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Are Schools Learning Organizations? An Empirical Study in Spain, Bulgaria, Italy, and Turkey

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Abstract: The aim of this empirical research, which is the first phase of an Erasmus project, is to analyze how educational institutions are configured, as learning organizations, through a systems perspective. The methodology employed was qualitative, utilizing prominent examples of schools in Spain, Bulgaria, Italy, and Turkey. Semi-structured personal interviews were conducted with experts in the field of education, members of school management teams, and teachers, resulting in a total of 63 participants. The findings reveal that, in all four countries, there are barriers preventing educational institutions from becoming learning organizations, including the rigidity of the educational curriculum and an individualistic teaching culture. Transformational opportunities lie in the creation of networks and the ability to share knowledge among educational institutions. In essence, it is necessary to continue working towards the implementation of a systems perspective in educational institutions, which, for its development, must be complemented by transformational leadership and an engaged educational community that is focused on enhancing student learning.

Keywords: school leadership; school organization; learning organization; system's perspective; sociology of education



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1. Introduction

School leadership is increasingly seen as a key factor in a school's ability to transform and adapt to changing circumstances. School directors are seen as leaders who can and should transform their school culture (Hallinger 2011; Anderson 2017). School culture, which may often be ignored or dismissed as unimportant, is, in fact, one of the most important defining elements of any school (Jazzar and Algozzine 2006). The concept of school culture is not new, Willard Waller used it in 1932 to describe how every school has its own rituals, beliefs, and even moral codes which shape how people behave and relate to one another (Peterson and Deal 2002). School culture "is the underground stream of norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and rituals that has built up over time as people work together, solve problems and confront challenges" (Peterson and Deal 1998, p. 28). This determines how people see, feel, and think about their school. School leaders, together with teachers and parents, are those mainly responsible for shaping this culture and for identifying a strong and positive culture centered on the students (Peterson and Deal 1998; Deal and Peterson 1998; Hallinger 2011). Thus, it is important to bear in mind that culture is at the core of any change that a school might undergo (Mestenhauser 2002, 2011). The quality of any educational system may be measured by, among other indicators, the leadership capacity of its management teams and their ability to promote and handle change and innovation (Hallinger 2005). The type of leadership existing in a school is the key to becoming a learning organization according to the theory, originating in the field of business, of how to build a learning organization (Hallinger and Leithwood 2013; Anderson 2017; Alkrdem 2020). Leadership is key in order to build an educational learning organization. Leadership for change, to transform and create a shared culture working towards innovative projects, is seen as the perfect match for a successful learning organization.

This article presents the empirical research phase (phase 1 of the project) of the Learning Schools Project, which is an Erasmus+ innovation Project developed by educational institutions in Bulgaria, Italy, Turkey, and Spain. The aim of the project was to develop a model that would assist schools in becoming learning organizations and to retain the knowledge of schools that possess knowledge management systems that permit them to manage change effectively. The creation of this model involves three key areas: theories of leadership; Senge's systems perspective; a model of learning organizations used to develop initial questionnaires for school directors, teachers, and educational experts (Kools and Stoll 2016). In this article, the empirical phase of the project is presented.

This article identifies the primary barriers encountered by educational institutions, in the four participating countries of the study, to facilitate the transformation of these institutions into communities of learning. Furthermore, it seeks to explore the prevailing leadership styles and examine the application of the systems perspective in schools. Although there is plenty of empirical research about this topic in other contexts, such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom, there is little research in the countries where the project has been developed. The significance of this study lies in its exploration of the organizational learning dynamics of schools within the context of these four European countries, so this research aims to bridge an existing gap in knowledge and provide a nuanced understanding of the intricacies associated with learning organizations within this specific regional context. Thus far, there are no such empirical studies in this context.

1.1. Leadership Styles in Education

Leadership is the key to transforming any organization's culture. There are plenty of leadership theories, applied to the educational field, that have developed research focused on the importance of leadership and determining which leadership style was more adequate depending on the context (Fullan 2001; Kotter 1990, 1996; Northouse 2007; Bolman and Gallos 2010).

The most common leadership styles applied in education are the following: first is distributive leadership, in which leaders distribute tasks, roles, and activities among their staff in accordance with their abilities and the interaction produced amongst teachers (Hairon et al. 2014; Peters et al. 2018; Börü 2020); second is participative leadership, which is based on leaders trusting teachers to assume responsibilities and share decision-making with management (Jazzar and Algozzine 2006; Ahn 2016); third is shared leadership, in which leaders strive to get teachers to share the long-term vision and objectives of the school, thus promoting the construction of professional learning communities (Huffman and Hipp 2001). Then, pedagogical leadership, or leadership for learning, is another theory which does not consist of leaders assigning and distributing tasks in teams but, rather, informal leaders sharing responsibilities and influencing other staff in such a way that all members of the organization feel responsible for what occurs in it. It is a multiple and bidirectional leadership that sees things through different eyes and perspectives. It focuses on student learning, innovation (Hallinger 2011; Bolívar 2019; Adams and Yusoff 2020), and, finally, transformational leadership.

Historically, over the past 50 years, 2 more important leadership theories have been applied through different school reforms, with the idea that different leadership approaches could rapidly change a school. This idea came from external policy reforms, and there is plenty of empirical research in certain contexts (the United States, Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom) (Hallinger 2005). Instructional leadership came first, and transformational leadership came later. The former focused on leaders (directors) as directive and strong, with the ability to turn around a school. This type of leader was mainly goal-oriented and able to motivate others to share their school views (Pacchiano et al. 2016) and to align the mission and vision of the school with curriculum and instruction (Hallinger 2003, 2005; Huong 2020). Instructional leadership focused, only, on the rapid improvement of student outcomes (Sparks 2021). However, more recently, there have been changes in

this type of leadership toward a more distributed leadership: a more shared commitment to change and innovation, with a greater distribution of leaders throughout the school (Hallinger 2003; Adams and Yusoff 2020; Sukarmin and Sin 2022).

In the 1990s, researchers began to identify a different kind of leadership that was, then, more aligned to and consistent with educational reforms and which considered the following key elements: empowerment, shared responsibility of leadership (horizontal leadership structures), and, very importantly, organizational learning (Hallinger 2003). Transformational leadership was best suited to promoting this type of change, as it fomented change in individuals so that they may, with sufficient motivation, perform above expectations, (Burns 1978; Northouse 2007; Adams and Yusoff 2020). It was first named during the 1970s and 1980s, and it was very well received in the educational community. It was, indeed, a reaction against the more top-down, directive structure of instructional leadership (Bass 1997; Hallinger 2003; Padrós and Flecha 2014).

Transformational leadership, applied to organizational change and innovation in educative centers, employs bottom-up participation and obtains high levels of motivation, stimulation for change, and commitment, in teachers, to transforming the school (Bass 1985; Anderson 2017; Adams and Yusoff 2020; Sparks 2021). This theory focuses on the capacity that a school may have to innovate by concentrating on sharing responsibilities and developing a shared vision and commitment to change (Peterson and Deal 1998; Bass 2000; Hallinger 2003; Anderson 2017). For this type of leadership to be effective, leaders should both push their staff to solve problems in an innovative and creative manner and ensure that their staff develops leadership abilities and competences by challenging and supporting them in equal measure, (Kotter 1996; Bass and Riggio 2006). Staff should also commit to the goals of the organization and be aware of what is best for the group, the organization, and society (Hallinger 2003; Anderson 2017). This differs from more traditional types where only people occupying 'important' positions are viewed as leaders, (Hudzik and McCarthy 2012). The transformational leadership approach includes all members of a learning organization and focuses on the learning of all stakeholders in a school with a shared vision and a strong commitment to change (Hallinger 2003; Jazzar and Algozzine 2006). There is plenty of empirical research into the use of transformational leadership in schools and how the practice of this kind of leadership has promoted sustainable change in school culture and student learning (Anderson 2017).

1.2. Schools as Learning Organizations

Leading organizational change is one of the most challenging and important tasks that leaders encounter. Creating an innovative learning organization that is sustainable over time only increases the difficulty of the task (Kotter 2008; Malm 2008). Organizations learn just as people do, but some learn more effectively than others. People tend to learn better through stories, connecting, and sharing moments through a dialogic approach (Kotter 2008; Padrós and Flecha 2014). In *The Fifth Discipline* (Senge 2006), but a learning organization is defined as one able to adapt continuously to change, "where people continually expand their capacity to create the results, they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free and where people are continually learning how to learn together" (Senge 2006, 3). Nowadays, change in schools is a constant element in a globalized hyper-connected world where information technology is an important element (Bass 2000; Kotter 2008). A learning organization is in constant change, and although certain elements of it may be unsatisfactory and there may be barriers to change, it constantly attempts to transform itself to promote a culture of learning.

Senge identifies five interacting principles that learning organizations share (Bass 2000).

- Shared Vision: members share an image of what the organization wishes to achieve. Leaders of a learning organization will establish goals shared by all members of the community.
- Personal Mastery: constant personal commitment to learning, excellence, and the vision of the organization. Leaders will always encourage constant learning.

- Team Learning: the idea that two brains are better than one and the process of learning together.
- Mental Models: held beliefs and assumptions that influence both organizational and personal behavior and perspectives.
- Systems thinking: a framework where all parts affect each other and are perceived as interrelated.

Systems thinking is the fifth principle, and it is the leading tenet of Senge's philosophy. This discipline integrates and fuses the other four disciplines. For example, vision without systems thinking may be able to envisage a wonderful future, but it will be with no real understanding of what is necessary to move from the current scenario to the imagined one. Senge understood that a systems approach was a rigorous way of seeing things as a whole, as well as a way of being able to see interrelationships, or patterns of change, instead of just erratic snapshots of the current context (Marty et al. 2023). The heart of the discipline of systems thinking is shifting the mind from seeing a linear cause–effect relation into seeing interrelationships and, instead of seeing only snapshots of the situation, seeing processes (Senge 2006).

A system is described as a web of interdependence that may produce unexpected outcomes (Kleiner et al. 1994). Systems perspective is an attempt to 'see' and be aware of these systems, in the context of schools, as well as to consider the organization as a whole, as individual members of the organization, and consider how they interact (Creswell and Guetterman 2018).

Senge argues that school stakeholders must develop the capacity to learn, and real improvement will only take place if people design and implement change themselves rather than those changes being externally enforced. To develop as a learning organization, Senge also argues that schools must confront deeply embedded beliefs and practices related to learning that belong to the 'industrial age'—beliefs such as: learning is an exclusively intellectual pursuit; all children should learn in the same way; classroom learning is different to other learning taking place outside the classroom; some children are clever, and others are not; learning is individualistic, and competition accelerates the process; knowledge is fragmented, and teachers control some kind of objective truth. Senge, in contrast and in line with social constructivist theories of learning, believes that, through learning, people make sense of their experience and information, and they learn to create and manage knowledge.

School, as a learning organization, is defined as one "that has the capacity to change and adapt routinely to new environments and circumstances as its members, individually and together, learn their way to realizing their vision" (Kools and Stoll 2016, vol. 137, p. 10). The characteristics of a school, as a learning organization, were seen as consisting of seven "action-oriented" elements for a school to become a sustainable learning organization: developing a shared vision centered on learning of all students; creating and supporting continuous learning opportunities for all staff; promoting team learning and collaboration among all staff; establishing a culture of inquiry, innovation, and exploration; embedding systems for collecting and exchanging knowledge and learning; learning with and from the external environment and larger learning system; modeling and growing learning leadership. This work was later extended, and another dimension was added to the model: partners contributing to the school vision (Kools et al. 2020).

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Methodology

Qualitative methodology was followed to collect data so that the voices of school directors, schoolteachers, and educational experts could be heard. Since Senge's systems perspective is a relatively unknown theory, in educational contexts, in the countries participating in the project, qualitative methods were deemed the most appropriate. Through personal, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions, the participants were able to reflect on how change is managed in their schools, as well as what innovative

projects have been successful and how they might have promoted a learning system community. By listening to the insights and impressions of the participants (Creswell and Poth 2017), rather than simply quantifying the innovative activities and projects they had developed, we understood what the respondents considered to be good practices in implementing change and innovation, as well as the type of leadership currently implemented in schools. Within qualitative methods, grounded theory was used. The intention of grounded theory “is to move beyond description and to generate or discover a theory” (Creswell and Poth 2017, p. 82), with the idea emerging from the data collected. It may also unify a theoretical explanation or create a model. Among several characteristics of the grounded theory applied to this study, one is that it focuses on a process or an action that the researchers are trying to explain. This might include developing an educational program or helping people to become better teachers (Creswell 2009). In this case, we focused on developing a theory to help teachers and school directors improve their school context, become more innovative, and move towards becoming a learning organization.

2.2. Tools: Interviews Protocol

The “Integrated model of the school as learning organisation” (Kools and Stoll 2016) formed the basis for the development of the questions, in the semi-structured personal interviews conducted with school directors, teachers, and educational experts, that was to be piloted in different European school contexts and adapted as necessary.

An interview protocol (semi-structured interviews) was created that considered the theories of leadership and systems perspective upon which the study was based. The questions were shared with the researchers in Bulgaria, Italy, Turkey, and Spain. Once feedback was collected about different cultural perspectives that may apply, a tool was created which reflected and allowed for cultural variables among the partnership. The interview for directors and teachers covered seven areas of the Kools and Stoll model, with each containing open-ended questions to prompt participants as necessary: a description of a substantial change that had been experienced or undertaken by the school; a response to the change in terms of leadership and organizational culture; ways in which new school visions were created and communicated, as well as ways in which resistance to change addressed; involvement and empowerment of all stakeholders to make change possible and effective; plans put in place to reach short term objectives; consolidation and mid to long-term objectives; external communication and changes made in school policy and culture. The interview script can be found for review in Appendix A. On the other hand, the interview with educational experts revolves around four main areas concerning the various methods of knowledge management within schools: knowledge assessment, knowledge gathering, knowledge capturing and synthesis, and knowledge sharing. These areas are closely aligned with Kotter (1996) leadership for change theories. The comprehensive interview script is provided in Appendix B.

2.3. Participants

A total of 63 participants took part in the research: 48 teachers and school directors from 16 selected schools (Bulgaria: 5; Italy: 3; Turkey: 4; Spain: 4) and 15 educational experts (Bulgaria: 4; Italy: 4; Turkey: 4; Spain: 3). Using this carefully curated cohort, the study achieved the point of qualitative result saturation.

The schools were selected based on a set of rigorous criteria: namely, the acquisition of official quality accreditations or certifications, prior participation in Erasmus+ initiatives, the possession of acknowledged exemplary innovative practices, participation in governmental programs, and working in educational networks. Additionally, a requisite was established to ensure representation of both urban and rural schools, as well as private and public institutions, with a further stipulation that each of these categories was present for every country. Another fundamental criterion encompassed the incorporation of both primary and secondary education levels within the selected schools. A comprehen-

sive breakdown of the participant schools, categorized by their respective countries and delineated characteristics, is presented in Table 1 (schools are named as S01, S02. . . S16).

Table 1. School characteristics per country *.

Bulgaria	Italy	Turkey	Spain
S01: urban and public	S06: rural and public	S09: rural and private	S13: rural and public
S02: rural and public	S07: urban and public	S10: urban and public	S14: urban and private
S03: urban and public	S08: urban and private	S11: urban and public	S15: urban and private
S04: urban and private		S12: urban and public	S16: urban and private
S05: urban and public			

* Source: own elaboration.

Regarding the selection of teachers participating in the interviews, a set of specific criteria was adhered to for each institution: representation of both male and female educators, inclusion of teachers from diverse academic levels, and consideration of varied tenures within the institution (spanning less than 10 years and exceeding 10 years of service). In each school, one principal and two teachers participated. Every participant was given a unique code following this structure: the school code and if they are the principal or the two teachers at every school, e.g., S01 principal or S01 teacher 1.

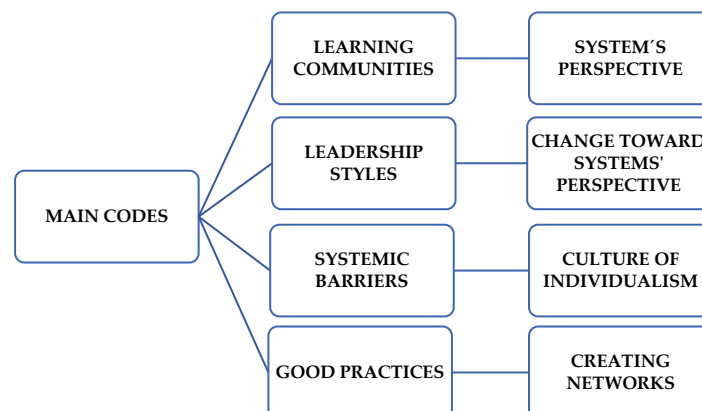
The educational experts were meticulously chosen based on specific criteria. Firstly, a minimum of one university-affiliated or academically oriented expert per country, specialized in the domains of leadership or school management, was ensured. Additionally, each country was represented by at least one government-affiliated expert possessing substantial experience in the management of educators and/or the continuous professional development of teaching staff. Table 2 illustrates the country-wise expert selection process (experts are named as E01, E02. . . E15).

Table 2. Type of educational experts per country.

Bulgaria	Italy	Turkey	Spain
E01: university affiliated	E05: university affiliated	E09: university affiliated	E13: university affiliated
E02: government affiliated	E06: university affiliated	E10: university affiliated	E14: government affiliated
E03: government affiliated	E07: university affiliated	E11: government affiliated	E15: university and government affiliated
E04: government affiliated	E08: government affiliated	E12: government affiliated	

2.4. Data Analysis

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, translated into English, and coded. All the codes were unified into eight main common themes, which were subsequently synthesized into four categories (Scheme 1):



Scheme 1. Code tree categories. Source: own elaboration.

Grounded theory was followed for the research method, even though the interview protocols (scripts) were developed following the stages of Kools and Stoll (2016) and Kotter (1996). In the analysis, there were eight common themes since the participants included one more important theme. The first common theme is learning communities and the use of the system perspective in the creation of a learning community. Then, the analysis and reflection about the importance of leadership in this changing process is another theme. This is why, within the common theme leadership styles, change towards a system perspective was included. The final two common themes were: systemic barriers in which the culture of individualism and the way to share knowledge was included with good practices, as examples, given by interviewees; within this last common theme, one of the most important ones was creating networks to improve teaching and learning, as well as to share knowledge.

3. Results

Figure 1 displays the frequency with which eight categories emerged during interviews conducted in four countries: Spain, Italy, Turkey, and Bulgaria. These categories reflect recurring themes in the interviews and offer insight into certain aspects of the education system, as well as practices within each country, which are the main codes of Scheme 1.

- Learning Communities: Spain and Bulgaria exhibited relatively higher occurrences of Learning Communities compared to Italy and Turkey. Spain had the highest frequency, followed by Bulgaria.
- Systems' Perspective: Spain and Bulgaria, again, showed higher instances of the Systems' Perspective. Italy and Turkey had lower frequencies in this aspect.
- Leadership Styles: Spain had the highest frequency of Leadership Styles, whereas Italy, Turkey, and Bulgaria had lower occurrences.
- Change towards Systems' Perspective: Bulgaria had the highest frequency in this category. Spain had a moderate occurrence, while Italy and Turkey had lower frequencies.
- Systemic Barriers: Bulgaria had the highest frequency of Systemic Barriers, indicating that this aspect was discussed frequently in interviews conducted there, while Italy had the lowest frequency.
- Culture of Individualism: Bulgaria showed the highest occurrence of Culture of Individualism, followed by Spain. Italy and Turkey had even lower frequencies in this category.
- Good Practices: Turkey exhibited the highest frequency of Good Practices, followed by Italy and Bulgaria. Spain had a lower occurrence of this aspect.
- Creating Networks: Creating Networks had relatively low frequencies across all countries. Turkey had the highest frequency, followed closely by Italy and Bulgaria. Spain had the lowest frequency in this category.

In summary, the data suggests that the themes of Learning Communities, Systems' Perspective, and Leadership Styles were more frequently discussed in Spain and Bulgaria compared to Italy and Turkey. On the other hand, Systemic Barriers and Culture of Individualism were prominent in Bulgaria, while Good Practices and Creating Networks had higher instances in Turkey. The comparative analysis underscores the nuanced variations in these educational aspects across the four countries. Within the three main common themes, Learning Communities and Systems' Perspective, Leadership Styles and Change Towards Systems' Perspective, as well as Good Practices, were added examples of Systemic Barriers.



Figure 1. Category codes by country. Source: own elaboration.

3.1. Learning Communities & Systems' Perspective: Transforming a School into a Learning Community

Across the four countries, there appears to be a gradual shift towards a more collaborative and team-oriented organizational culture within schools. While these changes are not yet officially recognized or systematized, they signal a departure from the traditional top-down approach to decision-making. However, despite these changes, there is often a designated individual or team (usually the principal's team) who retains control and makes critical decisions, indicating that there is still a degree of hierarchy within the organizational structure.

Traditionally, the countries participating in the project (Spain, Italy, Bulgaria, and Turkey) have collectivist societies that emphasize group harmony, cooperation, and avoidance of conflict, which may explain why they tend to embrace hierarchical organizational cultures (Hofstede et al. 2010; Bullough et al. 2020). However, the need for transparency, responsibility, and sustainability was identified as a crucial aspect of modernizing school governance in Italy. To this end, governance models are evolving towards greater management autonomy, resource optimization, and performance.

Despite these efforts, there are still challenges to the implementation of transformational leadership and creating learning communities within schools. Addressing the recruitment process for both teachers and school directors is one such challenge. In Italy,

for example, experts recommend that school directors not only possess knowledge and teaching experience but also undergo formal training to acquire the specific skills required to be cultural, strategic, educational, and receptive leaders in a rapidly changing world. By focusing on these essential skills, school directors can better meet the needs of their students, teachers, and communities.

According to the opinions of the experts and educators consulted, it is widely agreed that any transformation that takes place within a school must be centered on the needs of the students; it is essential for educators and administrators to consistently evaluate and adapt their approach to education to ensure that they remain student-centered.

“The common participation to the life opportunity, a multicultural approach, and an emotional growth is the main content of the educational projects that the school is promoting with students in different grades/classes/subjects or levels during the school year. The social inclusion is one of the main goals of the school”. (S08, teacher 1)

Furthermore, migration presents a unique opportunity for many schools to foster growth within their communities by learning and opening to new challenges. By embracing the changes brought about by migration, schools can create an environment that fosters mutual respect and understanding, as well as prepares students for success in a globalized world. As such, schools that actively seek to integrate and celebrate diversity can help to create a more vibrant and inclusive community, ultimately benefiting all involved.

In one school in the study, which has a high percentage of immigrant students, all teachers interviewed felt that they are part of the school’s management team, and they are sharing responsibilities. By involving all staff members in decision-making processes, the school creates a more collaborative and inclusive environment, ensuring that all students’ needs are being addressed.

“What works for us are horizontal structures, for example, the meetings that are truly effective are the ones we all have every week, like level tutorials, because that’s where common projects are generated, and common projects are solved. It’s a horizontal thing”. (S13, principal)

3.2. Leadership Styles—Moving Forward: Ups and Downs of Transformational or Pedagogical Leadership

Among the first aspects to consider when talking about educational transformation is to review the legislative framework. This framework provides insight into the opportunities and limitations that each country must face. The countries participating in the Learning Schools project have all recently undergone—and continue to undergo—educational reforms with different focuses. In Turkey, the Education Vision 2023 has a student-centered aim of fostering science-loving, skilled, ethical individuals who are interested in culture and equipped with present and future skills to benefit humanity, which promote critical thinking, problem solving, and creativity among students. Italy has implemented a comprehensive school reform called The Good School (La Buona Scuola, 2015, Law 107/15), which aims to improve the quality of state education and enhance merit and performance-based systems nationwide. The reform includes measures such as hiring more teachers, reducing class sizes, and promoting more professional development for teachers. In Bulgaria, the 2015 Law on Preschool and School Education has repealed all previous education acts. Key regulations currently in force concern vocational education and training, financing of preschool and school education, and the status and professional development of teachers, principals, and other pedagogical specialists. The country is also emphasizing the development of digital skills, among students, to prepare them for the digital age. Spain’s LOMLOE, Organic Law 3/2020, focuses, among other elements, on “a professional model of leadership that is aligned with European recommendations,” involving managing resources and activating pedagogy. The law also emphasizes the promotion of inclusive education, an increase in the application of theory to practice, and the use of technology in the classroom.

Legislative frameworks also affect teacher selection processes, which are important given that one of the main agents in promoting educational change is the teaching staff. In these four countries, state schoolteachers are selected through a public selection examination. Schools are involved in the selection process to varying degrees. In Italy and Spain, schools have no control over the recruitment, payroll, or dismissal of teachers. Schools simply request a teacher to teach a certain subject, regardless of their suitability for a particular context or project. In Bulgaria, on the other hand, the school director and a senior subject teacher play a role in the selection process, and they are also involved in the extension and termination of teacher contracts.

“Unfortunately, the principals are recruited with a selection foreseeing the drafting of an essay in Italian, we do not have the tools to identify these soft skills for leadership, and perhaps these soft skills are not even at the center of the selection process”. (S07, principal)

The lack of school involvement in the recruitment process could be seen as a barrier to forming effective learning communities and aspiring to transformational leadership. Moreover, due to the large number of candidates at each public exam, the exams tend to focus on subject knowledge rather than on “soft” skills, such as communication, problem-solving, or teamwork. In Bulgaria and Turkey, newly appointed teachers go through an initial trial, or training period, to evaluate their performance.

“In public schools, the director doesn’t have that freedom, to choose the teachers nor to form the team. . . So, it depends on leadership and the director’s ability to engage people with the projects”. (E11)

Various training programs provided by government bodies are described and evaluated. In Turkey, the Teacher Strategy Paper (2017–2023) is a roadmap designed to enhance the quality and perception of the teaching profession, and it includes the development of a School Based Professional Development Model (OTMG) that encourages teachers to take responsibility for their own learning and development, through self-assessment, based on competencies. Another accessible and cost-effective program is the cascade training system, where mentor teachers receive training and then train other teachers at regional and local levels. In Spain, there is some dissatisfaction with government professional development programs, as tools to assess their effectiveness and implementation are lacking. Bulgaria requires teachers to undergo compulsory training or “qualification” courses throughout their careers, but the country report suggests that only 30% of schools have developed a qualification plan based on research of a teacher’s needs.

“Focus-oriented trainings are carried out in MoNE, especially in the change of specialization of teachers. For example, in recent years, in addition to general in-service trainings such as “Inclusive Education”, trainings contributing to the development of the teacher in the field are carried out”. (E9)

In Italy, there is no evaluation of directors’ or teachers’ performance, which could lead to an ineffective professional development system. It is important for government bodies to continuously evaluate and improve their teacher training programs to ensure that they are meeting the needs of educators and students alike.

“The only tool for monitoring the training that teachers receive is a record of the courses they have attended. However, it is not evaluated whether that training has a real impact in the classroom”. (E14)

To avoid this loss of knowledge, the schools are trying to implement different strategies. An example of good practice is the program “Look and Act” (*Mira y Actúa*) in Spain, where teachers are invited to other schools to observe new methodologies, projects, and activities, and then, they put them into practice in their own schools.

It is generally recognized that greater collaboration between schools and universities is required. Educational conferences are seen as the key to bringing teachers together and

forging ties between tertiary institutions and other education levels. The Turkish Ministry of education, for example, arranges for university academics to become academic advisors to schools. Rather than this 'top down' relationship, it would seem necessary to encourage teachers to research their own practice and share their findings with academics. Research methodology should, perhaps, be included in teacher training programs, as it already is in some pre-service programs.

"University professors who are leading projects, and I am involved in some of them, in which they have never set foot in a classroom and are asking classroom teachers for something that is impossible if they are not prepared beforehand". (E15)

For example, in Spain, a program named "Hipatia" creates work networks between teachers, from educational centers and the universities, to reflect on educational issues of interest to both parties.

Although there appears to be a willingness and a need to share knowledge and to innovate, there are systemic barriers to this. In the case of Spain, for example, there is occasionally a lack of adequately trained teachers to implement necessary changes, as was evident in the move towards bilingual education, which was undertaken in an unsystematic, uninformed manner. The rigidity of the curriculum was also mentioned as hindering change and the implementation of certain innovative practices or teaching methodologies, such as Cooperative learning or problem-based learning, which require more time than traditional teacher-fronted classes. The focus tends to be on academic results rather than the development of other competences required by fully rounded members of society.

"I would like to add that we need an urgent change in the teaching plan. I had lots of conversations with colleagues teaching Informational Technologies. The teaching plan should start with preparing students to make presentations". (S03, teacher 2)

Another reason often given for a lack of effective knowledge sharing was a lack of time factored in for team meetings and the difficulty of finding time slots convenient for all participants. Most efforts to share knowledge and innovate are not remunerated or programmed as part of the teachers' workload. In many cases, 'middle management' or 'mentor' teachers are selected by directors, and they receive little or no additional time or other incentives to pursue that function. Teachers also commented that there was a lack of description of their functions as coordinators or mentors; organizing and 'ordering' peers to do things did not come naturally and was not always received well in what has been, for so long, a vertical structure.

"Generally, there is no information sharing mechanism, but groups work actively and support each other. Since our school has many teachers and departments, it is difficult to act together, and each class has different needs. We prefer to solve problems quickly within the group". (S10, teacher 1)

3.3. Good Practices: Applying System's Perspective in Education

Research suggests that internal training and knowledge sharing among schools through networks can have a greater impact on improving education outcomes than externally imposed programs (Schnellert and Butler 2021). This is because such networks allow for greater customization and adaptation to local conditions and contexts. In Spain, educational conferences and innovation maps are being used to promote collaboration between schools and the sharing of best practices. Innovation maps help identify schools in need of educational innovation plans, and they facilitate knowledge sharing among schools. In Italy, as in Spain, there is a 'visiting' program in which new teachers visit innovative schools to observe good practices.

To create effective learning communities, it is important to involve not only teachers but also students, parents, and other stakeholders in decision-making and information-

sharing processes. Regular communication through various instruments, such as online questionnaires, meetings, and digital platforms, can help to ensure that everyone's perspectives and needs are considered. This can promote a culture of collaboration and shared responsibility, leading to better educational outcomes for all involved.

"The Learning Schools are where an enlightened manager meets with teachers willing to give him credit, and there a real community is born that involves the territory and parents, which animates the students and there are innovation laboratories open". (S06, principal)

While mentoring new teachers by experienced colleagues, retired teachers, and ex-directors is viewed as a valid team learning and knowledge sharing practice, it is not implemented systematically in any of the four countries, and it is mainly organized at the individual school level. The teaching profession is often viewed as an individualistic activity taking place behind closed doors, with teachers often reluctant to adopt an 'open door' policy, practice co-teaching, or participate in observation processes. There was little mention of these practices, except for the Bulgarian context, which notes that:

"Open lessons for sharing teaching practices are conducted at both internal and national levels". (E02)

Effective strategies for learning communities would, therefore, include the creation of community networks; greater collaboration between schools and universities; the inclusion of students, parents, and other stakeholders in decision-making and information-sharing processes; the systematization of knowledge sharing; more time and defined functions for coordinators or mentors; mentoring procedures for new teachers; the implementation of co-teaching and observation protocols; a move towards an increasingly horizontal organizational structure. These and other strategies are included in the developmental model of learning schools.

4. Discussion

The experts participating in the study agree that there is no systems perspective in schools of the four countries, which differs from schools in Canada and the United States in which systems perspective and related leadership were implemented and evaluated long before any educational reform in Spain, Bulgaria, Italy, or Turkey mentioned it (Hallinger 2011; Bolívar 2019). This lack of systems perspective and learning community implementation in schools is, in part, due to systemic barriers in the educational system of the four countries, as well as the main culture of those countries (Hofstede et al. 2010). Participants in the study perceived that even responsibility should be shared among the educational community, there is always a need for a leader figure who is the most responsible. This perceived idea, of a very horizontal leadership structure, is directly linked with a more instructional leadership than transformational or pedagogical leadership (Hallinger 2005; Hudzik and McCarthy 2012). This includes, for example, the absence of school directors in teacher selection processes, individualistic career building systems, and a lack of career development opportunities (Bolívar 2019). These make it hard to transform a school culture into an innovative one. However, there are examples of a transformation and change in how teachers learn and like to learn, such as networking, "open door" teaching philosophies, as well as the sharing of pedagogical practices among different schools and with student teachers. These show a new path into a more innovative school culture. In summary, more learning networks among different schools may help improve the educational community learning system in general (Bass 2000).

Nevertheless, participants affirmed that they enjoyed these programs and that they were very helpful; they also said that these networks need to be constantly fed and promoted by regional governments and educational departments. A lack of consistency in this matter was seen as a barrier for their development.

Among the different leadership styles, the development of transformational leadership in all the schools of the countries participating in the project is shown as key. This type of

leadership, also referred to as pedagogical or shared leadership, is a fundamental base for the development of schools as learning communities. When participants were asked about this style, they all agreed on it being perceived as a good one for their context. However, a cultural barrier still needs to be overcome according to some of the participants that still think that relying on one leader is the best way to lead a school. Schools may teach and educate their students, but they are not necessarily organizations that learn as a community, as many of the participants affirmed during the interviews (Senge 2006; D'Angelo and O'Brien 2022). This may be due to the top-down leadership still often perceived as the correct way to lead a school, instead of a more shared, bottom-up leadership approach, which is the basis for transformational or pedagogical leadership (Bass 2000). A reason for this may relate to the culture of each country and each school; collectivistic cultures tend towards more hierarchical structures than individualistic ones (Hofstede et al. 2010). Some of the schools participating in the study said that once they have tried a different kind of leadership—one that is more shared and horizontal—the culture of the school was perceived to be different in a positive way. Even though, within the context of the school and the community, there are plenty of difficult situations to overcome, such as many migrant students, school cultures are key to promoting change in the way that they perceive reality and consider what is correct or not in each context or organization (Deal and Peterson 1998; Mestenhauser 2011).

The application of systems' perspective in education in the four participant countries of the project is, in general, weak. Some of the participants affirmed that the rigid structure of the curriculum and its lack of flexibility promotes individualism when working in schools, and it is seen as a barrier to promoting innovation and sharing knowledge (Bolívar 2019). The more freedom and flexibility given to schools, the greater opportunities are created to transform, innovate, and share work and experiences. However, this still depends on the leaders. As the results of this study show, using co-teaching and the creation of networks to share knowledge generates positive impacts. However, a rigid extensive curriculum makes it very difficult to introduce these positive changes within a school, causing teachers to feel overwhelmed and lacking in time to work on new projects, making it impossible for them to envisage the school, permitting only snapshots of their own classroom's reality. The participants claimed that they lack control in how extensive the curriculum is and how, sometimes, they need to concentrate on that more than on other important learning aspects of their students.

As one of the Spanish experts mentioned, innovation maps are very useful tools that permit knowledge sharing and the evaluation of the needs of schools. These practices and tools should be constantly updated and promoted among schools. All participants showed willingness to share their good practices and knowledge, but they require help systematizing and making this more publicly recognized. This, indeed, will help in building learning communities and organizations that learn.

It is important that a more fluid relationship is established between primary, secondary, and tertiary education, such as that existing in the United States or Finland, for example (Hallinger 2011; Peterson and Deal 2002). This could enable the sharing of knowledge and innovative practices, and it could open the community in general. Although professional development programs exist, mainly in the public sector, teachers are not trained adequately to implement the changes required in a new context and to develop learning schools as learning communities.

5. Conclusions

This article presents the empirical research phase of the Erasmus+ Project "Schools as a Learning Organizations", which is a collaborative effort by educational institutions in Bulgaria, Italy, Turkey, and Spain. The project aimed to develop a model for transforming schools into dynamic learning organizations, supported by effective knowledge management systems; this model rests on theories of leadership and Senge's systems perspective.

The article's objectives are twofold: identifying key obstacles faced by educational institutions across the four participating countries to foster their evolution into thriving learning communities, as well as exploring prevalent leadership paradigms and the incorporation of systems thinking within schools.

Over 60 years of empirical research focusing on school leadership have shown that it is the key to turning around a toxic school culture and transforming a school into an innovative educational organization. This type of research has, mostly, been carried out in the United States, Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom. Distributed and transformational leadership have proven to be two of the most effective leadership styles for the current, constantly changing educational context. Although educational policies have referred to school leadership for some time, there are systemic barriers in the countries involved in this study that have made these policies fruitless.

Research has proved that top-down leadership is not effective, even though a school's context may vary significantly, and transformational leadership is one of the elements that are key to building a learning school following a systems perspective approach. A more horizontal, pedagogical, shared school culture promotes the development of a learning school.

There are important barriers that need to be overcome to promote sustainable change that will make our educational systems better for our students and the rest of the learning community. Co-teaching, sharing pedagogical experiences, open-door policies, observation programs, sharing good practices, and connecting with other schools, making schools more open to the community, as well as sharing responsibilities among school staff, have been proved to be essential elements in becoming an innovative learning school.

While this phase of the study attains saturation levels, the prospect of involving diverse educational institutions within the same countries stands as an intriguing future avenue to enhance the empirical research results.

In the near future, the study suggests promising trajectories for further inquiry, including cross-national comparisons with other European countries and diverse international settings. Additionally, in light of the applied nature of this research within the Erasmus+ framework, future exploration could probe whether participating educational centers have progressed toward authentic learning communities subsequent to their engagement with the program, as well as including organizations that work closely with schools, such as NGOs. Overall, this investigation opens pathways for continued exploration and transformation in educational practices and paradigms.

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Appendix A

The interview for principals and schoolteachers is based on Senge's systems thinking in learning organizations and includes the following questions:

1. Establishing a sense of urgency/needed change
 - 1.1 Do you remember any particularly significant moment of change in your school?
 - 1.2 Can you explain it please? What caused the change?
 - 1.3 (It could be, for example, a demographic, socio-economic or legislative change or an internal or external crisis or change).
2. Forming a powerful coalition/Leadership and organizational culture
 - 2.1 How did you react in the face of this difficult or critical situation/change?
 - 2.2 How did you communicate the situation to your team? Who were the first people you communicated it to? How did you work with the whole school to come up with a possible solution? What decisions had to be made during the process of change and who took part into it?
 - 2.3 Did you involve teachers, parents and students, external partnering organizations, etc.?
 - 2.4 Did you need external help in the form of training, mentoring, coaching, etc.?
3. Creating and communication the vision
 - 3.1 How did you work on the vision and mission of your school in way that supported changing this situation?
 - 3.2 How did you work with inter-generational differences in the team?
 - 3.3 Were there persons who resisted or continue to resist this change? How have you dealt with this resistance?
 - 3.4 How was the new vision or decision to change communicated to the educational community?
 - 3.5 What type of school would you like this to be in a few years' time?
4. Empowering others to act on the vision
 - 4.1 Did you assess the capacity of your staff to go through the change in terms of existing knowledge and qualification? Was there a plan how to fill any existing gap?
 - 4.2 Which persons within the educational community were key in promoting this change?
 - 4.3 Is there a mechanism for sharing knowledge and experience in your school among teachers in one department and/or among departments? Can you explain how this happens in practice?
5. Planning for creating short-term wins
 - 5.1 What short-term objectives were established for changing the critical situation?
 - 5.2 What practical steps did you take and what tools did you use? (Task groups, research groups, interdisciplinary teams, external networks, experts mentoring and coaching, etc.).
 - 5.3 Of these steps, which do you think were most successful? Which were least successful?
 - 5.4 Can you explain that please?
6. Consolidating improvements and producing still more change
 - 6.1 Once these objectives were attained, what other mid- to long-term objectives were established?
7. Institutionalizing new approaches

- 7.1 Did these newly established objectives cause changes to strategic plans or school planning/practices?
- 7.2 How were they followed up? Was there any change in your staff development plan? Can you give an example? Did it lead to sustainable innovation in the school environments, teaching process, etc.?

Appendix B

The interview for experts consists of the following questions:

1. Knowledge assessment
 - 1.1 Schools are in a situation of rapid change. It requires an upgrade in the staff/teachers' capacity and expertise. How is that achieved in your country?
 - 1.2 Are there any instruments for teacher qualification tracking or knowledge mapping that are being used?
 - 1.3 Is there a professional development plan on team and individual level?
2. Knowledge gathering
 - 2.1 What internal and external sources for staff training do schools in your country use to fill in the gaps in staff expertise?
 - 2.2 Would you give examples of such instruments (training programs, qualification courses, mentoring and coaching practices)?
 - 2.3 What are the leadership training programs in the educational field in your country?
3. Knowledge capturing and synthesis
 - 3.1 How efficient are existing teachers training and qualification programs? Do they lead to any practical implications, and do they solve existing problems in schools?
 - 3.2 What is the practical application of the obtained knowledge in the schools (new methodologies, new tools, new programs etc.)?
4. Knowledge sharing
 - 4.1 How is the new knowledge disseminated in the organization?
 - 4.2 What are the best practices for knowledge sharing from the individual teacher to his/her department or the entire school?
 - 4.3 What are the ways for knowledge sharing on team level?

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