

## Educational Policies that Address Social Inequality

# Spain case study report 4 Transforming Schools into Learning Communities: Social and cultural transformation

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The EPASI project is a programme of analysis of educational programmes in fourteen European countries, designed to address various forms of social inequality. The project analysis was conducted in the period 2007 – 2009. This report is part of the overall project, details of which are at <http://www.epasi.eu>.

The analysis is intended to be used within the overall framework of the EPASI programme.

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The EPASI project was conducted by the following institutions:

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## Introduction

Instead of choosing five different policies to be developed in this section, the Spanish team has decided to focus its attention on one “macro-project” – **City Educational Project (PEC)** - as our first case study. The project is an umbrella-type project that encompasses a series of interesting, semi-autonomous sub-projects, some of which will be analysed in more detail as four separate case studies.

The decision to focus first on one “macro-policy” was based on the following factors:

- 1) The project is a clear example of a general, transversal social pact aimed at compensating social and education inequalities and to improve education in general.
- 2) It affects, basically, all “at risk” groups selected to be outlined in this research, through the development of eight “thematic work areas” (*ámbitos temáticos de acción*) (including, for example, immigration and academic success), from which specific actions are derived.
- 3) The project includes both general educational policies based on a theoretical framework about education and social actors, and specific, local actions that are materialised through the macro-project’s lines of action (some of which will be further described in detail). These elements of the macro-project are regularly assessed and revised for continual improvement
- 4) The whole project counts on one fundamental base – full implication and participation of the social actors, thereby involving the target groups and/or related communities in the design, management and/or delivery of the actions.
- 5) It represents a good example of local and transversality of educational policies, based on the advantages of giving educational competences to local administrations (city councils and schools) due to their proximity to the community and knowledge of the specific needs of community members.

### **Case study 4: Transforming schools into Learning communities: social and cultural transformation**

As part of Barcelona’s City Educational Project (PEC-B) within the thematic area “Academic success and access to employment”, “Learning communities” is a project of social and cultural transformation of schools and their context or surroundings in order to achieve an inclusive and participative educational model for all the community. This includes all spaces and associations of that specific neighbourhood, starting from the classrooms but going far beyond this physical frontier. Some of the main objectives of “Learning communities” are:

- Becoming experts at resolving conflicts in the schools
- Overcoming school failure
- Achieving maximum learning for all pupils
- Contributing to the creation and development of an Information Society for all citizens
- Potentialising cultural activities as an articulating element of collaboration
- Providing the necessary conditions to overcome social exclusion.

The rationale is to improve pupils’ overall learning, thus helping to overcome school failure and problems of conflict in the school between different social groups. This is obtained through the promotion of solidarity, participation and dialogue within the schools. Academic success and social dialogue can be achieved only when schools become communities that open their doors to the members of its community and promote communicative interaction of all social agents: teaching staff, social educators, city hall, families, pupils, neighbourhood businesses, recreation associations and other district associations. Inevitably, this process is less related to what happens within the classrooms and more focused on the co-relations between classrooms, pupils’ homes and the public space (Castells 1994).

Learning communities also wish to overcome the social and educational parallel tracks of the current educational system, where those schools attended by pupils from non-academic families (whose adult members lack university diplomas) tend to have a higher number of early school-leavers, or more who take “junior” degrees rather than higher education degrees. Meanwhile, academic families encourage their children towards higher education and students from these schools tend to have students with higher rates of access to university careers. The main objective of this project, then, is that children from Roma, Arabic and other origins or disadvantaged positions in general, get the same opportunities as the students from other backgrounds. However, if teachers, families and recreational institutions are uncoordinated and act in different directions, school failure of the non-privileged groups seems to be an inevitable option.

To overcome this double-profile where schools perpetuate social exclusion of children with less resources, these schools have to be transformed into learning communities guided by an egalitarian model, which involves contextual transformation through dialogic learning and consensus among as many educational social actors as possible. The proper methodology would be based on acceleration (see next lines) instead of adaptation and the usual compensatory measures.

### ***Antecedents of Learning communities:***

The concept of Learning communities is the result of many years of international investigation on educational projects to overcome school failure and problems of conflict in schools. The most widely recognised and successful precedents can be found in the USA and Canada, but there are also successful projects in other places such as Korea or Brazil. To name a few:

- a) The “School Development Programme” is considered by many to be the pioneer programme, and the most recognised by North-American authorities. It started in 1968 at Yale University, in collaboration with two primary schools from New Haven which were experiencing low rates of school performance, as well as other social problems. It was aimed at pupils from Early childhood to 12 years of age who were attending “problematic” schools located in the city centres.
- b) “Accelerated Schools”, initiated in 1986 under Henry Levin’s direction (Stanford University). The model was inspired by worker cooperatives and democratic models of work distribution. Its starting point is a community that analyses its current situation and plans a joint vision of how they desire the school to be. This is the only project that has been widely covered in Spain, both by the general press and specialised educational publications.
- c) “Success for All” started in Baltimore in 1987 as part of collaboration between Johns Hopkins University and Baltimore Education Department. Their focus was on schools presenting significant rates of low school performance and problems of conflict, inter-group violence, etc. Based on research in evolutionary psychology, it is currently the most widespread programme in North-American schools (more than 2000).

These three programmes share common characteristics, basically their focus on social and cultural transformation of the school and its community, achieved through dialogic learning. This helps explain their success and provides the basis of PEC-B “Learning communities” creation and implementation.

### ***Implementation phases***

The “Learning communities” project has two basic phases of development, prior to its implementation: awareness-raising and decision-making.

Awareness-raising: this stage is based on training sessions of 30 hours where the current Information Society is explained and discussed, specially focused on the learning processes and

knowledge it requires for those children who will live in this new context in the future. It also focuses on ways to overcome social inequalities and successfully develop students' personal and professional lives. These sessions are addressed to all social actors implicated in the creation of the Learning communities.

Decision-making: Following the awareness-taking phase, the community must decide, jointly, to implement the transformation of the school into a learning community. There are some minimum requirements to make this decision:

- 90 percent of the teaching staff of the school must agree to carry out the Project
- The school's administrative team must agree
- The School Council must give its approval
- The Parents Association must give its approval
- There must be community involvement (social agents, external entities, etc.)
- The General Administration of the Education Department must give the school maximum autonomy.

Once these conditions have been reached, one of the first tasks is to organise work groups, where a leader is placed in charge of carrying out each of the priorities. These work groups are actually "mixed commissions" made up of teachers, families and/or pupils, who are in charge of implementing each particular priority. Actual decisions, however, are taken by the administrative organisations for each case, whether this be the school board, the school council, etc. Another innovation lies in the classroom organisation, which should include the presence of more than one adult during school lessons. This helps that disadvantaged children are not forced to abandon their group and regular sessions to attend separate remedial or compensatory classes (flexible workgroups). From the "Learning communities" perspective, these flexible workgroups are considered to increase inequalities – despite the fact that they are intended to resolve them. A better formula consists in organising interactive groups (see details below) where the teaching staff shares its task and space with other adults – usually parents –, thus, at the same time, increasing the family's motivations and involvement in their children's education.

To achieve this significant transformation, the learning community decides upon certain priorities and actions to be carried out in periods of 2-3 years, some of which are:

*a) Interactive groups:*

Considered the most radical aspect of the project, it has to do with the major debate about the homogeneous character of most educational models and how to organise diversity and heterogeneity within the classrooms. Interactive groups are the opposite of taking "at-risk" groups of pupils out of the class, sometimes even out of the school, to develop separate activities. In interactive groups, no one is taken out of their original group. However, assuming that the teacher cannot always handle all the class by him/herself, needed resources are brought into the classroom to help the learning process, overcome failure and resolve conflict problems for all children. Other adults in the classroom are considered to be one of these resources, as are pupils' parents and relatives, volunteers and retired teachers.

*b) Family training:*

Another essential transformation, and the one considered to give better outcomes, is family training. Learning communities consider, for example, that the use of an ICT classroom can be organised in timetables that allow pupils, the family and their relatives to access these resources together is important. This method is especially stimulating for those families who enjoy sharing activities, such as the Roma community. Literacy is also another element offered for those families

who need it. If a real transformation is to be achieved, schools must become centres of education for all the community, in conjunction with the community.

*c) Conflict solving models:*

Solving conflicts within the classrooms has been a major concern of a wide range of theories and applications, ranging from disciplinary actions to mediation models, many of them quite arbitrary and not always successful. The “Learning communities” project bets for another conflict solving model though to have better results: the communitarian model, where families participate on equal conditions, no matter their cultural origins and differences, and all the community is involved in a dialogue to uncover the origins and causes of the existing conflicts. Through interactive groups and the presence of parents within the classrooms, conflicts between groups tend to disappear from the classrooms. Those families that usually lack motivation to get involved in their children’s education tend to change their attitudes and collaborate when they have the opportunity to see that real transformation and opportunity for participation is encouraged.

Certain family realities have to be taken into account to promote this type of participation. For example, in some of the Catalan centres where “Learning communities” are implemented, 20 percent of the pupils have relatives in prison, whose treatment cannot be different or exclusive from that of other families. Therefore, whenever an assembly is being held, the centre must visit and inform these relatives, encouraging their reflection and participation. This dialogic focus creates the sense of a big family and helps the schools to be perceived not as strangers telling parents what to do, but as co-workers sharing the same educational and communitarian model.

***Current state of the project:***

Around 40 early childhood, primary and secondary schools are in the project in Barcelona, along with the participation of their communities. The programme has been introduced into the “Language and Social Cohesion” plan since 2004-2005 (Generalitat de Catalunya, Subdirecció General de Lengua y Cohesión Social). “Learning communities” are also being implemented in other Spanish regions such as Andalucía, Aragón, Castilla-La Mancha, Castilla-León, Extremadura and the Basque Country.

***Specific outcomes:***

Two Catalan summits of Learning Communities, held in June 2005 and 2006 by the Catalan Education Department were attended by all the region’s Learning communities. The second summit had John Comming, professor of Harvard’s Education Faculty and head of NSCALL (National Centre for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy) as invited guest. At a national level, inter-regional summits have also been held since 2005. They occur once a year, in a different community each time and are jointly organised by the Aragón, Basque Country and Catalan governments. Representatives from all Learning communities, including counsellors, students and a wide range of professionals interested in the project usually attend.

***Impact (project report):***

The schools involved in the project have transformed into “Learning communities”, signifying the implication and participation of all the community especially the families- in these schools. Communitarian construction of a new educational context fully responds to the children’ needs without excluding anyone and at the same time offers qualitative improvement of the pupils’ learning process. The project has been led in particular by the presence of CREA ([Centro Especial de Investigación en Teorías y Prácticas Superadoras de Desigualdades, Universidad de Barcelona](#)). They have also counted on the collaboration of Barcelona City Council Education Institute.

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