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Learning Communities: Supporting Change in European School Education

By Hannah Grainger Clemson

Introduction

Recently the European Commission's ET2020 Working Group Schools¹ published their report with the title 'European ideas for better learning: the governance of school education systems'. The work involved close collaboration by governmental policymakers and education stakeholders in a series of meetings and 'peer learning' events over the course of two years. Although a small task in comparison, choosing the title was a similar challenge to the whole process of assimilating and reflecting different perspectives and priorities. And, in the end, it was not difficult to come to an agreement when the key shared values of the Group were brought to the fore.

The phrase 'European ideas' was chosen because the report represented all of the members and the way in which they had generously shared practices and listened to each other with curiosity. The Group also favoured 'better learning' because they were searching for ways to support schools to continually develop in creating meaningful learning experiences for all young people. It is not accidental that the members – government policymakers and educational organization representatives – applied the same collaborative pedagogical approach to their work as that which they desire for their own contexts. This collective desire regarding school education is also notable in the prevalence of key words in the report: 'collaboration' is mentioned 79 times in the 260 pages. 'Autonomy' is mentioned 92 times; 'capacity' (i.e. the ability to do something) 94 times; 'trust' 82 times.

¹ Education and Training 2020 (ET2020) is a strategic framework of the European Commission which creates fora for exchanges of best practices, mutual learning, gathering and dissemination of information and evidence of what works, as well as advice and support for policy reforms. Members of expert groups come from all ministries of education across Europe plus European stakeholder organizations.

This article explores the collaborative process of sharing and developing ideas on the governance of school education and how that process – with both its opportunities and challenges – closely relates to the concept of ‘schools as learning organizations’ that underpins the Group’s work.

Collaboration and community

Collaboration and community are concepts and ways of interacting and working together that are fundamental to both how the Group worked together and what the Group wants to say about school education. This link between process and content is evidence of the strongly held shared values of the members as well as something that contributed to the success of their work in terms of effective peer learning.

When one talks about business, enterprise, research, innovation, the word ‘collaboration’ is never far away. Even unbeknown to ourselves as citizens, algorithms also pull us into societal groups via digital technologies. But it is not as if we avoid such relationships. We are human, and we arrange ourselves into partnerships, clusters and groups.² We benefit from such interactions and we worry when we see the opposite happening: the individual student locked in their own mind; the isolated teacher hidden away in their classroom. Fragmentation has become a dirty word.

For schools and for national and regional policymaking and decisions, the Group’s work was underpinned by the concepts of schools as ‘learning organizations’ within school education as a ‘learning system’.

Schools as learning organizations

...encourage and enable teachers and school leaders to improve both their pedagogical and their organizational practices concurrently through local collaborative research and networking. Developing the capacity and role of teachers and school leaders is essential for schools to provide a clear strategic vision and leadership that guides and fully supports teaching and learning, and which enables effective communication with other practitioners and stakeholders.³

² See the report on ‘Networks for learning and development across school education’ for the way the Group distinguishes these in school education: https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/downloads/Governance/2018-wgs5-networks-learning_en.pdf

³ For more on these concepts, see the main report at https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/downloads/Governance/2018-wgs1-governance-school_en.pdf

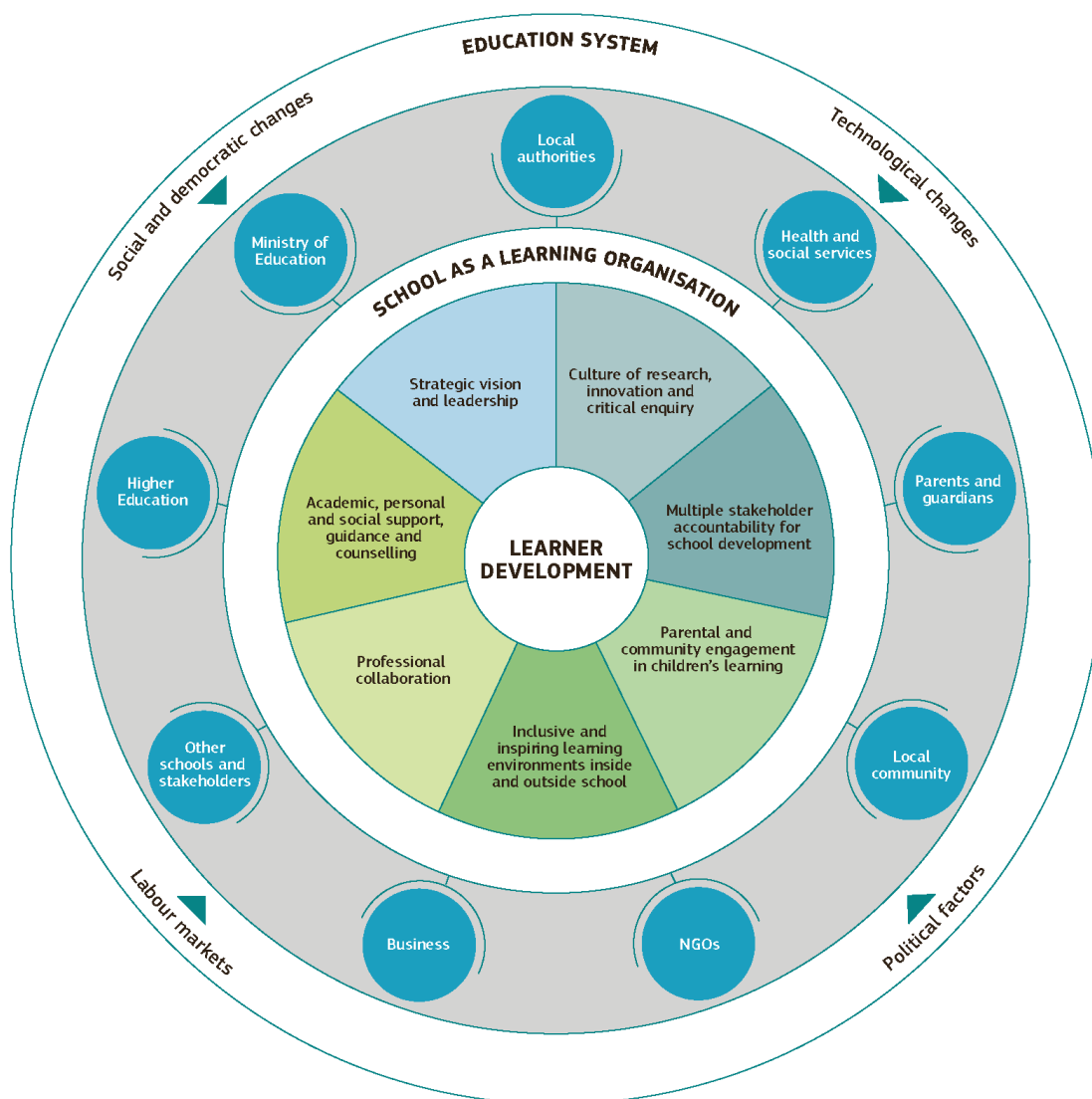


Figure 1: The different elements of schools as learning organizations. This was developed in several contexts: the thematic work on Teachers and School leaders using a similar OECD/UNICEF (2016) model; the Study on Supporting school innovation across Europe (European Commission 2018); and Working Group discussions on the aims and activity of education systems.

Working Group members – who are not only ministry representatives but also come from education organizations – are very much aware of the key barriers to teacher collaboration. These barriers include not having enough time in addition to classroom work and a fear of negative judgement by others or simply the very personal nature of teaching style cultivated over time that feeds an attitude of working in ‘safe’ isolation. For ministries with very different education systems, built in different political and cultural contexts over decades, the common perspective or understanding of why or how a particular initiative takes place may not immediately or always be there, even if the curiosity is. Therefore, even though the curiosity or common interest may exist, other factors may inhibit collaboration and it is a particular feature of the ET2020 Working Group Schools that they are in a position to transcend these. In many ways the Group itself was operating as a learning organization and was very much aware of the particular nature of this methodology.

Taking the leap from 'collaboration' – working with another to produce something – to 'community' requires a particular attitude and environment but can reap rewards other than the output, and even enhance the output itself. 'Schools as learning organizations' and schools within 'learning systems' share the characteristics of 'Communities of Practice' as developed by Lave and Wenger:

- Shared interest and a commitment to that interest;
- Working together, helping each other and establishing relationships that foster learning from each other;
- A shared repertoire of resources or expertise that is built over time.⁴

For the individual young learner, there is power to be gained with a developed skill of working in teams; of negotiating with others. One hopes for these learners a future of being able to live and work in harmony with others but to also learn from each and gain new perspectives in doing so. In the present, these learners may already be feeling the heightened joy of succeeding at a task through combined effort, which depends on the way the teacher has shaped and facilitated the learning experience.

Part of the Working Group mandate for these two years was to examine the development of learners and support their variable pathways. In their report, the Group stresses the importance of collaboration between institutions, particularly concerning the point at which learners transition from one to another. This does not just mean taking care to share learner data but also considering each other's learning approaches, the physical learning environment and the potential involvement of other services, such as career guidance. This is not automatically achievable, and the Working Group recognises the challenge of a variety of tools and other resources needed to support such interaction.

Early in their work, the Group were clear that a long-term, step-by-step approach to school education development, with piloting, reflection and feedback, is necessary in order to ensure the sustainability and legacy of education policies. Strengthening and exploiting both horizontal and vertical (hierarchical) connections help to organize collective intelligence in order to understand and act upon what is — and what needs to be — happening in different parts of the system (see also Figure 2 below).

⁴ <http://wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice/> Accessed 5 October 2018.

In Portugal, the Priority Intervention Educational Territories Programme (TEIP) promotes inclusion through the support of schools and school clusters located in the most disadvantaged/challenging regions. The programme takes preventive, sustained and networking action with a community, in order to promote a good school climate and the educational success of/for all students, as well as to combat school drop-out and to strengthen the relationship between the school, family and the community. It has also been the basis for the negotiation of additional resources.

Schools Clusters and non-grouped schools in Portugal are organized in a way to develop continuous professional development activities but a set of networks goes beyond the internal organization of the school clusters and their relationship with local communities. Presently there are 91 School Associations Training Centers (CFAE-Centro de Formação de Associações de Escolas), located in one of the associated schools, which provide ongoing training to associated schools, TEIP and non-TEIP, through the development of continuous training plans based on the needs identified in each school.

The Directorate-General for Education has taken a multi-level approach through the organization of national, regional and local meetings to promote networking between teachers, technicians, middle and top leaders, families, critical friends and institutions of higher education.

More on this is available in the report on Networks – see footnote 2.

In time and space

In the official language of the European Commission, Education and Training 2020 (ET2020) 'is a strategic framework... It is a forum for exchanges of best practices, mutual learning, gathering and dissemination of information and evidence of what works, as well as advice and support for policy reforms.' From a coordinator's perspective, I am not referring to the equally useful digital work sharing policy documents and crunching numbers about education reforms; I am talking about people in a room, in a shared space.

The meetings and activities that take place under the banner of ET2020 are different to the mere informative approach one might expect. They are designed to explore current issues and difficult problems. Members present case study examples of their own current practice (policy approach) to each other which is more immediate than reading an edited report some time after an initiative has been instigated – both for the presenter and the listener. In a unique safe space, members are able to talk about their current priorities and 'work-in-progress,' and gain constructive feedback from others. This takes both trust and skills as acting as a 'critical friend' – both discussed below.

The Group has had to invest equally in both the developing of concepts – an 'approach' to school education governance – and the sharing of country or organization examples to prompt or explain these concepts. They discovered very quickly that it was useless to remain in the abstract. The numerous examples are what made the meetings and the final outputs come alive and so this sharing, and the generosity of the members in doing so, has been crucial to the success of the work.

One of the underlying principles of the Group is the importance of creating meaningful learning experiences. It is important to note that the Group does not discuss classroom practice although it has discussed the work of teachers and school leaders in the broadest sense and what measures might support them. Nevertheless, there is an assumption with the word 'meaningful' that the pupil should find value in the work; that it is relevant and useful to their lives and motivates their curiosity and desire to develop further. Pupils are invited to question problems and search for solutions in a creative way, which involves imagination, negotiating with the ideas of others, and critical reflection to find innovative routes forward. Such problem-solving is at the core of the Group's understanding of school development which relies upon an attitude – by the education system as a whole – of striving for high quality and continuous development through the sharing of expertise and different perspectives or evidence.

This relates to the Group's exploration of the different mechanisms of external and internal review of schools; for example, school inspectorates and self-assessment.⁵ The work explored the interplay between such mechanisms and began to uncover possible solutions to the problem of taking an integrated and system-wide approach to quality assurance. In the examples shared, there is evidence of a keen desire to involve different stakeholders – teachers, families, regional decision-makers, and government policymakers – in the process of generating, analysing and reporting evidence on school and learner development. During a peer learning activity, they explored, among others, Estonia's exploration of the online sharing of school data. Such tools can help address the notion of shared time and space but through digital means – potentially giving a more immediate reflection of a school in development, aspiring to a national and more long-term understanding of quality and development, and a common 'virtual' space with information that can be provided and accessed by different stakeholders.

Critical reflection

In the Working Group Schools, we – as facilitators and members – have developed an approach to peer learning known to us as 'critical friends.' The Group takes this approach in particular when a smaller group (approximately one third) of the members come together for a 'Peer Learning Activity': an event of 3-4 days where participants will present a specific policy development. They will problematize it for the group with key questions, then open up the discussion for constructive feedback, the 'audience' identifying both strengths and suggestions in order to help the presenters create the beginnings of an action plan for the future.

⁵ See more on the Working Group exploration of quality assurance at https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/downloads/Governance/2018-wgs2-quality-assurance-school_en.pdf

The competence and contextual demands on the participants are clear. First, for the work to be truly useful, participants need to be honest and able to share the good times and bad in terms of their policy development. While one can understand on a human and political level the difficulty with labelling something a 'mistake', the lessons that can be learned from something not sustaining its early impact, if making the desired impact at all, are just as valuable as ones from successful initiatives.

From my observations as coordinator, it is also important that participants are willing to reflect upon approaches even if they would not normally occur in their own context. This is because getting caught up in the peculiarities of another system may become a barrier to making pertinent suggestions. Indeed, the participants need to be open and curious to the needs of their fellow Group members and find some bond over the shared interest (the particular topic selected to focus on). This places quite a significant demand on members who often have to grapple with the intricacies of multiple education systems other than their own and to imagine other possibilities on their behalf, based on their own experiences.

Dealing with an unknown future, there cannot be any absolute right or wrong in the suggestions a member might make, which also might be queried by other participants in the spirit of teasing out workable solutions. Indeed, the members actively encourage each other to ask pertinent and sometimes difficult questions to help each see the problem differently and improve their possible responses. Working in this fashion one might observe that they quickly come to the limit of peer learning here in the discussion phase. They are not bound by or imposing benchmarks or other such indicators on the outcome of policy action that might draw clear lines of 'success' and the eventual action could have any number of possible outcomes. Does this make the work easier? Does such an approach translate to national education systems? This flexibility and lack of control over outcomes is certainly a broader issue in school education governance when there is value placed on encouraging schools and teachers to be more autonomous and take ownership for their own development.

Another key feature of the Group's peer learning process as critical friends is the sense of narrative and journey that is created through the work. Not only do members spend a significant period of time together working deeply on complex issues to emerge tired but satisfied at the end, but they are also within that expressing their own work as a story with a beginning, middle and (possible) end. They describe the characters (stakeholders) involved, the setting, the struggles and resolutions. They draw each other into their worlds in a very human way, expressed as a personal quest. It strikes me that this is similar to the 'Children as Actors Transforming Society' (CATS)⁶ approach to treating humans as owners and narrators or their own journeys – as living 'books'. Participants are asked to 'tell their story' and invite other participants to be actively curious and engaged. In return, the 'books' (the members and their policy examples) are able to feel supported and to consider their own story in a new light.

⁶ More information on CATS is available at <http://catsprogramme.org/>. Accessed 5 October 2018.

Learning from work-in-progress that cannot already be labelled an accomplished success might seem to operate in a tricky liminal space of subjectivity and possibility rather than certain direction. It cannot seem possible that national policymaking can be based on such evidence and yet coupling research literature with multiple examples seems to find its own robustness. The same might be said to be true of teachers and schools learning from each other, all still finding their way and yet drawing on each other's experiences to boost their own confidence and creative thinking.

On another level the very nature of parallel development and mutual exchange creates a special relationship which adds to the sense of all actors aspiring to high quality together rather than working in isolation.

In Serbia, the SHARE project focuses on the development and verification of a programme of horizontal learning and implementation among schools based on the networking of the teachers between schools. High-performing schools mentor and provide support and capacity building for schools with poor performance which have been identified in external evaluations. The aim is to improve quality in specific areas of school work and life. SHARE project is a joint project of the Institute for Education Quality and Evaluation (IEQE), Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development (MoESTD), Centre for Education Policy (CEP) and UNICEF. The programme was very successful in its pilot phase and is looking to expand.
More on this is available in the report on Networks – see footnote 2.

Trust

The Working Group acknowledge that increasingly, national governments are shifting greater control to the local level while maintaining responsibility for the effectiveness, efficiency and equity of the overall system. With a range of mechanisms in place to assure quality, genuine trust between the different levels of the system is paramount and this is reflected in the direct reference to the term in the Group's outputs. Despite the growing autonomy of schools and a genuine desire that they will steer their self-development, some mechanisms are understood to also inflict pressure, competition and even fear in teachers and school leaders that inhibit their capacity to innovate and adapt according to the needs of their students.

Working Group members are perhaps fortunate to exist on the fringes of the political arena. They are trusted by their ministry (or organization) to represent their country (or stakeholders) without the need for fighting a particular opinion over another. They are at liberty, to a certain extent, to share the inner workings and concerns of their institutions for which the ET2020 framework is explicitly and formally set up. However, in practice, the social space within which the members meet is still dependent on an informal trust that encourages people to speak without fear of judgement, sense of competition, or even being ignored.

There are stakeholders within school education systems that are at risk of being isolated or ignored, and this was raised in particular in the context of the work on learner pathways. A

‘Whole School Approach’⁷ has been a concept understood and aspired to for some years; this being where policies and actors across a range of sectors – health, social services, families, etc. – are joined to support or add to a holistic understanding of learner development. Such an approach is particularly important in the case of vulnerable learners. A balance also needs to be struck so that each stakeholder feels genuinely involved and not just exploited for their service or evidence to support another priority.

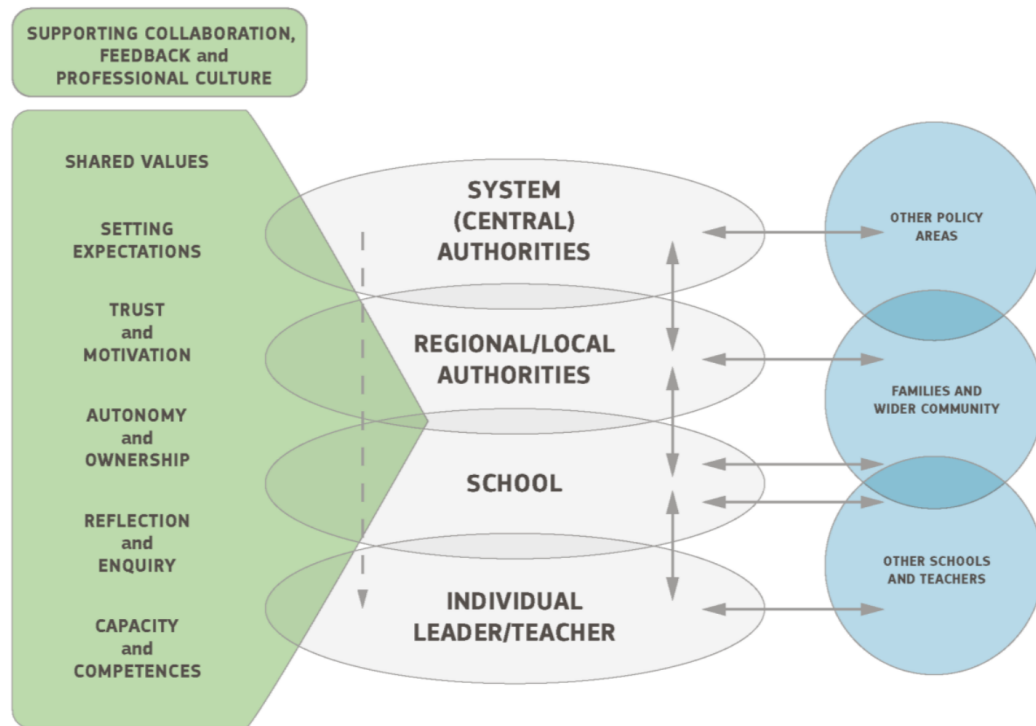


Figure 2 – Vertical and horizontal relationships within school education systems with an approach to governance.

The Working Group acknowledge the difficult positioning of parents and families in school education decision-making. On the one hand they are encouraged to be engaged in the education of their own children and in supporting the local school community and yet are rarely consulted as key voices in policy development. This can then be detrimental to the trust the parents have in the system. Closely linked to the notion of trust is flexibility; in particular, the choices that young people have and the ability to change their path and adapt as their aspirations change.

⁷ More information on the ‘Whole School Approach’ can be found in an earlier report from the Working Group Schools: http://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/education/experts-groups/2014-2015/school/ireland-school-approach_en.pdf

Some countries have found recent success in allowing these marginalized voices to be heard, such as in Finland and Ireland.⁸ As it was expressed in the 2018 conference of the Working Group, these local actors – teachers, school leaders, pupils and their families – should somehow be left space to choose their own path yet still brought to the table to support decision-making.

Leadership, ownership and responsibility

For change to happen teachers and schools need a strong sense of leadership at school level. For that leadership to be able to strategically embrace development there needs to be a sense of ownership in all stakeholders. And for that development to be sustained and coherent with a broader shared vision for a national system there needs to be a sense of responsibility. These three elements are inseparable.

The Working Group has certainly witnessed this on different levels, beginning with their own existence where the work was born out of member priorities and challenges. It was critical to the process that the programme of work was developed in discussion with the members rather than imposed upon them. This may surprise those who were not part of the Group, but it would have been impossible for the members to be as engaged in the work and find it as useful if it had not organically grown around their own perspectives, interests and needs.

In the ‘Study on innovation in schools across Europe,’⁹ which ran at the same time as the Working Group, one of the key findings was the enormous influence of the school head in changing teacher mindsets and driving change to happen. These school leaders were described to have particular skills in people management and acute awareness of the whole school community from where they could gain extra support, even in more deprived areas. In the work on ‘Continuity and transitions in learner development’¹⁰ it was also acknowledged how learners themselves need a blend of good access, broad choice and sufficient capacity/skills to direct their own pathway through formal and non-formal education.

⁸ In 2018 Finland surveyed a range of actors, including children and parents on their experiences of morning and afternoon school activities. The report (Finnish) is available at: https://www.oph.fi/julkaisut/2018/aamu_ ja_ iltapaivatoiminnan_ tila_ ja_ kehittamistarpeet Accessed 5 October 2018. Ireland also consulted a range of stakeholders, including young people, in the recent development of the Junior Cycle (lower secondary curriculum). A video interview describes these changes, available at: <https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/en/pub/viewpoints/interviews/education-talks-listening-to-.htm> and detailed information is provided on the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment website: <https://www.ncca.ie/en/junior-cycle/framework-for-junior-cycle> Accessed 5 October 2018.

⁹ See <https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/en/pub/resources/innovation> Accessed 5 October 2018.

¹⁰ See report ‘Continuity and transitions in learner development’ at https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/downloads/Governance/2018-wgs3-learner-development_en.pdf

Finally, the teachers themselves as ‘agents of change’ need the same grounding of leadership competence and sense of ownership – of their own career as well as pedagogical approach – in order to reach their full potential and strive collectively for better learning outcomes for all pupils. In Flanders (Belgium), schools and teaching staff are supported by pedagogical counselling services, which are set up by the educational umbrella organizations and funded by the government. A decree sets out the tasks of these services, some of which specifically aim to support and train managerial staff and support the professional competence of members of staff who have particular roles across their school.¹¹

Working Group members regarded ‘distributed leadership’ as having a significant part to play within and between schools to ensure such capacity. In complex organizations such as education systems, hierarchies with a long chain of command can lose their effectiveness and one of the guiding principles within the work on Teachers and School Leaders promotes the approach of involving teachers and school leaders from the outset in the design of new initiatives and reforms. This is with the belief that it will empower more staff to engage in school development, be innovative and take (as well as manage) risks.

Such approaches cannot be automatically introduced, and this is where communities of practice and peer mentoring are vital. The members’ report highlights some personal qualities of leaders, such as empathy, open-mindedness, and communication skills. It is not surprising that these should be the same that teachers might encourage in their pupils or indeed those qualities of Working Group members in a well-functioning community.

Meaningful learning

Earlier in this article, I considered the merits and challenges of creating meaningful learning experiences. As a former school teacher, teacher educator and now facilitator of a stakeholder working group this has certainly been a career-long challenge for me personally.

Not only pupils, their teachers and school heads, but also the policymakers through these peer learning opportunities are invited to question problems and search for solutions in a creative way, which involves critical reflection and negotiating with the ideas of others.

Just as a pupil or teacher might ask themselves, ‘Is this useful? Will it make a difference?’ so we ask it ourselves of our own work. As I was sharply reminded by a young student participant of a Learning for Well-Being community day, big ideas and abstract concepts described by European institution staff are of no use if they are not rooted in local and national practice and can support real change. Just as it is fundamental to the Group’s peer learning process, it is about ‘ideas into action’.

¹¹ See report ‘Teachers and school leaders in schools as learning organizations’ at: https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/downloads/Governance/2018-wgs4-learning-organizations_en.pdf

And so to return to where we began – and ended – I believe that the title of the final report, *European ideas for better learning*, really means that and more. It embraces and finds power in the key issues facing education systems: those of collaboration and community; time and space; critical reflection; leadership, ownership and responsibility; and trust.

Author

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All of the views expressed in this article are my own and do not reflect those of the European Commission or other parties referred to.