INTERACTIVE GROUPS

We like working in interactive groups because we learn more, also because time goes by faster and because in a class of twenty-five children the teacher has to attend each of us … On the contrary, in interactive groups as on one table we are only six and we help each other, if there is a question we can resolve it in a second. We become better friends, we trust each other more, and during the breaks in the yard if someone feels lonely and has no one to play, we call him/her and we tell him/her to play with us. Why? Because we have more confidence with that person. (…) It is great fun to work in interactive groups because we learn much more than in a normal class.

Ania, a 10 year-old pupil explaining Interactive Groups in the European Parliament.

Interactive Groups (IG)

Background

Interactive Groups (IG) is one of the **Successful Educational Actions (SEAs)** identified in the research project ***INCLUD-ED. Strategies for inclusion and social cohesion in Europe from education*** (European Commission, 6th Framework Program, 2006-2011). The SEAs supporting education of pupils at risk, have universal components which have been showed to be transferable in very diverse contexts, leading to educational success.

Thanks to the SEAs presented in two international conferences in the European Parliament in Brussels, thousands of children in all over Europe have improved their achievement, increasing their opportunities to continue their school career successfully. The social and political impact of this project has been the reason why the European Commission has included it in the list of the top-10 research projects with the highest impact in Europe; INCLUD-ED is the only one from the socio-economic sciences and humanities selected to be in the list[1].

The theoretical framework underlying IG departs from the extensive scientific literature that indicates **the negative impact of ability grouping** on student learning, expectations and self-esteem, the possibility of learning from peers, and move to higher ability groups, especially for vulnerable students, plus the **need to multiply and diversify the interactions** students are exposed to. In line with the outstanding approaches of learning sciences, IG involve and promote the quantity and quality of interactions of all students with a dialogic approach of learning. The theory of dialogic learning[1] maintains that learners reach deep understanding of subject knowledge and engage in processes of personal and social transformation through dialogues that are *egalitarian*, recognize and build upon each person's *cultural intelligence*, seek *transformation*, enhance the *instrumental dimension* of dialogue, are based on the value of *solidarity*, act as sources of *creation of meaning*, and rely on and promote *equal value of different backgrounds*. Thus, IG achieve the participation of all those who directly or indirectly influence learning and development of pupils, including teachers, relatives, friends, neighbours, members of associations and neighbourhood organizations and local volunteers.

IG can be used as an independent practice but are also implemented in **Schools as Learning Communities**, along with other SEAs such as Dialogic Literary Gatherings and Family education. Learning Communities is a project based on a whole school intervention to overcome early school leaving and improve school performance and social cohesion. As a result of the improvements achieved in these schools, the European Commission and the Council of Europe have recommended considering *schools as learning communities* to reduce early school leaving and improve learning outcomes[2].

How do Interactive Groups work?

IG consist of grouping students in a class into **small heterogeneous groups, each of them supported by an adult**. Each of these groups is organised around four or five students, in a heterogeneous way regarding ability level, gender, culture, language and ethnicity. IG has two adult profiles involved in learning processes: teachers and volunteers. Volunteers are often family and community members – including illiterate persons or those with very low educational levels, former students, volunteer university students and also other adults from community organisations.

---

[1] Aubert, A., Flecha, A., García, C., Flecha, R., & Racionero, S. (2008). *Aprendizaje dialógico en la sociedad de la información*. Barcelona: Hipatia; Flecha, R. (2000). *Sharing Words: Theory and Practice of Dialogic Learning.* Lanham, M.D: Rowman & Littlefield.

[2] Communication from the EC (January 2011). *Tackling early school leaving: A key contribution to the Europe 2020 Agenda*.

Teachers are exposed to an initial intense training in which they are exposed to the scientific bases about IG. Volunteers are also invited to participate in this initial training. Teachers are responsible to prepare all the activities to do in the class, and briefly explain to volunteers before each class the activity to do in that group. Although it is important, this brief introduction is not entirely necessary as the volunteer´s role is to produce dynamic supportive learning interactions in each group and guide the activity, not to replace the teacher's role. Thereby, **anyone could be a volunteer**.

Activities in the groups are short, around 15 or 20 minutes and centred on instrumental learning. After completing one activity, all students in the group move into the next one and work with a different adult. As a result of this dynamics, in about 1 hour and a half all the students in the classroom have worked on four different curricular activities and have interacted with four different adults apart from their group mates. In consequence, the **IG increase the instrumental learning**, as this way to work guarantees that all students learn 4 times more than in a regular classroom. Besides, it **improves motivation** of students who participate in them, **as well as coexistence**, as learning is based in the principle of solidarity, rather than rivalry, and all members within the group should help their peers to finish the task (as this is a prerequisite in order to be able to move to the next group).

In schools where IG are implemented, the content of the curriculum does not differ from other schools, it is the official one, and teachers should respond to the standards approved by the government. Particularly, although IG can be implemented in any subject, instrumental learning in language skills and mathematics is prioritised in many of the schools. IG, as well as other SEAs are designed to break the "Mathew effect" of giving less to those with more difficulties, since it brings excellence for everyone, especially high level contents for those more disadvantaged. Teachers decide when to use IG in their classroom; using it does not meant stopping other activities, like master lectures, for example. They also decide the type of material to be used, according to the task. Teachers are also the responsible for the correct implementation of the IG.

In schools using IG, the decisions about the supports students need are made following the ordinary procedures and engaging parents, teachers, volunteers and students in dialogic processes of assessment and agreements related to learning. As every adult only attends four or five students and the class teacher supervises the entire activity, IG allow for a **more individualised assessment of the students' difficulties and support**. It also makes possible having more and more diverse sources of support: the teacher, the volunteers, and the classmates. In some cases, also support teachers participate in IG to help the students with most difficulties. These same agents participate in the monitoring and assessment of the IG successful operation; often the IG sessions end with a joint reflection about what students have learnt, what worked well, and weak points to improve. Besides internal procedures, teachers and schools implementing IG use the standard assessment instruments (e.g. standardised tests); IG should help all students to pass any kind of test.

Implementing IG does not entail additional costs for schools, neither for students, and schools do not receive additional funding to implement them. However, **working in** IG **mobilises resources that are already available in the educational community, primarily community members and the students themselves, to enhance all students' learning**. As IG are developed with the already available resources, they are a sustainable educational action.

Needs/challenges addressed

- Attendance and retention in education
- Reduction of behavioural problems
- Motivation for learning
- Children emotional wellbeing, solidarity and friendship
- Learning achievement
- Multicultural coexistence
- Empowerment of family members and other community members as educational agents
- Students-families-school relationship
- Coordination home-school about children's education

Level of intervention

IG are addressed to any individual who is participating in a school. IG can be implemented in schools from a wide range of levels, including early childhood education and care, elementary, middle and high schools, as well as adult school centres (lifelong learning and/or educations as second chance). The schools implementing IG may be public, private, religious, non-religious, placed in poor neighbourhoods, "middle-class" schools, and upper class neighbourhoods. Although all students participate, IG are particularly beneficial for socio-economically disadvantaged students, minority groups and students with learning difficulties or disabilities.

Intensity of the intervention

IG are implemented on an ongoing basis throughout the school year, and all students in the class, without exception, participate. Teachers, volunteers and the students themselves ensure all students receive the level of support they need through the multiplication of learning interactions in the classroom, both with more competent peers (other students with higher level of ability) and diverse adults (teachers and non-teachers).

Results

Some of the main achievements[3] of IG are: 1) Increase in school performance (performance rates), 2) Involvement of all the community in the learning process and the school, 3) Reduced absenteeism and early school leaving, 4) Improved coexistence, 5) More efficient use of the existing resources. These achievements are exemplified with the cases of particular schools.
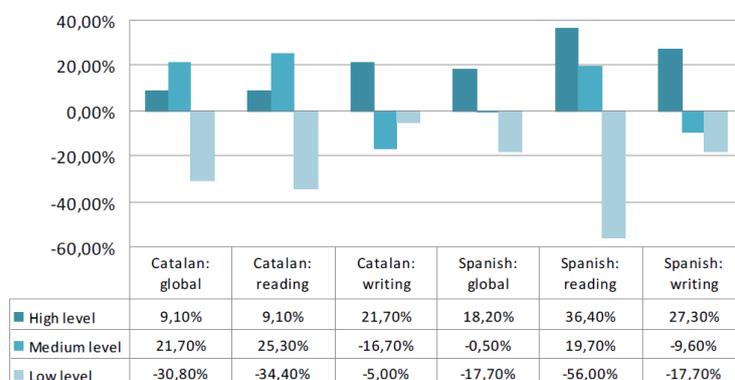
Angel Guimerà School is located in El Vendrell (Catalonia, Spain), specifically in the Puig neighbourhood, one of the areas with largest growth. This school has become a centre of reference for the integration of all students, since it has a large percentage of students with special educational needs. Data on **academic performance** show an increase of more than five percentage points, as measured by standardized tests, compared to the period before implementing IG.

---

[3] The quantitative data presented as follows belong to schools implementing several SEAs, therefore the individual effect of IG cannot be isolated. The greater the number of SEAs implemented, the greater the improvement schools achieve.

Results in standardised tests	
2008-2009	**2011-2012**
7,8% above regional average	13% above regional average

Improvement in standardised tests (between 2008-2009 and 2011-2012). Source: INCLUD-ED project.

Mare de Déu de Montserrat School is located in the outskirts of Terrassa (Spain), an area that gathers families with low SES, high unemployment and poverty rates. A large number of students are from Morocco, Latin-America and some children are from the Roma community. This school implements IG since school year 2001-2002. Data between 2009 and 2011 show the improvement achieved in **language competences and mathematics**. In the case of language skills, the percentage of students with high level performance increased through time, while the percentage of those with low levels decreased. The same trend is observed in mathematics competences.

|	Catalan: global	Catalan: reading	Catalan: writing	Spanish: global	Spanish: reading	Spanish: writing
High level	9,10%	9,10%	21,70%	18,20%	36,40%	27,30%
Medium level	21,70%	25,30%	-16,70%	-0,50%	19,70%	-9,60%
Low level	-30,80%	-34,40%	-5,00%	-17,70%	-56,00%	-17,70%

Percentages of improvement in Basic Competences in Language (between 2009 and 2011). Sixth grade. Source: INCLUD-ED project.
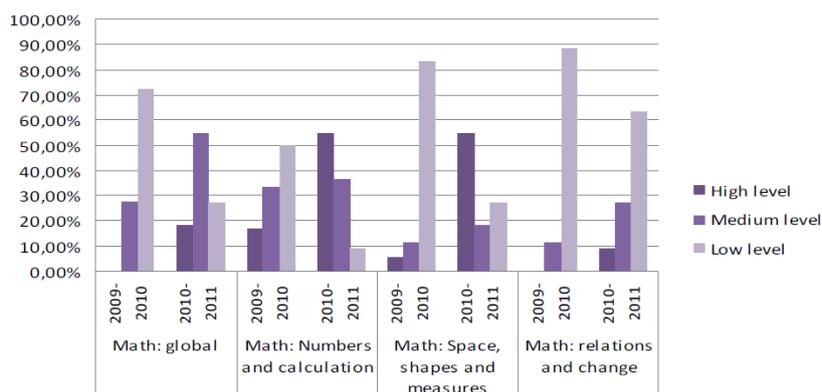

Basic Competences in Mathematics (between 2009 and 2011). Sixth grade. Source: INCLUD-ED project.

La Paz school is located in La Milagrosa neighbourhood, in the outskirts of the city of Albacete (Spain). The neighbourhood comprises mainly Roma families with very low educational levels, precarious living conditions and high levels of unemployment. Data on student performance show an improvement of between 1,1 and 2,3 score points (over 5) in 6 areas of language.
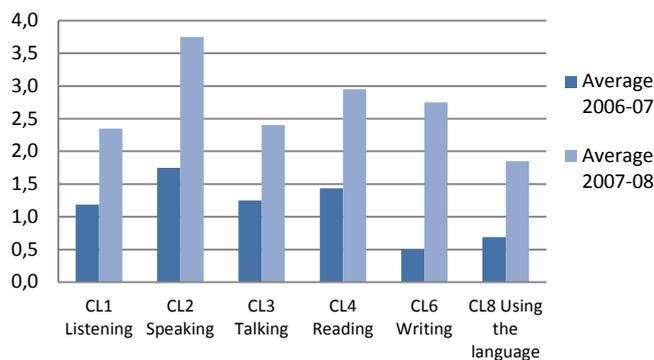
Language competences. Areas improved. Fourth year. Source: INCLUD-ED project.

Additionally, in La Paz school, the increase in school performance was accompanied by a reduction of student **absenteeism** and an increase of students' **enrolment**. Absenteeism for the 2006-2007 school year was 30%, in 2007-2008 it was reduced to 10% and in 2008-2009 it occurred occasionally. After years of experiencing a decrease in the number of pupils enrolled, since the implementation of SEAs (2005-2006), including IG, the number of matriculated children began to increase.
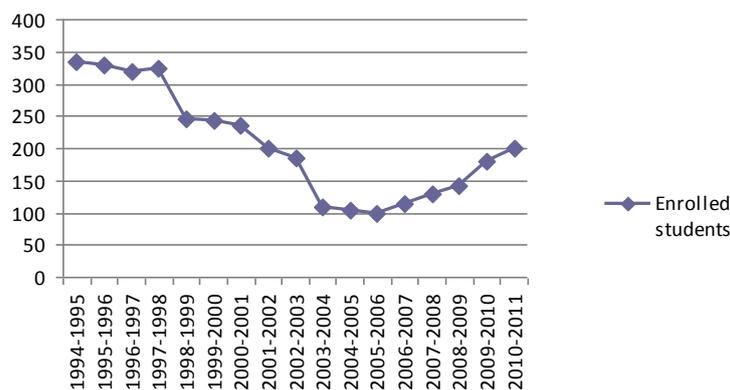
Trends in student enrolment. Source: INCLUD-ED project.

IG contribution to learning improvement goes hand in hand with improving **coexistence and solidarity levels among the students**, showing that schools do not need to choose between learning contents and values. The following quotes from IG participants exemplifies it and shows the key role that community participation has in it:

> *If we are working with volunteers and we are working in small groups in the classroom one of the things we work on a lot are values. We are working on being able to relate to each other, respect for those next to you, tolerance, knowing that if you finish first you are not finished, it is not you, you, you, but rather it is us, you think of the whole group.* (School coordinator)[4]

> *Before I came in they were making such a racket. It was too much! And then one of the little girls said, "Juan's mum is here", and they sat down. [And I said], "Come on everyone, calm down and you'll see what happens" and all the kids sat there to do what the teacher said, and everything went well… And the teacher said, "when are you coming next, Emilia?"* (Illiterate mother from an

---

[4] Elboj, C., & Niemelä, R. (2010). Sub-communities of Mutual Learners in the Classroom: The case of Interactive groups. *Revista De Psicodidáctica*, *15*(2), 177-189. doi:10.1387/RevPsicodidact.810. p.186

ethnic minority group)[5]

These improvements are achieved without any additional resources, which entails that using IG means making a **more efficient use of the resources available** in the community. In the following chart data of a school is showed in which in a five-year period the number of enrolled students increased much more than the number of teachers and, as a consequence, the number of students allocated to each teacher increased. During the same period SEAs, including IG, started to be implemented and the students greatly improved their achievement levels. IG allowed the existing resources to be used more efficiently: per each 1.000 Euros of monthly expenditure more students were educated and their results were better. Academic results improved not because the amount of resources increased but because the resources were more efficiently used.
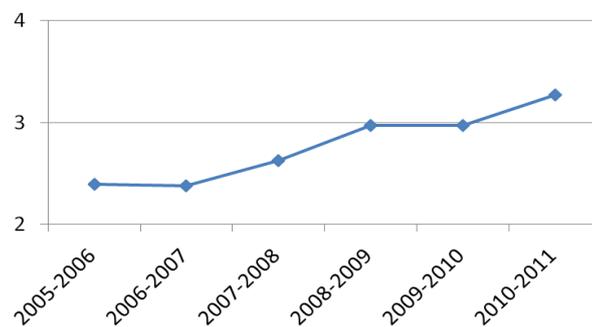
Number of students educated per each 1000 euros invested per month. Source: INCLUD-ED project.

The introduction of IG in schools is not free of **obstacles**. There is one main barrier to its implementation, which is the **resistances** found among some teachers to welcome parents or other non-academic community members in their classrooms. IG are never implemented in a class if the teacher is not convinced to do so, as any teacher can decide whether they want to conduct IG or not. Reluctances are overcome when teachers see the improvements achieved in the other classes, which convinces them to want the same for their class.

Because of the positive results, the number of schools implementing IG have greatly increased since the 90s. At the moment, **more than 200 schools implement IG in Europe and more than 300 in Latin America**. As they are improving the learning attainment and educational prospects of many students, IG are a promising tool to approach the EU2020 target of reducing school drop-out rates below 10%.

References

Elboj, C., & Niemelä, R. (2010). Sub-communities of Mutual Learners in the Classroom: The case of Interactive groups. *Revista De Psicodidáctica*, *15*(2), 177-189. doi:10.1387/RevPsicodidact.810. http://www.ehu.eus/ojs/index.php/psicodidactica/article/view/810

Flecha, R. (2015). *Successful Educational Action for Inclusion and Social Cohesion in Europe*. Springer Publishing Company. http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-11176-6_4

---

[5] Diez, J., Gatt, S., & Racionero, S. (2011). Placing Immigrant and Minority Family and Community Members at the School's Centre: the role of community participation. *European Journal Of Education*, *46*(2), 184-196. doi:10.1111/j.1465-3435.2011.01474.x. p.191

García-Carrión, R., & Díez-Palomar, J. (2015). Learning communities: Pathways for educational success and social transformation through interactive groups in mathematics. *European Educational Research Journal*, *14*(2), 151-166. http://eer.sagepub.com/content/14/2/151.short

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

Oliver, E., & Gatt, S. (2010). From power-related communicative acts to dialogic communicative acts in classrooms organised in interactive groups. *Revista Signos*, *43*, 279-294. http://www.scielo.cl/pdf/signos/v43s2/a02.pdf

Valls, R., & Kyriakides, L. (2013). The power of interactive groups: how diversity of adults volunteering in classroom groups can promote inclusion and success for children of vulnerable minority ethnic populations. *Cambridge Journal Of Education*, *43*(1), 17-33. doi:10.1080/0305764X.2012.749213. http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0305764X.2012.749213#.Vcn-Sfl_Oko

Further information

Ania Ballesteros, a 10 year old student, explains Interactive Groups and Dialogic Literary Gatherings at the INCLUD-ED Final Conference (6th of December 2011. European Parliament Headquarters) (subtitled in English): https://vimeo.com/76545601

Contact details

CREA. Community of Researchers on Excellence for All.

Email: crea@ub.edu

Website: http://crea.ub.edu