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## **European Training Path for 21<sup>st</sup> Century School Leaders\***

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**Abstract:**

*This article investigates the competences of school leaders needed to develop learning communities (LCs) in the context of European school governance systems. It shows the output of a two-years project “School Governance to build a Learning Community” supported by European Union, with the involvement of Sweden, The Netherlands, Italy, Greece and Romania. Basing on an empirical research, we designed an “European Training Path” for school leaders who want to build LCs. The training path is planned to be sharable in the EU countries and, at the same time, differentiable on the basis of each country’s particular needs.*

**Key Words:** *Learning Community, School Leaders, Educational Training*

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**JEL Classification:** *I250 Education and Development*

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\* **Note:** Although the article is the result of a team effort, Simona Franzoni is the author of Sections 1, 4 and 5; Francesca Gennari is the author of Sections 2 and 3.

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## **1. Introduction**

In an era characterized by continuous economic, technological and demographic changes in Europe, school leaders' role is evolving too. Principals are expected to be managers and leaders at the same time, called on to lead the redesign of their school and of school system in general, interacting with a wider range of stakeholders and creating socially integrative learning environments (learning communities).

The existing literature confirms direct or indirect positive impacts on student outcomes coming from both the quality of school principal and the development of learning communities (Tinto, 1997; Gordon *et al.*, 2001; Minkler, 2002; Price, 2005). So, professional development and training of school leaders should focus on learning communities and should be extended promoting ongoing learning opportunities, according to the lifelong learning goal promoted by the Recommendation 2006/962/CE.

This article shows the output of a two-years research financed by EACEA (Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency of European Commission) called "School Governance to build a Learning Community (SGoLC)" – with the involvement of Italy, Greece, Romania, Sweden and The Netherlands – oriented to design, test, improve and disseminate an European Training Path for school leaders looking at the development of learning communities. The project joined together a theoretical research on school governance, on-the-field research in the partner countries and an European training proposals for principals who desire to create learning communities within and around their school. In spite of differences in school governance systems and various degrees of school reforms enforcement, the competences demanded for school leaders involved in learning communities are similar and refer to three areas (leadership, management and pedagogy). This result confirmed our intent for a bottom-up European training path for educational leaders in the European 2020, oriented to pursue a strategy for an inclusive growth, sharable in the EU but, at the same time, differentiable on each countries' particular needs.

## **2. Literature Review**

Over the recent decades the landscape of schools is widely changed (OECD, 2008): decentralization coupled with more school autonomy; more accountability for school and student results is requested; the need to a better use of the knowledge

based education is felt, widespread immigration, a broader responsibility for contributing to and supporting the local community around the school are issues to consider.

Changes in the school systems are part of the trend in the management of public service organizations, characterized by the decline of the older public administrative models and the rise of the public governance paradigms (Kickert, 1997; Stoker, 1998, pp.23-24; Osborne, 2010). In this context, social impacts are mainly referable to individual hands-on decision-making processes made easier by the creation of networks among institutions and/or individuals. The networks are based on the certainty that public educational services work better if they are conceived and achieved in partnership with other stakeholders (citizens, enterprises, organizations of civil society and so on), in order to attract their approval, energies, experiences, cultural background and ambitions.

In particular, the co-planning and the co-production of educational services transform the relationships between service users (pupils, students, families) and service providers (first of all teachers and principals, but also policy-makers and other institutions cooperating with schools), enriching both of them with mutual experience and fostering «the spirit of genuine partnership for working towards the common goals in education» (UNESCO, 2008, p.4). Some studies highlight the positive relation between learning outcomes by students and school climate characterized by interaction and collaboration among members (among others, Tinto *et al.*, 1994; Tinto, 1997; Gordon *et al.*, 2001; Minkler, 2002; Price, 2005).

According to this thought, school should be integrated with the local community to the point that it seeks to create a Learning Community (LC) (Wenger, 1998), that is a group of «people who share a common purpose and who collaborate to draw on individual strengths, respect a variety of perspectives, and actively promote learning opportunities. The outcomes are the creation of a vibrant, synergistic environment, enhanced potential for all members, and the possibility that new knowledge will be created» (Kilpatrick *et al.*, 2005, p.11). LCs not only facilitate the sharing of knowledge, but have the potential to create new knowledge that can be used for the benefit of the community as a whole and/or its individual members. These considerations remark that LCs are not closed systems but are realities where the stakeholders' engagement is encouraged and where the membership with other communities is to be encouraged too.

LCs in the schools can informally evolve or can be deliberately fostered. In both cases principals assume a special role because of they must be aware that all the community members can and should be encouraged to contribute to the collective learning process (Brown and Duguid, 2000). The principals are the focus of a complex network of relationships; Green (as cited in Grisby *et al.*, 2010, p.1) talks about the school leader as a «chief learning officer», responsible for developing and supporting a collaborative educational process.

However, recent reports on dissatisfaction, severe workload and overburden of school principals (Vandenberghe *et al.*, 2003) might indicate that an important number of today principals feel they lack the competences to live up to current global changes (Engels *et al.*, 2008, p.3). These changes can be caught as opportunities stimulating processes of lifelong learning. In this context professional development of principals become a fundamental tool for the development of a up-to-date school system inspired by LCs. In some authors' opinion learning by doing, working together and learning each from each other is one of the most effective forms of professional development (Lieberman and Grolnick, 1996, Stein, 1998, Sparks and Hirsh, 2000), but according to Reitzug (2002), even if professional development may take different forms, the training is the traditional and still dominant one.

The existing training courses for principals are mainly focused on leadership and managerial competences needed to take the opportunities coming from nowadays extraordinary changes. The European surveys on educational training have been mainly led by European Training Foundation, European Commission (Study on Key Education Indicators on Social Inclusion and Efficiency, Mobility, Adult Skills and Active Citizenship, 2006), OECD (Teaching and Learning International Survey, 2009) but they were focused in particular on teachers and on national impacts.

The originality of our research lies in the effort to understand different European countries' opinions about principal's role and skills with a marked focus on LCs. The practical implication of our survey is the development of a European training path for principals, and school leaders in general, who want to build, maintain and develop Learning Communities in order to face the challenges related to the global changes in education.

### **3. The Project's Steps**

The project aims at improving principals' competencies to develop and foster LCs resting on the follow research question: is it possible planning a European Training Path (ETP) for school leaders in order to promote the building and the development of LCs through which stimulating continuous and sharable learning processes? If so, what skills should the training path develop? Which contents the ETP should have?

The project develops through these steps:

1. literature review in order to share among partner countries a common definition of some key concepts (learning community, governance, school autonomy); study on the national school governance systems and professional profiles related to school management (access requirements, cultural and professional background, required skills, roles and duties);
2. collection of information about existing training courses for school leaders in the partner countries;
3. social research (on-the-field) focused on the relationships between school and local community and focused on the training needs for school leaders useful for a greater awareness of the possibility to create and manage LCs;
4. definition of the structure of the ETP: competences to train and training contents.

The methodology used for the first step was literature review for the key concepts and Eurydice sources with direct surveys by partners in their own countries, for the study on national school governance systems and professional profiles. The partners discussed and shared the results obtained by means of a continuous exchange of information and during meeting planned by the project. From this analysis emerged that:

- some general concepts are not defined in univocal way by the literature. For example, the concepts of decentralization in education and school autonomy developed during the decades and have different meanings in different countries: e.g. decentralization interpreted as the transfer of tasks from higher to lower levels within the administration, but without the transfer of decision-making power, and decentralization interpreted as the complete transfer of authority (Rondinelli, Nellis and Cheema, 1984; Manor, 1999; Ribot,

2002; Daun and Mundy, 2011). At the same way the concept of Learning Community was used variously within the literature with the focus on the human element of communities (Himmelmann, 1994; Lenning and Ebbers, 1999; Yarnit, 2000) or the focus on curricular structures (Gabelnick *et al.*, 1990);

- the European countries differ in the educational systems, despite trends of convergence due to globalization (Daun, 2002; Franzoni and Gennari, 2012).

For the second step a shared grid with some item for helping the researchers to identify the existing training courses for principals in their own country was used. In particular, the grid enclosed information about: course's provider; general characteristics of training course; course's contents; course's structure. From this analysis emerged that some training courses are provided by State, universities and recognized institutes, while others are provided by various organizations, associations, consultancy and other coaching agencies. With regard to contents, in our opinion the theme of LC were not adequately included.

The third step of the project consisted in a social research carried on using focus groups technique (Kitzinger, 1994; Morgan, 1997; Bryman and Bell, 2007) in some secondary schools of all partner countries during February and March 2011. The interviewees represented five categories of school's stakeholders: principals, teachers, students, parents, others (heads of educational services in public administration, orienteering operators and youth counsellors, trade unions, entrepreneurs, etc.). The questions addresses to all categories of stakeholders were articulated on three matters of investigation (relationship between school and local community, role of relevant actors, principal's skills for LC) and they were the followings:

- a) In your opinion to what extend is your school well integrated into the local community? Is there anything that can be done in order to improve this relationship?
- b) How do you see the role and the activities of your own category within a more lively and participative school?
- c) Which abilities should a school leader have in order to give a positive contribution to the school life in general, and in particular to the improvement of the learning and recognition processes?

The research results were the followings (Salvioni *et al*, 2012):

- nowadays schools tend in general to adopt inward-looking behaviours and the link with territory seems quite weak. Existing level of stakeholders' participation in the school varies considerably among the different categories interviewed but we have perceived a substantial coherence within categories in terms of what could be done to improve a more integration between local community and school;
- the role of principal is crucial in all partner countries, but in some of them it is debased by a limited responsibility in the allocation of resources in favour of the territorial needs;
- there is a considerable coherence across the school stakeholders' answers in terms of the abilities required for principals to create and develop learning communities. These competences can broadly be seen as leadership, management and pedagogical skills;
- the potentiality for the development of LCs exists in all partner countries and the school stakeholders themselves hope for it.

The outputs of steps 1, 2 and 3 of the project were the prerequisite for the last step: the design of a European Training Path (ETP) for school leaders, expressly focused on the development of LCs (see the next section). The contents of the ETP were tested with school leaders in all the partner countries in February and March 2012, with training meetings scheduled. On the basis of the criticalities and suggestions emerged during the testing courses (contents, equipments, relationships among participants and facilitator, etc.) some changes were made until the current version of ETP.

#### **4. The European Training Path**

Starting from the outputs of the steps 1, 2 and 3, the partner countries developed an European curriculum for principals capable of governing their school in order to create an effective learning community. Training for principals is nothing new in European countries (where principals have to attend refresher courses before or during their career); the really innovative feature of the SGoLC project is a training path not based merely on factual knowledge, but strongly oriented towards the development of learning communities and governance model to build learning communities, where people learn how to profitably share their own knowledge. In

this way the project takes part to the goal to make the Europe the most competitive knowledge economy in the world.

The training model is composed of four areas of competencies to be acquired; these areas come from the focus groups answers' (step 3) with regard to the abilities a school leader should have in order to give a positive contribution to the school life in general, and in particular to the improvement of the learning and recognition processes. The competences to be developed can broadly be seen as:

- learning community: comprehension of the concept and the way to govern it (Area 0);
- educational leadership in the LC (Area 1);
- management of the LC (Area 2);
- pedagogy in the LC (Area3).

Each area includes some blocks/modules specific for the development of different target skills coherent with the area subject and for every target skill specific contents are provided; the modules can be used separately or as a whole depending on the specific training need (the users can enjoy the course in a sequential way or according to a "Lego bricks" logic).

Area 0 aims to make school leader being able to bring across the concept of learning community and to motivate all stakeholders to contribute to setting up a specific learning community for their school (Table 1). This Area aims at giving concepts and tools to deepen: the basic notions about the learning processes and LC, focusing on students' needs and performances and the involving of all stakeholders in the decision-making processes of the school; the definition of the organizational model (the network) useful to govern the relations among LC's members; the definition of a governance framework able to satisfy the stakeholder's interests, namely to provide responses compatible with different expectations and, therefore, to pursue the LC's mission and to achieve the LC's output and outcome; the knowledge of country specific educational system to understand the single stakeholder's space of action according to legal limits.



**Table 1: Area 0 – Learning Community**

AREA 0	MODULE	TARGET SKILLS
Learning Community	0.1 Learning Community	To be able to build, maintain and develop a LC country/needs specific: to know what a LC is and to be aware of the role of school leader in a LC.
	0.2 Networking	To define the organisational model of the LC (the network) and the key elements for the achievement of LC's mission. To identify the network players considering their degree of importance. To develop relations with local institutions, civil society organizations, etc.
	0.3 Governance	To develop the concept of “educational governance”. To define the school governance model according to the system in force in the country for the achievement of LC's mission.

**Source:** [www.sgolc.eu](http://www.sgolc.eu)

Area 1 aims to make school leader being able to maintain the LC through motivation/encouragement and development of specific leadership skills (Table 2). This Area develops contents about: the role of leaders in their organizations and in the network they belong to; the way leadership contributes in building LCs; the understanding of the role of motivation; the suggestions of tests, games and reflections on personal behavior profiles, active listening, effective communication with the aim at creating LCs; the understandings of the causes of conflicts encountered in school administration (conflicts that can obstruct the human relations) and the suggestion of strategies for managing conflicts.

**Table2: Area 1 – Educational leadership for LCs**

AREA 1	MODULE	TARGET SKILLS
Educational leadership for learning communities	1.1 Nature of leadership	General overview of the nature of leadership. How leadership contributes to school effectiveness ; distinction between leadership and management; the most representative leadership theories; successful leadership practices; Leadership strategies for building democratic LCs.
	1.2 Levels of influence: power and authority	Identification of the characteristics of a good administrator . Ability to distinguish power and authority as distinct “levers” of influence. To accept the proposition that administrators' effectiveness

		is related to how they use power and authority strategically to influence others – how they manage the distribution of control. To identify leadership styles for inclusive decision making in view of the nature of a LC.
	1.3 Leadership tasks and skills	To be aware of global and regional trends and differences in role expectations for school leaders; to surface personal role expectations for school leaders. To be able to adopt a personal style of leadership. To develop skills on: active listening; verbal communication; written communication. To be able to create and keep a high level of motivation by the staff .
	1.4 Managing conflict in schools	To identify potential causes of conflicts in school systems. To identify causes referenced in (a) the literature and (b) interviews with school principals. To identify a common weakness in conflict management. To identify strategies for dealing with conflicts.

**Source:** [www.sgolc.eu](http://www.sgolc.eu)

Area 2 aims at making school leader being able to manage the LC defining for it goals to be achieved, tools for LC's performance measurement, ways to obtain and allocate resources (Table 3). In particular, this Area proposes methods and tools useful for: developing a LC consistent with the current and perspective situation of the school and of the local community; defining the mission, the strategic and operational objectives and goals of the LC; identifying the responsibility in the goals' achievement; measuring the results obtained; evaluating the efficiency and the effectiveness of the LC, addressing accountability for all stakeholders.

**Table 3: Area 2 – Managerial skills to build and develop a LC**

AREA 2	MODULE	TARGET SKILLS
Managerial skills to build and develop a LC	2.1 Context and organization self-analysis	To develop managerial skills with regard to collection, classification, processing of information (qualitative and quantitative, economic and financial information) in order to interpret the activities carried out and the local context in which the school works.
	2.2 Strategic orientation – Planning	To expand the concept of LC to the school: to motivate and enthuse. To interpret the external and internal ties and the complexity level of the school. To identify and manage key performance indicators. To define objectives, strategies and manage changes.

		To realize a strategic and shared plan. To become aware of the importance of planning and controlling.
	2.3 Development of operational objectives	To define an action plan of measurable objectives through effectiveness and efficiency indicators, in according to the actual responsibilities.
	2.4 Performance monitoring and evaluation, accountability	To monitor and control the organizational and individual performance. To share information-based transparency principles. To develop skills of information collection, data processing and reporting. To combine reporting with other organizations processing.
	2.5 Fund raising and skills in financial management	To manage financial resources. To define the priority allocation of resources. To collect the resources and allocate them.

**Source:** [www.sgolc.eu](http://www.sgolc.eu)

Area 3 is focused on students' engagement in the LC through pedagogical skills (Table 4). In particular this Area suggests: tools to support school leaders and teachers in their work with students in the LC; tools to increase students' motivation and engagement; methods to help teachers to design cross-curricular modules according to the LC mission.

**Table 4: Area 3 – Pedagogical skills in a LC**

AREA 3	MODULE	TARGET SKILLS
Pedagogical skills in a LC	3.1 A pedagogical vision	To be aware of European and national political expectations in the field of education. To lead teachers in building a LC. To be aware of the role of school leaders in this field. To be aware of the importance of continuity.
	3.2 Promoting success for everybody	To be able to lead the LC in the engagement to reduce drop – out. To achieve measurable results in reducing drop – out and assure success in education to lower – skilled students. To promote excellence.
	3.3 Innovation in	To be able to create the best context for use of innovative methods and technologies (included ICTs) at school.

	education	To be aware of importance of cross – curricular education
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**Source:** [www.sgolc.eu](http://www.sgolc.eu)

In accordance with national traditions and constraints, the ETP is a mix of lessons based on active didactics, characterized by inductive methods and where the different topics are presented through concrete cases and project works. The ETP is addressed to groups of 15 – maximum 20 principals, deputy principals and teachers with a relevant role in the school life. They should be people already convinced that improving their school is possible and necessary. About the profile of trainers, they should be good “facilitators” and not classical lecturers.

All the material about the project and the ETP is available on the project’s website: [www.sgolc.eu](http://www.sgolc.eu).

## 5. Conclusions

The setting-up, development and maintaining of learning communities imply to have competences able to achieve the quality of education system as fundamental element in the value of the economic development and the social growth of local, national and international communities. SGoLC project was developed on the belief that school is responsible for the strengthening of the coordination and integration among all the stakeholders involved in the educational system: the ability to co-produce the educational services through consensus, sharing and convergence of interests is essential and critical for the improvement of students’ performance, but also for the economic growth of a country.

The creation of LCs, where individuals can learn how to share their own knowledge, experience, responsibility and vision with others, can find in the principal the focal point: the principal can be the centre of the relationships developed among all school’s stakeholders. This entails that principal is endowed with specific skills to first understand and then manage this complex network of relationships, with the aim to optimize the potentialities of knowledge in the community.

The training path for principals developed into the SGoLC project aims at improving European school leaders competences in order to create and maintain (manage/facilitate) learning communities in their own territory. This can be saw as a

further step in the process of integration in Europe and in the realization of the European goal of “lifelong learning” (Rec. 2006/962/CE).

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