see how being

separated from the rest of pupils made them feel stigmatised and had a depressing effect on their self-esteem.

i) A flexible framework. A key feature of the Learning Communities model is that it is not a rigid, prescriptive methodology, but rather a flexible framework that can be adapted to the needs and wishes of each school. The types of initiatives and activities that schools may implement are different, as are their frequency and intensity. This allows schools – and probably, above all, teachers – to live the experience in a relaxed way. The project does not demand a revolution in teaching habits, but rather an opening up and introduction of new elements into classic practices.

j) Schools and education researchers can work more closely together. The development of Learning Communities greatly benefited from a close co-operation between the schools implementing the project, the Government and a group of University researchers. Co-operation between research and ground actors over innovative projects is often beneficial, as it allows the actors implementing the project to deepen reflection and to obtain guidance, while it allows researchers to see theory into practice and to ensure an evaluation of progress.

4.3.3. Challenges for the Learning Communities project

The model that was presented to the cluster in the Basque country seems extremely attractive: it greatly improves academic results for all, boosts schools' staff motivation, and manages to overcome some pressing school-life issues, such as bullying or lack of respect for teachers.

The cluster, therefore, also sought to understand what its possible shortcomings were.

a) Up to which school level is it applicable? The examples we saw, and most Learning Communities implemented in the Basque country, are in primary or lower secondary schools, where all pupils of a given age cohort go to school together. Is it feasible to apply the model also to other education levels, notably upper secondary education, where path differentiation according to abilities is normally applied, and that often has a more competitive profile? Since the visit of the Cluster was limited to primary and lower secondary schools, the Cluster was nether able to further explore this issue nor to make any generalizations.

b) How to spread Learning Communities? Can the model be imposed by law? Given that a key component of the success of Learning Communities is the full commitment of all actors, based on the persuasion that the project will benefit the school, it would not be appropriate to try to generalise the model by law. The Basque government feels that making the initiative known is the key to its development. Efforts need to be made to convince the public that the model is not only good for schools in difficulty, but for any school even if thriving. Dissemination of the results, particularly when targeted to

potential 'multipliers' of the Learning Communities approach (e.g. teachers involved in pedagogical innovation) can probably be the most effective way of expanding the initiative.

The Basque Government is confident that making concrete examples known (for instance, through a large conference) may generate more and more interest in the practice, and that this type of dissemination will be more efficient model than regulations from above.

*

*

*

ANNEX – LIST OF PARTICIPANTS IN THE PLA

Host Member State (Spain)

Josefa SALVADOR HERNÁNDEZ **Ministry of Education, Social Policy and Sport**

Basque Government

Luisa María PUERTAS **Department for Educational Innovation**
María Luisa JAUSSI **Department for Educational Innovation**

Member States of the Cluster 'Access and Social Inclusion'

Ursula AMBRUSTER	Sweden
Dominique BARGAS	France
Valdis BOGDANOVŠ	Latvia
Ruta CIZAUSKAITE	Lithuania
Anna D'ARCANGELO	Italy
Gabriela DROC	Romania
Baudouin DUELZ	Belgium (French-speaking Community)
Claudio FEDERICO	Italy
Peter KLANDT	Germany
Donagh KELLY	Ireland
Diana MACRI	Italy
Szilvia NEMETH	Hungary
Kristina WESTER	Sweden

Representatives of non-governmental organisations

Ian FLEETWOOD **CEEP**
Judit SZIRA **Roma Education Fund**

European Commission (Directorate General for Education and Culture)

Germán BERNAL RÍOS
Laura CASSIO

Others

Dragana AVRAMOV	Consultant
José Ramón FLECHA GARCÍA	CREA, University of Barcelona
Gisela REDONDO	CREA, University of Barcelona
Claudia STRÜBEL	Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich