

# DIALOGIC LITERARY GATHERINGS



*We like literary gatherings because we learn more. We learn more vocabulary and expressions and we learn to read. One example is two boys from my class, one is called Ayoub and the other Kavi, and thanks to the literary gatherings, they learned to read. Why? Because they wanted to know what was going on in the literary gatherings and debate with us and as they didn't know how to read, they had to make an effort, and they practiced and read it again until they finally learned to read after so much effort. [This was also possible] because, when reading the books for the literary gatherings, they had someone to read with at home, relatives or friends who came to visit and helped them to read.*

Ania, a 10 year-old pupil explaining Dialogic Literary Gatherings in the European Parliament.

# Dialogic Literary Gatherings

## Background

Dialogic Literary Gatherings (DLG) is one of the **Successful Educational Actions (SEAs)** identified in the research project **INCLUD-ED**.<sup>1</sup> INCLUD-ED analysed educational strategies that contribute to overcome inequalities and promote social cohesion, and those generating social exclusion, particularly focusing on vulnerable and marginalised groups. 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. DLG are used to improve education of children and youth in different contexts around the world.

The **importance of reading** in the current society goes without saying. Since reading is a basic skill **for further learning**, students struggling with it will inevitably have serious problems in other disciplines. Conversely, good reading skills facilitate access to other areas of the curriculum and, more generally, reduce the risk of repeating classes and dropping out of high school. In other words, reading difficulties correlate with higher rates of **underachievement, segregation, early school leaving, and educational inequalities**. This affects particularly different minorities, such as immigrants or Roma students, who are very often segregated in formal and informal procedures, in different school contexts and also within school where they are already enrolled.

In line with the evidence coming from the learning sciences, specifically in the field of reading, DLG raises the quantity and quality of interactions of all students through a dialogic approach of learning. The theory of dialogic learning<sup>2</sup> maintains that learners reach deep understanding of the subject engaging in processes of personal and social transformation through dialogues that are egalitarian, recognize and build upon each person's cultural intelligence. Dialogic learning seeks transformation, enhances the instrumental dimension of dialogue, is based on solidarity, acts as a sources of creation of meaning, and promotes the equal value of different backgrounds.

DLG can be used as independent practice but they are also implemented within **Schools as Learning Communities**, along with other SEAs such as Interactive Groups and Family Education. Learning Communities is a project based on a whole school intervention through SEAs to overcome early school leaving and to improve school performance and social cohesion. The improvements achieved in these schools induced the European Commission and the Council of Europe to recommend *schools as 'learning communities'* as one of the approaches to reduce early school leaving and improve learning outcomes.<sup>3</sup>

## How do Dialogic Literary Gatherings work?

DLG is a dialogic reading activity based on two principles: reading a **classical literature book** (as *Romeo and Juliet*, *the Odyssey*, *Don Quixote*) and then **sharing meanings, interpretations and reflections** with the dialogic learning methodology.

DLG are organised as follows: Before the gathering, the class chooses a classical book of the universal literature, and agrees on the number of pages to be read before the next gathering; then, each participant reads the text at home and selects the paragraph he or she liked most or that caught his/her attention to share it in the gathering. During the gathering the moderator gives the floor to each participant, who reads aloud the paragraph and explains the reasons why he/she selected it; then, the moderator gives the floor to other participants so that they can discuss that paragraph. The same procedure is repeated with each paragraph for the full duration of the gathering.

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<sup>1</sup> All the information presented here comes from the INCLUD-ED Project results.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> Communication from the EC (January 2011). *Tackling early school leaving: A key contribution to the Europe 2020 Agenda*.

DLG are carried out with **children** and also with **family members** as an activity of family education. DLG improve language performance and enhance direct contact of children with regional culture, international classic culture, history, and draw on their own experiences. DLG break away from the assumption that students and families with a low socio-economic status cannot be interested in classic literature, as we can find students reading the *Odyssey*, talking about and reflecting on the ideas in the book in a dialogic way, while student literacy and the students' learning in general is reinforced.

In DLG used as family and community education, diverse adults get together to read and discuss books such as Joyce's *Ulysses* and García Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba*. Family and community members participating in such an activity foster their own learning and that of their children. This is possible because here instrumental learning is key and responds to the needs and demands of the participants. As a result, it raises the educational level of the families concerned and transforms the interactions within them, improving also the learning of the school children.

The content of the curriculum of schools which organise DLG is the same as in the other schools, and teachers should fulfil the standards set by the government. Particularly, DLG address curricular contents of literacy, literature and history. As well as other SEAs they are designed to break the negative "Mathew effect" of giving less to those with more difficulties, since they bring excellence for everyone, especially high level contents for those more disadvantaged. Teachers get an initial training where they receive all the scientific bases about this practice. Teachers organise DLG and decide when to use them. DLG can be a complementary activity; then they do not replace other activities, like master lectures, for example. Teachers are also responsible for the correct implementation of the DLG. When used as Family Education measure or as extending learning time for students, DLG can also be moderated by a volunteer.

In schools using DLG, the decisions on the support students need are taken following the ordinary procedures, but parents, teachers, volunteers and students are involved in dialogic processes of learning assessment and agreements. When a student presents difficulties to do the reading or to prepare his/her contribution to the gathering, support is organised within the school: students can prepare the gathering with a support teacher or with a more competent peer. It can also be agreed with the family that the child gets help from them to prepare the reading at home. Besides internal procedures, teachers and schools carrying out DLG use the standard assessment instruments (e.g. standardised tests); DLG should help all students to pass any kind of test, especially regarding literacy.

Using DLG does not entail additional costs for schools, neither for students, and schools do not receive additional funding to organise them. As **DLG tap on resources already available in the educational community (family, community members and the students themselves) to enhance all students' learning**, they are a sustainable educational action throughout time.

### Need/challenge addressed

- Attendance and retention in education
- Reduction of behavioural problems
- Motivation for learning
- Children emotional well-being, solidarity and friendship
- Learning achievement
- Multicultural coexistence
- Enhance educational level of families
- Students-families-school relationship

## Level of intervention

DLG are addressed to any individual learning in a school centre. DLG were developed in the Adult School La Verneda – Sant Martí, a Learning Community set up more than 35 years ago, in an underprivileged neighbourhood of Barcelona. Nowadays, DLG are being introduced in schools from many levels and types, including pre-kinder, kindergarten, elementary, middle and high schools, as well as adult school centres (lifelong learning and/or educations as second chance), and even prisons. The schools using DLG may be public, private, religious, non-religious, placed in poor neighbourhoods, middle-class and upper class neighbourhoods. While all types of students participate, DLG are particularly beneficial for socio-economically disadvantaged students, minority groups and students with learning difficulties or disabilities.

## Intensity of the intervention

DLG are being introduced on an ongoing basis throughout the school year, and all students in the class, without exception, participate. The high quality of the texts and the interactive process of understanding and interpretation enables students with low reading proficiency to perform much better in DLG than in other types of literacy activities. Each teacher decides whether he/if wants to carry out DLG on a weekly basis, twice per week, monthly or whatever frequency..

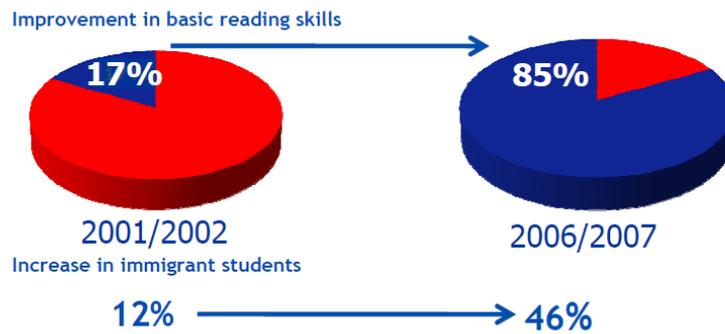
## Results

Some of the main achievements<sup>4</sup> of DLG are: 1) Improvement of students' instrumental skills in language-related activities, 2) Involvement of the community in the learning process and the school, 3) Improving living together of students of different origins, 4) Promoting reflection and reasoning. These achievements are exemplified by case descriptions from a particular school.

Mare de Déu de Montserrat School (Terrassa – Spain) is an exemplary case showing the improvements achieved through the introduction of SEAs (DLG and other). This Learning community is located in the outskirts of Terrassa, with a high concentration of families with low socioeconomic status, high unemployment and poverty rates. A large number of students are from Morocco, Latin-America and some of them Roma. This school was transformed into a Learning Community and introduced SEAs in the school year 2001/2002. DLG are carried out with students and their family members. The results of external evaluations show that the percentage of students who pass the official exam on **reading skills** increased from 17% to 85% in 5 years (2001-2006). At the same time, the amount of immigrant students continued increasing, and in 2011 it was more than the 70% of the total school population.

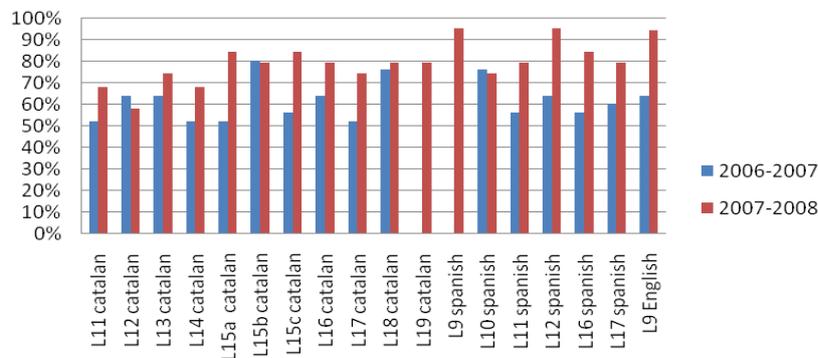
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<sup>4</sup> The quantitative data presented as follows belong to a school implementing several SEAs, therefore the individual effect of DLG cannot be isolated. The greater the number of SEAs implemented, the greater the improvement schools achieve.



Percentages of improvement in Basic Reading Skills (between 2001 and 2006). Source: INCLUD-ED project.

Data on language competences for the following school year showed the same improvement trend:



Basic Language Competences (2<sup>nd</sup> grade). Source: INCLUD-ED project.

While school failure is very often linked to the overrepresentation of immigrant students, this school case demonstrates that educational success does not depend on the ethnic composition of the classroom, but on the methods used. This case shows how the use of research-based strategies that have been proven to be successful, such as DLG, can be decisive in improving students' outcomes.

In Mare de Déu de Montserrat School, a highly popular DLG is organised by Moroccan women. The **active participation of family members** and their interest in education **proves wrong stereotypes** related to migrants' interest and success in education. Their involvement in DLG also contributes to their children's educational success when the **interactions about the readings** (from both children's and adults' DLGs) are shared at home:

*Now during dinner we speak about the books we read in the gathering. I explain to my children and my husband some of the debates we have been having in the gathering. Also things about the books we read (Moroccan mother).<sup>5</sup>*

Reading works of the world literature triggers among the participants **deep reflections and debates** about universal and timeless topics such as love, war or friendship, while students find connections between the story and their own lives.

<sup>5</sup> De Botton, L., Girbes, S., Ruiz, L., & Tellado, I. (2014). Moroccan mothers' involvement in dialogic literary gatherings in a Catalan urban primary school: Increasing educative interactions and improving learning. *Improving Schools*, 17(3), 241-249. doi: 10.1177/1365480214556420. p.246.

*In the literary gatherings we debate on what happens to us and we relate it to the books. Very important debates have come up, such as for example: fidelity, love, also on feelings, the “cool” ones, religions, friendship, braveness, prudence... well, very important issues. We have already read several books so now we start to compare the characters of one book to those of the other books. One example is Ulysses of the Odyssey and Don Quixote of the Don Quixote of La Mancha. Once we have discussed... we thought that Don Quixote was braver and others thought that Ulysses was braver. So, it resulted that who is the bravest is the one who faces things no matter whether these are in your imagination or in reality. Another comparison that we did was also between The Odyssey and Don Quixote and it was whether they had the same goal, both were doing things for love, for a woman. That was also a debate that we all remember. (10 year old girl participating in DLG)*

These debates not only have an impact on learning but also on improving **coexistence** and better understanding among the participants, as it is illustrated in the following quote:

*The dialogic literary gatherings create spaces of dialogue that before were much harder to promote. They generate better relationships among the young people: they ask about the books, about the points of view given in the gathering, they mix with other classmates that they didn't before. They see their classmates in a different way. But, what is more, for the relatives who attend the gatherings, they help them to better understand what is happening in the schools, what happens among students. (High school teacher)<sup>6</sup>*

Because of the positive results, the number of schools implementing DLG have greatly increased since the 90s. At the moment, **more than 200 schools implement DLG in Europe and more than 300 in Latin America.**

The spread of DLG across schools and countries is a success but is also a challenge and a risk to the preservation of the principles of this SEA. Particularly, when schools and professionals call DLG similar activities with literature other than classical books they distort the method . Such activities should get another name. In other cases, teachers who initially are not convinced that it is important to use classical literature, change their mind when they compare the type of interactions and learning that take place with these books in contrast with others.

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<sup>6</sup> Serrano, M., & Mirceva, J. (2010). Dialogic imagination in literacy development. *Journal of Psychodidactics*, 15(2), 191-205. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1387/RevPsicodidact.820.p.201>.

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## Further information

Learning Communities – Tertulias Dialógicas (Instituto Natura). Video on Dialogic Literary Gatherings (in Spanish): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NfL5PfrJ9yY>

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