

Case studies of successful learning environments -Artatse-

Work Package 3

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 School and context

Artatse is a primary school located in Bilbao (Basque Country), Spain. The school serves children from 2 to 12 years old, and it is located in the district of Otxarkoaga-Txurdinaga, one of the neighborhoods in which the working class live. This district of 10.215 inhabitants where 61.6% of the population is between 20-64 years of age. Of the total number of inhabitants, 1.3% are immigrants from the European Union and 14.4% from other countries of the world. Its history of urban migration from other regions of Spain resulted in its significant increase in population during the 1960s. Nowadays, it is one of the most culturally diverse neighborhoods in Bilbao, and the Roma community constitutes the vast majority of the population of this area, who have been suffering exclusion and discrimination for centuries. Predominant groups of ethnic origins including important groups of people who have already been living in the neighborhood for years (Latin Americans and families from Africa mostly).

The unemployment rate in Otxarkoaga is 24,56%, which is double the rate compared with the rest of the city. The educational level of the neighborhood is also considerably lower than in the rest of Bilbao, even if they have several schools in the vicinity providing pre-school, primary, secondary and vocational education and training. The district has numerous public transport services, which allows inhabitants to travel to various parts of the city and the rest of the province.

The families are mostly from Otxarkoaga. The school community is culturally, socially and economically heterogeneous, with many families coming from diverse origins and speaking different languages (Arab, English, Amazing, among others). Among the local languages, Spanish is the most widely used, unlike Basque, which does not have a significant presence.

The Artatse School is a public school, fully funded by the Basque Government. Despite the vulnerable situation of its students, the school has received several awards for its educational performance during the last 15 years. Among those, the followings stand out: the 1st prize in the Elvira Zipitria Award, the 1st National Quality Award for projects that develop actions that compensate the effects of socially disadvantaged situations, as well as the 1st prize in the Marta Mata Award, which is the National Award for the Quality of Educational Centres.

The school fosters a strong community-involvement, and its ethos is rooted on the following principles: create and support high expectations towards everyone, shared goals to achieve higher standards and leverage the instrumental dimension of education (retrieved from the school's website: <https://sites.google.com/a/artatseceip.net/artatse/home>). Although the school has been labeled as a "ghetto" due to the high percentage of immigrant and Roma families, its diversity has also empowered the community to dream big, and the coexistence of the school context is referred to as positive by children, staff and families.

1.2 Innovative practice

The main innovative practice on which this report will focus is known as Interactive Groups, (IG hereinafter), particularly in grade 2 (7-8 years old). This particular practice was identified by the European Commission funded project INCLUD-ED (FP6, 2006-2011), and is part of a wider set of educational actions: Successful



Educational Actions (Flecha, 2015). One key aspect of those SEAs are the transferability and sustainability of its positive impacts along the years.

Particularly, Interactive Groups are driven by egalitarian dialogue and **community participation in the classroom**. As will be explained in more detail below, this is an educational practice in which the pupils work on academic activities, with the help of a wide range of people from the community who come to help the school as volunteers: parents, grandparents, university students, researchers, or other school staff.

All of this helps to **strengthen the bonds** between the people in the school and the rest of the community, while enhancing **instrumental learning**. For instance, one Roma mum that volunteers every Thursday acknowledges how her daughter seems more focused on literacy while in Interactive Groups, and how her involvement as a volunteer encourages her to support her daughter at home to read and write as she does while in IG (and increasing her standards so that the improvement is massive during the school year).

The teacher develops an essential role in welcoming and acknowledging every volunteer's time and work. Thus, students' families and other staff play a central role in doing IG, and the teacher always thanks them all for their invaluable effort in coming and supporting children's learnings. Due to the intense and collaborative work of all educational agents, they are experiencing an accelerated learning process on reading, writing and other relevant literacy aspects. As the teacher explains:

As they help each other every time during IG, they make great progress. The improvement is massive. (Maria, 2nd grade teacher)

At an organizational level, the school provides training in different areas such as wellbeing, math, literacy, or even focused on handling trauma or other adverse situations. The school offers the opportunity to carry out educational actions such as IG, but its implementation generally depends on the teachers. As a result, even though some teachers implement IG (as Maria) the first year teacher does not. However, those teachers that decide to implement IG follow a **rigorous implementation** of the IGs thanks to the support of local pedagogical associations such as Adarra, which provide assistance and guidance based on scientific research on the field.

1.3 Achievement

This particular classroom has evidenced improved academic performance in reading and literacy since the implementation of IG. The teacher and students interviewed agree on the point that has improved their knowledge and relationships in the classroom.

1.4 Attendance and/or Early School Leaving data

Since the Interactive Groups are being implemented in the classroom, the teacher has reported increased attendance and participation by pupils. This group presents two cases of low attendance, which is currently under the supervision of the school principal and social services.

2.0 Methodology

Data collection took place in May 2024. Two researchers visited the school, prioritizing the school's previous agenda. Some SCIREARLY researchers are currently volunteers at the school, so they are therefore familiar with the school context, children, families and staff.



Data collection took place during two school days (Table 1). The agenda was agreed with the school staff and researchers adapted their research work to the preferences of the school. First day focused on classroom observation and a couple of discussion groups with 6 children. Then, the second day one more classroom observation was conducted, along with an interview with the lead teacher. The following table summarizes the data collected in Artatse. Although this report is mainly built on the information collected in the following table, it has been also feeded with informal conversations with the head teacher, 3 staff and one Roma mum that regularly volunteers in IG.

Table 1: Overall data collected in the school

	Classroom Observation	Interviews	Focus Group
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interactive Groups (2nd grade) → 18 children Interactive groups (2nd grade) → 12 children 	/	2 (6 students in total, 7-8 years old)
Staff		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lead teacher 	/

3.0 Practices to support and achieve success for vulnerable students

3.1 Practice identified: Interactive Groups

Teachers, teaching staff and students of the school agree that Interactive Groups are a successful educational practice that fosters children's academic achievement and wellbeing simultaneously. This particular practice is referred to in the scientific literature as Successful Educational Action. An overview of IGs and their impact is summarized below.

This Successful Educational Action (SEA) is defined by scientific research as a way of organizing the classroom through grouping students heterogeneously and including non-teacher adults from the community to boost peer-interactions (Valls & Kyriakides, 2013). This way of organizing the classroom works effectively across different subjects such as Language, Maths, or Science. In the school, Interactive Groups take place weekly, mainly in Language sessions, in one Elementary Education class. The traditional classroom setting becomes a setting with **small heterogeneous groups (about 5-6 students in each)**, with **one volunteer adult per group**.

The teacher is responsible for previously preparing the activities for each group, and the students are encouraged to work together on those activities. The adult volunteers are responsible for ensuring equal participation (so that every student can share their ideas and opinions), as well as managing time and encouraging all participants in the activity. After 10-15 minutes, each group moves on to the next activity, giving them the opportunity to interact with a different community member and support each other while



working on a different task. This format maximizes opportunities for learning and interacting by providing 5 or 4 different activities/exercises in one hour, while benefiting from the cultural capital of 5 or 4 different adult volunteers. The research behind this educational action is summarized below.

3.1.1. Underpinning research

Interactive Groups have been widely studied in a diverse range of educational settings and contexts, from Early Childhood Education to secondary education. Its benefits have been evidenced not only in the academic sphere but also in improving social behavior and the overall atmosphere in schools. The term Interactive Groups was coined in the 1990s. Interdisciplinarity has been identified as a key element that ensures its effectiveness. IG has three main elements that makes it a successful educational action: (1) it maximizes **opportunities for peer interaction**, (2) it involves **community members** in a meaningful way and (3) it offers **cognitively stimulating challenges** for students to solve.

Decades of research has shown that **peer interaction** is essential for learning and human development (Vygotsky, 1978) and more recent evidence suggests that interactive methods can strengthen academic and social outcomes for learners (García-Carrión et al. 2020a). The underlying philosophy that through collaborative interaction with others, learners can achieve goals that they would not otherwise be able to (Vygotsky 1978) runs through the literature, combined with the understanding that everyone can benefit from the transformative capacity of dialogue (Habermas 1987). Interactive Groups are rooted in scientific consensus, which prioritises peer interaction, ensuring that all voices are heard and that all group members understand and participate in the activity.

Those opportunities for peer interaction have proven to be effective in fostering **students' prosocial behavior** (Villardón-Gallego et al. 2018): 442 elementary students recalled how the IG format helped them to establish relationships of trust and friendship with those whom they rarely interacted with prior to participating in IG. Further, while children are working within IGs, they can help each other, which leads to improved learning (García-Carrión and Díez-Palomar 2015). Moreover, the IG format has been shown to be effective in promoting the bonds of solidarity and mutual support between native and immigrant students in high school (Valero et al. 2018) as well as among Roma students in elementary education (Flecha and Soler 2013).

The IG not only boost those important social aspects, they have also proven to be effective in enhancing meaningful understanding of mathematics (Diez-Palomar & Olivé, 2015), and the acquisition of second language skills (Santiago-Garabietta et al., 2023; Ugalde et al., 2023).

Another key aspect of Interactive Groups is the **community involvement**, since each small group is facilitated by an adult volunteer. No academic qualification is needed to volunteer in IG; the entire community is welcome to take part as long as they commit to the objectives of the activity: to ensure an equal participation, to hold high expectations, and to acknowledge the cultural capital of the members of the group. In short, IG acknowledges and democratizes the cultural knowledge of every individual and puts all those diverse funds of knowledge at the service of learning and coexistence (Moll et al., 1992). Thus, rather than narrowing the cultural vision of the school community, IG enhances them by including and valuing those important elements and incorporating them into learning activities relevant to students from diverse backgrounds (Gatt et al., 2011). This ultimately has the power to leverage the educational expectations of the family members themselves, which is particularly relevant within vulnerable populations (Gómez-Gonzalez et al. 2022).

It is essential that IG offer **cognitively challenging activities** to solve. Activities proposed to be solved during IG must challenge students, so that they are stimulated, and high levels of engagement and interaction are required. In addition, it is important to highlight that during IG, all members of each small group are working



on the same task or activity, regardless of their level at any given point; no student is given different tasks due to their achievement. Everybody works together to solve the task/activity, promoting teamwork and solidarity among peers. It has been evidenced that this classroom organization benefits all students: those students who initially achieve higher continue to improve their learning while explaining to other students and those who initially achieve lower scores improve their learning substantially through the assistance of their peers in understanding new concepts. This has been evidenced among students with and without special education needs (Rodríguez-Oramas et al., 2021)

Interactive Groups are identified as a Successful Educational Action due to the evidence that the classroom model is effective in different contexts. In other words, it is transferable, sustainable, and replicable. The following subsection gives an overview of a successful implementation of Interactive Groups.

3.1.1.2 Implementation of practice

The information that feeds into this subsection has been provided by the researchers involved in the case study data collection, and the lead teacher of this classroom.

1. Preparation:

In Artatse, how each session is prepared:

- A) Prepare a series of language related exercises for the session: The teacher prepares the materials that will be used in each small group. For instance, if IG is to be delivered in Spanish class, the teacher will ensure that each activity covers some aspects of the curriculum (for instance, grammar, reading comprehension, writing activities, etc.).
- B) Revise the ground rules: Once in the classroom, the teacher recalls the rules of IG. For example: respect each other's opinions, help each other and take turns to speak.
- C) Brief presentation of the activities: introduce the activities to be carried out in the session, in order to make sure that everyone understands the objective of each activity. After this brief general explanation, the teacher opens the invitation to volunteers to pick the activity they feel more comfortable with.

2. Implementation:

The variety of people and, especially, the volunteers involved in the classroom throughout the academic year have been quite stable. While implementing the Interactive Groups, they all had opportunities to help and interact with each other, they all felt very welcome and comfortable in the classroom. They felt that with their contribution they were making an important and meaningful contribution to their children's learning process.

3. Monitoring and Evaluation:

The current experience gained with the implementation of Interactive Groups, and the resulting improvements, have been achieved due to the constant interaction of all the people involved in the classroom. Having short conversations before and right after the sessions among teachers and volunteers, the IGs have shown their effectiveness to enhance academic achievement and school coexistence. Its have been also important to tight home-school collaboration.

3.1.1.3 IMPACT

When talking about and reflecting upon the Interactive Group and its impact, the lead teacher and students agreed on highlighting how this way of classroom organization has: a) leveraged their reading and literacy levels; b) created an inclusive and supportive environment for everyone; c) facilitated and accelerated academic and social achievement of newcomers.



Leveraged reading and literacy levels.

Academic achievement is the main priority of the entire school, but it's particularly present in 2nd grade class. The teacher sets challenging tasks for students so that they can conclude their academic year with the required learnings for subsequent academic stages. This vision is particularly relevant in educational contexts where children have no other learning opportunities but those that school provides. Even if they come to school less than 5 days per week, it's critical that they make the most of their time while in the classroom. As the teacher said, there is no point for a Roma grandma to wake up early to bring the children to school if what they do there can be done in the comfort of the home, or in the workplace of his/her parents. Thus, cognitive challenges need to be taken to the next level: children ages 7-8 need to know how to read and write before they move forward. But this does not stop there: for this teacher, the pleasure of reading and writing needs to be offered to the children so that they get the joy of discovering endless worlds and possibilities through books and literature. That is why the lead teacher prepares not only basic activities to master reading and writing, but also prepares tasks to go beyond by including concepts such as the synonyms and antonyms, the diminutives and augmentatives, while incorporating difficult vocabulary so that children can get acquainted and be challenged by it. This has resulted on an accelerated general learning of the entire group, as the teacher stated:

I am seeing that difficult things can be proposed and achieved through Interactive Groups. For instance, the writing... the own production is difficult for them, and I see that they are making huge progress and I am loving it. And this is thanks to everyone, also thanks to the great volunteers that we have. (Maria, 2nd grade teacher)

These improvements have also been noticed by children themselves. During the discussion groups, two Roma boys of 7 years old shared how engaging and funny is learning while in Interactive Groups because they get to explain the task to each other and because they recognize the joy of learning and understanding the content. In their own words:

Jon: It's easy and for me it's like an energy because it's very fun. It's like you change groups, you have to read, you have to write, you have to do math, sometimes we do math...

Martin: Every day one thing gets better.

Jon: we are learning more and more... and the more I do it, the more I feel like I am learning.

Even those who have suffered from grade retention, acknowledge the improvements they have made in a relatively short period of time thanks to Interactive Groups and Maria's commitment towards each of them. In this regard, Erika, an 8 years-old Roma girl with a challenging reality at home, explains how gratifying is to learn with Maria:

Erika: Maria has taught us to learn to respect and help... with Maria I have learned so many things this year...

Inclusive and supportive environment for everyone

Research has widely demonstrated that increased participation and interaction correlates to better learning outcomes. Contexts such as IG have proven to maximize opportunities for peer interaction that ultimately lead to more effective learning and coexistence. From a teacher's perspective, this particular way of classroom organization fosters inclusion where shy students or those who rarely take part in regular classroom discussions feel emboldened to do so while in IG. This is particularly relevant when it comes to students with special education needs. In this group, there is one girl with cerebral palsy, and one boy with



undiagnosed developmental issues that hinders its ability to follow the basic contents. According to the teacher, it's the most "challenging" group that she happens to have ever had in her career in terms of important educational needs and cultural diversity. Rather than lower the expectancies towards the group, this teacher sets high the academic level and states that Interactive Group is the way she has found to make it all happen:

This may be the most complicated group that I've had. There are many children... 22, and each one has their own particularity. There are Marta and Joel, who you don't find in all classes.... It is a powerful group, at the level of behavior you have to remind the rules constantly, so you have to share reasons and arguments a lot. And on an academic level too. But when in IG, you see that, suddenly they achieve something that seemed impossible to them at the beginning. (Maria, 2nd grade teacher)

How those particular two children are also part of the dynamic of Interactive Groups has also been noticed by pupils themselves. During the discussion groups, one of them raised the concern about how some children might make fun of Joel, but there is no point on that because he continues to be a classmate and a person, and there is nothing wrong with his different ways of learning. As Jon, a Roma boy of 7 years old, shared:

Also, Joel, just because you have an illness doesn't matter at all. I also have an aunt who has Down syndrome, she has had Down syndrome for 1 year and 44 and it doesn't matter! .

Because in Interactive Groups students with and without special educational needs are grouped together under the same rules and are challenged by the same sort of activities, it creates an atmosphere of genuine solidarity that makes it easier for children to take a stand against exclusionary attitudes. As Jon explains when sharing an experience involving another 2 boys of the group that sometimes don't want to work with Marta (the African girl with brain palsy):

Imagine that it's me and Martin and it's our turn... and then Israel and Efra say they don't want to be with Marta. And we tell him that she knows a lot and that we are with her and we teach and support her. We are with her. and suddenly Efra says, "she's stupid" and I tell him "she's not stupid, she just got sick from birth." Imagine that Efra suddenly says, "what does she know" and I tell him "she knows a lot". Maybe she knows more than him! (Jon, Roma, 7 years old)

Academic and social achievement of newcomers.

Due to work reasons, Amina and Hakima's parents moved to Bilbao in mid-May, from Morocco. Amina and Hakima are 7 years old, and while her mum only speaks Amazigh, their dad understands and speaks Spanish. However, the girls came with no idea of the language nor the cultural particularities of the Basque Country when they landed in Bilbao for the first time in May. The teacher made a huge effort to support the girls during their first days of school by facilitating the basic information of the school through picture books, or by using google translation for more complex essential information. However, their biggest support has been the group itself. Amina and Hakima started taking part in Interactive Groups since their first day of school, and according to the children who took part in the focus group discussions and the lead teacher, they have been awesome. Maria, the lead teacher, shares her admiration for the great effort that this girls and the entire group is doing:

They've been there for a month...And they are doing very well. Children can definitely surprise you a lot. if I were in their shoes... uff.. If now I would land in a class with a bunch of people I don't know and they speak a language I don't understand... I would die. And yet, it is incredible, they are improving day by day. They are advancing in everything, they read better and better and, in the playgrounds, they are together but also with other people. So, they are moving forward in everything. That is fascinating. (Maria, 2nd grade teacher)



3.1.1.4 FACILITATORS OF PRACTICE

The participants interviewed highlighted several facilitators to successfully implement Interactive Groups:

a) Implementation since the beginning of the academic year

One of the factors that influences the student's success with the activity is progressive implementation of IGs that evolves from the beginning of the academic year so that students and volunteers become familiar with the format and learn how to work cooperatively.

b) High expectancies and margin to get surprised.

Maintaining high expectations is crucial according to the teacher, particularly with children that face several challenges in their contexts. This has been a stepping-stone to propose activities that go beyond the basics in literacy, so that children can end 2nd grade better equipped with deep knowledge of key concepts of language and literacy. According to Maria, lead teacher, this has been at the center of the huge improvement that the group is achieving when the academic year is coming towards its end. Those who barely read in December, are now devoted readers that dream of being writers someday.

3.1.1.5 CHALLENGES

No reference was made by teachers, school staff or families to potential challenges of IG during our fieldwork.

4.0 Key takeaways

- Setting high expectations towards everyone makes the journey of learning more appealing for teachers and children
- Interactive groups maximizes children's capacity for mutual help and support
- A smooth and accelerated transition to a new school might be easier when IG are put in place
- Acknowledging all forms of diversity and cultural intelligence through academic activities improves learning outcomes and children's wellbeing

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