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In European countries, there is no clear definition of the concept of small and rural schools. Rural areas are generally associated with small or offshore islands and the inner areas of the country. The term rural (widely used at an international level), is associated with regions mainly devoted to farming activities, but there is no working definition of rural in many of our European education systems.

In European literature, there are debates as to what a small school is. Harber (1996) reports that at an international level, small primary schools have fewer than 70 students, while secondary schools (for students 11-16 years old) have fewer than 400. Spielhofer, O’Donnell, Benton, Shagen & Shagen (2002) identify a school that has 20 students as “obviously small”, and a school with 200 students as “obviously large”. Arnold (1994) identifies 90 students as the maximum number for a small primary school with 200 for secondary schools. Hargreaves (2009) agrees with Carter (2003) that small primary schools (5-11 year old students) have up to 100 pupils, while small secondary schools have 600-900 students (Harber, 1996).

In rural and remote areas, it can be argued that the role of the school acts to advocate for the stability of the population (Cross, 1996), and as a way to fight social vulnerability. Hence, we can agree with Lyson (2005) who argues that: “Schools in rural communities serve as a symbol of community autonomy, community vitality, community integration, personal control, personal and community tradition, and personal and community identity. Schools are places for sports, theatre, music, and other civic activities... The capacity to maintain a school is a continuing indicator of a community’s wellbeing” (p. 49).

Politically speaking, two major and interconnected issues emerge when considering small and rural schools: the efficiency problem, and the inequality of the provision of education. In its meeting on 5 November 2019, the Steering Committee of European Schoolnet1 created the Small and Rural Schools Interest Group in order to explore issues of mutual concern related to small schools at a European level, as quite a lot of other countries are concerned with similar problems. The objectives of this Interest Group are to:

- Collect and share different research findings across European countries.
  - Work at the European level on the collection and sharing practices on the use of ICT, to overcome isolation.
  - Collect and share experiences on learning practices in multi-age classes.
  - Collect and share experiences on models of school organisation and links with local communities.

- Consider the opportunity to offer an open community of practices for all practitioners working in small and rural schools, and the chance to create a European network of small rural schools.
- Offer a capacity-building programme for small and rural schools in Europe.

The final results of this Interest Group could be to develop a European manifesto for a model of small and rural schooling that could improve the performance and well-being of rural education.

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1 European Schoolnet is the network of 34 Ministries of Education in Europe created in 1997 to bring about innovation in teaching and learning to MoEs, schools, teachers and researchers: www.eun.org. European Schoolnet’s mission is to support ministries of education, schools, teachers and relevant education stakeholders in Europe in the transformation of education processes for 21st century digitalised societies. More particularly, European Schoolnet’s remit is to: (1) identify and test promising innovative practices, (2) share evidence about their impact, and (3) support mainstreaming teaching and learning practices aligned with 21st century standards and expectations for the education of all students. ICT and digitisation are a particular focus of European Schoolnet’s work, because of the critical role they play in terms of designing and implementing future classroom scenarios and supporting new forms of learning both in and out of school.
The Small and Rural Schools Interest Group is composed by 13 countries (Croatia, Czech Republic, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Malta, Poland, Serbia, Sweden, Slovakia, Spain and Turkey). It is supported by European Schoolnet and INDIRE — the National Institute for Documentation, Innovation and Educational Research, which is the Italian Ministry of Education’s oldest research organisation.

The first activity started by the Small and Rural Interest Group consisted of launching a set of case studies, in order to share the practices undertaken at school level.

Each country identified two schools with the following criteria:

- The vast majority of schools are primary schools (as it is the main focus), but there are also some secondary schools that are classified as a “small and rural school” due to some specific characteristics, that have developed innovative approaches.

- The choice of small and rural school was based, first and foremost, on the innovative approaches developed regarding one or several of the following factors:
  - Leadership and management.
  - Teaching strategies, including space and time organisation, classroom management, assessments, and more.
  - ICT as an inclusive tool with a particular focus on remote teaching and distance learning.
  - System innovation, including parents’ roles, collaboration between schools, collaboration with the local community, and more.

This publication presents monographies of all the small and rural schools that were interviewed between October 2021 and March 2022. The structure of each monography is organised around the following sections:

- **Context:** This section presents the challenges and opportunities of the area where the school is situated.
- **System and innovation:** This section presents the school system as well as its innovative elements.
- **Leadership and management:** This section goes deeper into analysing the leadership system of the school and its management.
- **Teaching practices and strategies, and ICT:** This section talks about the practices and strategies applied by teachers in the school, as well as the use of ICT in the classroom.
- **Collaboration and partnership:** This section presents the school’s ability to move outside the school walls and communicate and engage with different stakeholders and the extended community.

Depending on the localisation and situation of each small and rural school, some aspects may be developed further. The monographies are presented in English, while Annex 2 provides a translation in the native language of the school.

Rural areas represent a considerable percentage of the total EU area. Due to rapid urbanisation as a result of industrialisation, the population in Europe’s rural areas has not only been drastically reduced, but is also ageing, since “rural and remote areas have the lowest shares of population in age groups below 50 years old”.

The Small and Rural school Interest Group decided to focus on small schools in rural communities with the reasoning that these schools offer education to a proportion of the young EU population that simply cannot be neglected.

European Schoolnet and INDIRE would like to thank the Ministries of Education participating in this interest group and for the support they provided by helping us identify the schools that participated in this research.

EUN and INDIRE would also like to thank the participant schools for the time, commitment, and honesty they exhibited when answering the questionnaires and participating in the follow-up interviews. Without their invaluable input this research would not have been possible. European Schoolnet and INDIRE will continue supporting the participant schools with the creation of a Community of Practice dedicated to the needs of small and rural schools.

Marc Durando (European Schoolnet)
Giuseppina Cannella, Giuseppina Rita Mangione, Stefania Chipa (INDIRE)
Rural schools under focus

School: Ravica Primary School

Location: Broćević, Croatia
There are three buildings:

- Bračević main school (21 pupils from fifth to eighth grade);
- Crivac satellite school (17 pupils from first to fourth grade);
- Donje Ogorje satellite school (27 pupils from first to eighth grade);
- 65 pupils altogether over a distance of 122 kilometres.

The schools have 13 classrooms (in total):

- Five (including one computer science room) in Bračević;
- Two classrooms in Crivac;
- Six classrooms in Donje Ogorje (including one specialised computer science room).
- All the classrooms have projectors.
- There are four interactive whiteboards in the schools.

The school has 25 teachers:

- Four teach from first to fourth grade.
- 21 teach different subjects from fifth to eighth grade.
- Of these 21 teachers, 13 are in Bračević.

Of these 25 teachers, 13 work full time and 12 work part time. The part-time teachers work in other schools as well, which makes organising classes difficult.

The school also has three professional associates, a librarian (part-time), a pedagogist (full-time), and a special needs educator.

Country challenges

Representatives of the Ministry of Education determined the following characteristics at the school level using a standardized questionnaire:

Issues: Low numbers of students enrolled, teacher and student isolation, lack, and availability of targeted teacher training.

Educational challenges: Quality and availability of teacher training programs, multi-age classroom management, teaching strategies for the improvement and application of the remote education model (ICT usage, distance learning methods in small groups etc.), and the strategic and development plan at the school level.

Policy challenge/priority: New innovative approaches to distance learning, networking models.

The context
The start of education in this area dates back to 1934 when two primary schools were founded. By 1945, each village had its own primary school (a total of 10 schools).

Until 1971, there were one thousand pupils in this area. Since then, there has been depopulation and the number of pupils has decreased since their parents went to live in nearby towns to seek a better life. The schools are known as ‘School on wheels’ because 80% of students are transported to school by bus and all employees drive to work. The closest school is 20 km away.

The district school building is in Bračević, while the buildings for the two satellite schools are in Crivac and Donje Ogorje. These buildings are approximately 10 km away from the district school.

**The isolation of the school impacts education** significantly. Students do not have the opportunity to study music, art, and culture. Parents do not have the opportunity to take students to museums/cultural events. The main cultural centres for activities in this area are the Bračević district school and the Crivac and Donje Ogorje satellite schools. These schools are only educational and cultural centres because the closest cultural institutions such as theatres, galleries, museums, etc. are more than 50 km away. It could be said that the school is isolated and culturally marginalised. Within the school curriculum, numerous visits to theatres and museums have been planned and organised, theatre groups, literary meets with authors, travel writers, musical artists have visited the school, and book promotions have been held.

Parents take their children to cultural events in far away towns. The school tries to organise events in the village and the school tries to take children to towns and cities to attend events and visit museums. There is a theatre group and the school also organises visits from travel writers.

All these activities were pre-COVID-19, which sadly, had a huge impact. Due to the pandemic, this year, all cultural activities are being held online with fewer activities than usual.
The school has a development plan. Every year they design a new one and add new activities.

The school’s vision is to enable students at the satellite schools to have the same opportunities as the children at the district school. The school provides teachers and students with digital tools to work, teach, and learn.

The school has high-speed internet connection and Wi-Fi computers for each teacher, and tablets for students. The school also provides students with internet for use at home, each tablet has a SIM card with 2 GB of internet. The first time the school introduced computer science classes was in 1998.

One of the biggest challenges is children with disabilities. There isn’t an expert who could help within and outside of the school. There is just one expert in special education who visits once per month, and the teachers have to do everything by themselves.

The schools have been part of a project called ‘The School for Life’ for the last 2 years. The project helped with equipment and training teachers how to use ICT in teaching and how to use new teaching methods.

For the last 5–6 years, the schools have taken part in Erasmus+ projects and for the last 10 years, have been part of the eTwinning community. The school also organises workshops held by teachers from the school or other associates.

The school also has an environmental goal. It wants to stop using wood as a source of heat and move to alternative energy sources. This is difficult due to admin issues. The school wants to resolve these admin issues in order to be able to apply for EU project that will help them achieve this goal.

The school offers sports.

We believe that the educational activities implemented so far have been quite successful for pupils. However, the school is constantly striving to find new and more meaningful educational activities that further motivate and encourage pupils to actively participate in and understand educational content. The success of the educational activities has been confirmed by the fact that our pupils achieve good results in high school and successfully complete their education.
The school’s vision is based on the idea that schools should be ‘a pleasant place to work’ and be, a place from which a happy and educated pupil will emerge ready to face life challenges and further their education.’

Guided by this educational vision, the school has been equipped with new technology for high quality education so that pupils are not deprived of educational technologies that are more accessible to students in urban areas.

As part of this vision, the school is developing cultural values in a culturally isolated area, and a recreational sports component of education through various sports activities and encouraging pupils to join sports organisations in larger cities depending on their parents’ financial capabilities.

All teachers have the adequate professional qualifications required for teaching and working with pupils. Teachers are organised into academic departments, class councils, and teacher councils. There are not many teachers in the school, so academic departments are made up of closely related subjects. The school has one academic department for primary teaching (from first to fourth grade), two academic departments from fifth to eighth grade, an academic department for humanity subjects, and an academic department for science and health subjects. At academic department meetings, teachers plan teaching content and projects, they agree on curricula, incorporate cross-curricular topics into the subject curricula, plan cultural activities, teaching outside the classroom, and field trips, make mutual agreements, and exchange their experiences in using IT programs for teaching. They agree on the criteria for evaluating pupil’s achievements, i.e. how to approach each pupil in order for them to understand the teaching content as well as possible.

Within the class council (only teachers who teach that particular grade), they also consider the social status of each individual pupil in order to treat pupils holistically, take care of pupils’ success, and agree on the development of programmes for children with special needs.

‘Loomen is the platform that teachers use as a digital repository where they exchange previous teaching materials and digital content to collectively support one another. We have also recently started using Microsoft Teams to communicate with teachers.’

At joint teacher council sessions (all teachers), teachers present their achievements throughout the school year (e.g. completion of school projects and their experience from teaching practice) and hold lectures on current topics. Teachers who have worked abroad through the Erasmus + project also present their new educational insights and experiences to other teachers through workshops.

A quality team has been formed within the school, which evaluates the implementation of the school curriculum and the school’s annual plan and programme and its achieved results at the end of each school year. Based on what has
been established, the quality team provides guidelines for drafting next year’s documents. ‘Members of our quality teams are some of our teachers (one representative for each subject group), the school’s professional associates, the head teacher, and one member that acts outside of school (usually a parent).’

Due to pupil’s homes being so spread out, they are transported to school by bus, which requires meticulous transport organisation. This is the reason why each school starts and ends at different times. At the beginning of the school year, in August, the schedule for school transport is made. The school uses one small school bus for transporting its pupils and this year, due to pandemic and adherence to health measures, there has been an increase of amount of transport. Since there are three different locations and only one school bus, each school has its own opening hours so that the school bus can take pupils to school and take them home after classes without delays. The schools tell the bus operator the routes for transporting students. The bus has only 21 seats; due to narrow roads, a bigger bus would not be able to get to students’ homes that are not easily accessible.

Example:

Bračević district school starts at 7.30 a.m., Donje Ogorje satellite school starts at 8.00 a.m., and Crivac satellite school starts at 9.00 a.m. In fact, 80% of our students use this transportation.

‘The area that the school covers is very large — for that reason the school organises classes at different times. The start for each period is different in each school due to these issues.’

At the beginning of the school year, teachers and other school staff (secretary, accountant, pedagogist, librarian, special needs educator, housekeeper, and caretaker) are given their weekly assignments.

A focal point of the school plan is communication between schools and teachers. They communicate daily via email, mobile phone, SMS, or online meetings. A tour of school buildings is mandatory once a week, and can take place more often if necessary. Good communication is important for planning and implementing certain tasks related to professional and pedagogical work, administrative work, maintenance, and cleaning school buildings. Up until the COVID pandemic, school meals were organised at the school and distributed by an external supplier because the school does not have a cook. However, for health reasons, pupils must now bring their own food from home.

The school has a designated school paediatrician based in Solin (30 km away) who organises general medical examinations and health education workshops.
This third part focuses on how schools have managed school activities.

Since the school is in an area surrounded by beautiful nature and not concrete and highways, teachers try to make it a part of the school’s everyday functioning. Educational activities are often held outdoors. If the weather permits, form class is held outside.

Since there are not a lot of children in this area, primary classes are combined, meaning that two year-groups share a classroom and a teacher.

The teacher teaches two year-groups at the same time by following the curriculum for each year-group. In 45 minutes, the teacher simultaneously teaches two subjects, one subject per year-group. Experience has shown that pupils pay more attention if the teacher is teaching different subjects to pupils in a combined-classroom setting.

This way of teaching is very demanding and requires great organisational skills so pupils can learn more effectively. Teachers do not have previous training in teaching multi-age classrooms. They learn on the job.

The schools has four blended/combined classrooms covering first to fourth grade. Combining two year-groups has added value for advanced students since they can work with higher-level materials, and the students who are struggling can easily repeat areas. Younger students gain self-confidence and maturity by being exposed to older students, while older students learn to be more positive and mature and can act as role models to younger students.

There are also many examples of peer-to-peer learning. The students learn how to take care of one another.

Some subjects, such as English, religious studies, German, and music are not taught by from teachers but subject
teachers in fourth grade. These teachers teach the same subject to both year-groups within the same classroom.

Since combined classes are a mix of year-groups, it is inevitable that older pupils instinctively help younger ones since they have already learnt the curriculum material in previous years. Sometimes, it is good for older pupils to review what they have already learnt.

Research has shown that younger pupils learn better from their older peers than from adults. Due to social interactions with older pupils, younger pupils develop social and emotional skills better and faster than older students. They also teach them school rules and help them better understand classroom rules and acceptable social behaviour. In addition, younger pupils learn faster and are more adaptable to changes in teaching than older peers because of the mix of ages.

The disadvantage of this kind of class organisation is that younger pupils have a hard time focusing on the lessons planned for them. Instead, they tend to concentrate on what the teacher is saying to older pupils. While one group is doing a task, the teacher has to use that time to explain new content to the other group of pupils. Therefore, those doing the task do not have the peace and quiet needed to concentrate on their work. Although this type of teaching is highly demanding, if the teacher is enthusiastic, it can work extremely well. However, in previous years, classes have been made up of three or four year-groups of pupils, which is less effective and should be avoided at all costs.

Example:

A teacher had to teach for a year in a class with four levels (one to four) and the results at the end of the year were poor.

Our curricular organisation follows the standards of the Ministry of Science and Education and their instructions. It involves subjects that have their own curriculum or content that the Ministry of Science and Education declares necessary for a particular year, and then each teacher chooses how to present the content to a particular class with respect to their prior knowledge and skills, psychological and social development, and development of motor skills. The second part is the elective, extracurricular, and additional classes that each teacher plans. Sometimes changes are made because it is impossible to predict the pace of work, or new opportunities open up that contribute to the quality of education and improving it. In addition, teachers and professional associates plan projects at the beginning of the school year, for example, extracurricular and outdoor classes and trips and excursions that they want to do during the school year. Sometimes new ideas emerge during the school year that are presented to the teacher council and school board and, if approved, are added to the school curriculum.

Teachers try to make everyday teaching, and all components of teaching, as diverse as possible, to cover as many areas of child development as possible. The school gives students a survey to complete and choose the extracurricular activities they want to do. The school then runs these activities with students from different age groups. There have been extracurricular activities in which children danced, sang, and collaborated with children from all over Europe, where they led entire countries in school plays and solved world problems such as famine, war, natural disasters, environmental problems, and many others. Home education programmes to teach housekeeping skills to children have been rolled out. Children have studied home economics and etiquette, storytelling, writing, drawing, and painting, and were often rewarded for their work. Due to the pandemic, there have been some organisational changes, and now extracurricular activities are organised at class level, so that means they are carried out in age groups, as the school can no longer mix different age groups. Some curricular and extracurricular activities this year are held online, and others in the classroom. The extracurricular activities are: English, German, theatre, music (choir or groups with instruments), sports (athletics or football), and Bible group. There is a small number of students, so the school cannot provide more extracurricular activities.

In addition, the school marks dates (national or international) of educational value. Every year, teachers remember the devastation of the war and the victims of Vukovar and show gratitude for the fruits of the land. At the beginning of
the school year, teachers encourage students to promise themselves that they will learn better and improve their etiquette, the school wants them to progress, remember the less privileged, and show gratitude for what we have.

Organising the curriculum is left to each teacher. They often use a parallel curriculum at micro level. A spiral curriculum is prescribed by the Ministry of Education, and students go back to certain topics in different school years to deepen their knowledge.

Such a spiral upward approach to teaching ensures the gradual development of certain concepts and/or skills while increasing the depth and adapting to the pupils age.

The rotational learning model is incorporated through extracurricular activities and flipped classroom activities. Each teacher has their own autonomy and vision of what their subject should look like, they combine features of the curriculum to suit their own style of teaching.

Teachers produce and use digital content. They usually publish digital content on the school website. They also have a digital repository where they share content that they don’t want to make public. Teachers feel they are extremely strong in the field of digital content and that they have gathered an enviable amount of material through years of work, especially considering the number of classrooms and pupils. Loomen is the platform teachers use as a digital repository where they also exchange previous teaching materials and digital content to collectively support one another.

Since March 2020, distance learning has become the norm in all schools across Croatia. However, even before the pandemic, teachers held some lessons remotely via Google Classroom and Loomen. Teachers are currently not working online, but the two previously mentioned platforms are available — Loomen and Google Classroom. Meetings are mostly video conferences via Zoom but other apps such as Google Meet are used. The school has 50 Mbps of bandwidth. All students have tablets and SIM cards with 2 GB per month so that those who do not have internet at home have no problems connecting to the internet. Teachers can choose the tool that suits them best. Teachers learned about Google Classroom as part of Erasmus+, so it was really helpful during the lockdown.

Due to the large geographical area the small school covers and the fact that a bus has to transport children from their homes to each school, teachers are unable to hold any activities outside school hours. Once the bus leaves, all activities end. Therefore, teachers are required to use digital materials to reach pupils while they are at home. These materials are often related to projects and extracurricular activities, but, thanks to online communication, the pedagogist carries out careers guidance with pupils and guides them through the process of enrolling for high school. eTwinning projects are implemented through extracurricular activities and online at home.

During the pandemic, in the event of self-isolation, students learn online with their teachers, and teachers who are in self-isolation teach lessons online via a real-time virtual meeting while pupils are in their classroom.

The school has been involved in eTwinning projects for 7 years. This year, five classes are taking part in an eTwinning project called ‘TeaM’ which is also the name of the KA1 Erasmus+ project. Teachers are implementing the ICT knowledge they acquired abroad and it helps them prepare for a new KA2 project they would like to apply for. ICT tools that they are using in everyday practice include Genially, Book Creator, Wordwall, Wizer.me, ThingLink, Socrative, and Canva.
Although teachers had partially used distance learning before, no compulsory subjects were held entirely online until the COVID-19 pandemic. Thanks to the experimental ‘School for Life’ programme that the school was a part of, teachers and pupils managed very well in this new virtual world. The programme gave pupils the means for online learning (tablets), which in these unfavourable socio-economic conditions provided them with the working conditions they needed.

Although distance learning has its advantages, teachers cannot say that they had a positive experience. Students are quite isolated. Some of them are isolated not only by wider geographical areas, but also by the fact that they have to travel several kilometres to their nearest schoolmate, which is almost impossible without their parents driving them. **Online teaching further exacerbates isolation and students lose the social interaction** they need for healthy development and progress at their age. In addition, parents often downplay school and education in this area, so when learning is from home, pupils do not have the motivation they need to learn most efficiently. That is why students often only know what they have learnt in class, since learning at home is minimal or non-existent. Therefore, teachers avoid distance learning and only use it when they have no other choice or as an aid, while direct teaching in the classroom is still the most efficient and best way for students to learn.
Collaboration allows the school to move outside the walls of the establishment with different stakeholders. A school collaboration has three different stakeholders: parents (close to the students), other schools (collaboration with peers), and local authorities and associations in the local area.

Local associations do not really impact the curriculum or the school’s teaching because in this area there is only one cultural association, the Komaštre from Donje Ogorje. However, the school has some events with them because their students are members of that association.

Parents participate in the school through the school board, the parents’ council. They are invited to all events, activities, numerous workshops, lectures, and projects. Although they often participate in all the activities, they do not offer any suggestions or ideas to improve the school’s work. They do not initiate any activities, but they do attend the activities and events organised by the school. They support the school’s work and are invited to participate in workshops. They come to lectures that are part of Erasmus+ projects or eTwinning. At the beginning of each school year, the parents’ council is elected. It consists of one parent from each class department who is elected at parent meetings. Parents cooperate with the school; they get involved in school activities carried out by schoolteachers. However, their individual influence is weak because their mandate is only for one school year. Two or three houses are near the school and the rest of them are very far away with no means of transportation. It is therefore really hard for parents to go to the school and actively participate in school life.

The school has strong collaborations with other primary schools through various forms of education: cultural events, joint projects, sports activities, Microsoft Showcase, visits to the school etc. However, the school does not have a systematically developed school network for cooperation because networking training ‘is not yet recognised by our educational system’. Despite this, the school has collaborations with other elementary schools and educational institutions (nursery schools, institutions for children with special needs, and higher educational institutions) on its own initiative. A local or national network of small and rural schools [ed. at European level] would be a great opportunity as it would encourage students to be creative, be more social, build self-esteem, learn more, and share experiences (for the school). Similarly, educators would help to solve problems, share knowledge, and promote peer tutoring. Professional associates have no-one to turn to, so an idea like this would be most welcome. The school could become a model for other schools — the school can contribute a lot.

The school has not signed a cooperation agreement with local organisations, but plans and implements cooperation with various organisations.
In the school area, there is only one cultural and artistic association, Komaštre from Donje Ogorje, which the school works with. The schools participate in two cultural and artistic events organised by this organisation every year: the Christmas concert and the Saint Jure party. However, the school cooperates mostly with organisations outside the area. For 21 years, teachers have been cooperating with the Lions Club Marjan from Split in the humanitarian field, raising funds for those in need. Pupils make Easter items that they sell with Lion Club members in Split to raise the funds needed. Teachers have also been raising funds for child education in Africa for many years (usually around Christmas), which they send to Sister Mislava Prkić, who is the head teacher at a school in Bukawi, Republic of Congo. Sister Mislava attended the primary school. They cooperate with the Institute of Public Health from Split – Counselling department for the protection of children’s and adults’ health in a joint project called Connect with colour, which involves presenting yourself with a picture, Forum for freedom of education - Happy Child project, organisation Most, Club for parents and mums to be in Split.

To share the schools’ work experience, teachers use an online platform called Meduza, a service for distributing multimedia content for educational and academic institutions and individual users of CARNet member institutions. Meduza stands for Multimedia EDUcation on request, and it can be used to broadcast live lectures, workshops, and other conference events. However, a national school network could also be a good place to share schools’ work experience.

‘Due to the remote nature of the school and the small number of students, it is difficult for us to cooperate with other institutions, which we urgently need to better educate our students and improve teaching content. The engagement of our employees is to thank for every cooperation we have made.’

The school has a school library, which is not open to the local community after school hours. The school’s book fund is mainly used for titles needed for school reading materials for pupils from first to eighth grade.

There is no public library in the school area and the nearest one is 30 km away. Their area is culturally marginalised when it comes to developing reading values. However, the school is trying very hard to encourage pupils to read through various school activities such as book evenings, book promotions, book month celebrations, and organising workshops on joint reading, etc. Teachers often organise extracurricular visits to the public library in Split, which is 50 km away, where children take part in various workshops and use reading rooms.

The entire educational work and other activities from the school life and work can be found on school website, which they have been editing since 2011.

1 School website [http://www.os-brace-radica-bracevic.skole.hr/](http://www.os-brace-radica-bracevic.skole.hr/)
Here are some links to our cultural activities:

World Children’s Day (online) –
http://www.os-brace-radica-bracevic.skole.hr/?news_hk=1&news_id=1022&mshow=923#mod_news

Literary meet (meet the writer) –
http://www.os-brace-radica-bracevic.skole.hr/?news_id=925#mod_news

Night of museums that our school organises every year–
http://www.os-brace-radica-bracevic.skole.hr/?news_id=842#mod_news

Book night –
http://www.os-brace-radica-bracevic.skole.hr/?news_id=802#mod_news

Puppet show –
http://www.os-brace-radica-bracevic.skole.hr/?news_id=794#mod_news

Book promotion –
http://www.os-brace-radica-bracevic.skole.hr/?news_id=703#mod_news

Music workshops –
http://www.os-brace-radica-bracevic.skole.hr/?news_id=651#mod_news

Pupils’ performances in cultural activities of their homeland–
http://www.os-brace-radica-bracevic.skole.hr/?news_id=873#mod_news

Testing basic swimming skills –
http://www.os-brace-radica-bracevic.skole.hr/?news_id=919#mod_news

Majorettes practice –
http://www.os-brace-radica-bracevic.skole.hr/?news_id=372#mod_news

Erasmus+ presentation –

http://www.os-brace-radica-bracevic.skole.hr/erasmus/diseminacija_euProjekta?news_id=469#mod_news

Outdoor classroom –
http://www.os-brace-radica-bracevic.skole.hr/?news_id=881#mod_news
http://www.os-brace-radica-bracevic.skole.hr/?news_id=733#mod_news

Some of the materials published on the school website –
http://www.os-brace-radica-bracevic.skole.hr/etwinning/teaching_for_teachers

http://www.os-brace-radica-bracevic.skole.hr/etwinning/action_english?news_id=319#mod_news

http://www.os-brace-radica-bracevic.skole.hr/?news_hk=1&news_id=1024&mshow=923#mod_news

Advent art workshop for students and parents –
http://www.os-brace-radica-bracevic.skole.hr/?news_hk=1&news_id=958&mshow=923#mod_news

Cultural events – Catholic primary school in Šibenik – performances by our pupils at an event for St. Nicholas and Mother’s Day –
http://www.os-brace-radica-bracevic.skole.hr/?news_id=386#mod_news

Joint project – blue and green – Primošten Primary School in Primošten – joint presentation of the project in our school
http://www.os-brace-radica-bracevic.skole.hr/?news_hk=1&news_id=966&mshow=923#mod_news

Sports activities – cross-country competition, organised by our school, with the participation of Prince Branimir Primary School in Donji Muć and the Neorić-Sutina Primary School in Neorić –
http://www.os-brace-radica-bracevic.skole.hr/?news_id=248#mod_news

Visit to Microsoft Showcase School in Split – Gripe Elementary School, Split – introducing students to new digital technologies –
http://www.os-brace-radica-bracevic.skole.hr/?news_id=416#mod_news

Lecture for students at the Faculty of Philosophy in Split –
http://www.os-brace-radica-bracevic.skole.hr/?news_id=380#mod_news
Rural schools under focus

School: Tordinci Primary School

Location: Tordinci, Croatia
The context

Country challenges

Representatives of the Ministry of Education determined the following characteristics at the school level using a standardized questionnaire:

Issues: Low numbers of students enrolled, teacher and student isolation, lack, and availability of targeted teacher training.

Educational challenge: Quality and availability of teacher training programs, multi-age classroom management, teaching strategies for the improvement and application of the remote education model (ICT usage, distance learning methods in small groups etc.), and the strategic and development plan at the school level.

Policy challenge/priority: New innovative approaches to distance learning, networking models.

The first part of each case study will set out the context and describe the geographical situation and some socio-economic aspects of the school.

Two Buildings – one main building in Tordinci and one smaller one in Antin (satellite building).

11 classrooms – nine in Tordinci and two in Antin.

103 students

25 teachers – three in Antin (the teachers at Tordinci also teach in other villages and cities in the area).

Please note: In the school there is also a school counsellor and a school librarian.

Tordinci Primary school is in the village of Tordinci.

Tordinci is in Vukovar-Srijem County in the east of Croatia. Tordinci village is in the middle of a triangle formed by three cities, Osijek, Vinkovci, and Vukovar. The closest is Vinkovci (15 km) and Osijek is the furthest (25 km). The school is in the centre of a municipality made up of four villages, Tordinci, Antin, Antinska Mlaka, and Korog. The entire municipality has population of 2,032, out of which 739 are from Tordinci.

In Korog there is a Hungarian national minority who honour their cultural heritage. Tordinci is in the Pannonian Basin, which has a mild continental climate, making all sorts of agriculture possible. They have very good transport connections with nearby cities and one of the villages in the municipality (Antin) has a railway connection.
This part of Croatia is still feeling the consequences of the Croatian War of Independence during the 1990s when the entire population was exiled, most homes were destroyed, and many people were killed or are still missing. While other parts of Croatia, which were not affected directly by the war, continued to develop, they had to rebuild their homes and economy.

The school is in a rural area of eastern Croatia, which has a low socioeconomic status especially compared to other areas of Croatia.

The Vukovar-Srijem County and the Tordinci Municipality have a low Human Development Index and are ranked below the average local government areas. This shows the lack of investment, very few big companies, and slow development of this part of Croatia. This situation strongly affects the local population in that young people move to other parts of Croatia and other countries in search of employment. Depopulation of this area is affecting the school more and more because entire families are leaving. Ten years ago, there were 204 students but now there are only 103 students in the school. As a result, the smallest class only has six students and the largest has 20 students.

Most students are involved in the free school lunch project, which shows the very poor socioeconomic situation of families here.

The catchment area for the school includes all the villages in the municipality. The main school is in Tordinci and there is a satellite school in Antin. Students from Antin go to the satellite school for the first four years then they travel to nearby Tordinci. Students from Korog have a primary school in their village but the classes are in Hungarian so they can choose between this school and their local school. Other base schools are more than 10 km away from the village.

This isolation also strongly affects the local population due to transportation.

There are good connections with other cities but there are no sufficient public transport lines.

Therefore, teachers have to use their own transport. The situation is also problematic for former students who attend the high school and have to travel at least 45 minutes from their homes to get to schools in nearby cities (the same route by car takes only 15 minutes).

A certain amount of isolation is felt through transport connections because there are very few public transport lines. This makes it harder for students to attend high schools in nearby cities. There are no motorways to regional centres. There are also no cultural institutions such as theatres, cinemas, galleries, or museums, and parents rarely take their children to these places in other cities. Most students visit museums or galleries for the first time on school trips.
Tordinci primary school is a relatively small school with all the characteristics of Slavonian village school. It reflects all the village’s benefits and disadvantages. That is why the school chooses to develop certain values and competences in their students.

The school’s vision focuses on humanity and solidarity, which they foster in everyday activities and especially in their many humanitarian activities such Mary’s Meals, the Christmas fair, and donations to Croatian Caritas, the Croatian Red Cross, and social supermarkets. The school encourages environmental activities, internationalisation, entrepreneurship, and digitalisation. All these aspects are expressed and fostered through the curriculum and the school’s activities.

Environmental awareness is very important to the school and is visible in the eco-activities such as collecting old paper for recycling, collecting electric waste, and caring for their school environment.

Because of all their efforts, the school has been awarded the golden status of International Eco School. Internationalisation at the school is incorporated through different activities such as eTwinning and Erasmus projects. Through the work of the student co-operative, the school is trying to encourage an entrepreneurial mindset in its students, as well as creativity, initiative, independence, teamwork, and awareness of self-employment possibilities. This helps students develop skills for independently setting goals and planning results through practical experience in the school environment and outside of the school. There are also two very important factors of the work, which seem opposite, preserving cultural heritage and digitalisation. The school considers both to be very important in the 21st century. The first maintains the good and valuable elements inherited from ancestors, while the other opens students to the future.
The school has a main building in Tordinci and a smaller building in Antin, which is about 4 km away. The main school building in Tordinci has 1,600 square meters of indoor space, and the satellite school has 300 square meters of indoor space. Both schools have a large sports field, but no indoor gym. The school surroundings of both schools are suitable for outdoor classes where they also have gazebos, which they use as outdoor classrooms.

Teaching is organised through classes in the base school in Tordinci and the satellite school in Antin. In the base school, there are 83 students from Tordinci, Mlaka Antinska, and Korog, and students from Antin in grades five-eight. A school bus is run for students who come from Korog, Antin, and Mlaka Antinska. The satellite school only has 20 students in all four year groups.

The school administration is based in Tordinci (accountant, secretary), as is the headteacher, school counsellor, and school librarian.

There is one school library in the school, and it is for all the students, from both the base and satellite school. The school library is the school’s information centre. Students can borrow books for their compulsory reading, read magazines, spend free time between classes there, and participate in many workshops.

Time and space are organised in a standard way; classes are 45 minutes long, they are held in regular or specialised classrooms. Only physical education classes do not have a suitable space.

The school has primary education teachers who teach all subjects except foreign languages and optional classes (IT, religion) to students from first to fourth grade. In middle school (from fifth to eighth grade), students have different teachers for each subject.

All teachers are on the School Staff Council. On this council, there are other members like the school counsellor, the librarian, and the headteacher. All teachers who teach the same class are a part of the Faculty Council. The Staff Council makes decisions on everything important for the whole school, whilst the Faculty Council deals with issues about certain classes. Besides this, they have teams of teachers for other school activities. The School Quality team discusses the quality of the school and ways to improve. The Eco-Committee takes care of educating students about the environment and organises eco-activities throughout the school year.

The Staff Council makes decisions on everything important for the whole school, whilst the Faculty Council deals with issues about certain classes. The counsellor deals with learning disabilities, conducts workshops with students, talks to parents, supports many other school activities and the curriculum, and talks with teachers on how to improve. The counsellor works closely with the headteacher.
Teachers from both buildings go to the main school building for meetings and teacher training. Usually, the plan for training comes from within the school. Teachers decide to share knowledge about things they have learned.

The Student Co-operation board manages six different extracurricular activities: floristry, religion group, home economics, an art group, a creative eco group, and the little ecologists. The Eco-Committee and the Student Co-operation board have teachers, student representatives, parents, and members of the local community. They also have an active Erasmus team consisting of the headteacher, the school counsellor, and some teachers. They all work together on eTwinning projects, Erasmus projects, and on internationalisation at the school. The results of this team have been excellent; they have been awarded the eTwinning School Label for the second time, and they are working on their third Erasmus KA1 project.

On the eTwinning platform, they have 81 finished projects and 16 active projects. Some of the projects have been awarded National and European Quality Labels. Every year since 2009, teachers have been involved in organising a traditional Christmas fair. The school has been registered on the eTwinning platform since 2013 when they did their first project. Since this day, almost all teachers have participated in at least one eTwinning project and some teachers do multiple projects every school year.

Teachers have to attend different national, regional, and local training sessions. Training activities for teachers in Croatia are compulsory. There are financial incentives for them. In Croatia, there is a national agency and various teachers’ associations. These two organisations provide workshops, training, and meetings. A lot of teachers attend webinars provided by eTwinning, School Education Gateway, and other activities from European Schoolnet.
This third part focuses on how schools have managed school activities.

Teachers’ strategies are mainly based on the ‘standard’ lecture-based model where the teacher is the presenter. Recently, teachers have been trying to change this approach and put the students at the centre of the teaching and learning process.

Teachers are also trying to add many different activities and projects to the standard curriculum, which are determined at the beginning of the school year.

Their school uses the outdoor space for many educational activities. Their first Erasmus KA1 project ‘Classroom Without Walls’ was in 2017/2018 and its main goal was to organise more classes outdoors. Using the funding, they built two gazebos (one in Tordinci, one in Antin) for the outdoor classrooms.

They often have curricular and extracurricular classes there (maths, physics, English, geography, Earth Day activities, reading on hay, and Winter Olympics). Multiple times a year they organise one-day trips to nearby cities (Vukovar, Vinkovci, Osijek) or to the Kopački Rit nature park.

Once a year, students have the opportunity to go on an excursion to other parts of the country (the seaside or mountains), for two to five days. In the outdoor space used for teaching, students do curricular activities, learning...
science, art, geography, and history. For example, students explore the changing seasons.

The school runs trips and organises workshops and biology and physics classes with experts. The students do not just visit museums, but actively learn by attending workshops organised by museum curators in collaboration with the teachers at the schools. Please note that for the majority of students, this is the only opportunity to visit museums, the cinema (children’s film festivals), and theatres, since most of them are from a disadvantaged background. Through teachers taking part in Erasmus mobility and structured courses, this area of work has been strengthened and the number of outdoor classes has increased since then. Besides learning from their natural surroundings, digital tools are used in outdoor classes. There are smartboards and laptops in all classrooms. Students have been provided with tablets, which was very helpful during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The school follows the National Curriculum for primary education, which is the same for the entire country. The school also writes its own curricula to determine long-term and short-term plans for the school and for extracurricular activities, elective classes and additional classes, outdoor education, and other educational activities and projects.

No other forms of curriculum are used, but teachers try to add many different activities and projects to the standard curriculum, which are determined at the beginning of the school year.

(For example, this year there are many charity activities, a student artwork exhibition ‘Masks’, maths and IT competitions (Klokan bez granica, Dabar), and a reading out loud competition. Important days are marked (World Storytelling Day, Safe Internet Day, Pink T-shirt Day, World Postcard Day, Days of Croatian Language, Book Night, Maths evening etc.). This year, they are working on their third Erasmus KA1 project ‘Step into entrepreneurship’, the International Eco-school project, the Christmas fair, fundraising for Mary’s Meals, the international Young Reporters project, a project to help prevent drug abuse, and various eTwinning projects.)

Teachers use a lot of digital content in school. The school is very well equipped; it has laptops, internet connection, and interactive whiteboards in every classroom and tablets for students. Teachers also create their own content since they had training through Erasmus structured courses.

As far as assessment is concerned, students work is assessed using standard methods, but recently they have also started using digital tools such as Teams, Matific, Edmodo, OneNote, Kahoot, Geogebra, Quizziz, Wordwall, Plickers, and Quizlet.

They usually do not need to teach remotely. Since the beginning of the global pandemic, they have had three months of remote teaching during the spring of 2020 in all classes. This school year, there has been remote teaching for extremely vulnerable students. There was also a short period of remote teaching for eighth graders because of self-isolation.

Before the schools closed for the lockdown, they prepared for distance learning. Teachers presented the digital tools and platforms they would use for distance learning. They did not experience great difficulties because students were prepared for this type of learning. Some students found that this kind of teaching suited them better. They were able to organise their time as it suited them to learn better. This was especially good for shy students who managed to show their abilities and knowledge with less fear. A small number of students achieved better results with distance learning.
During remote teaching, they used Yammer, Teams, ClassDojo, Edmodo, Google Sites, and Adobe Spark. This school year they prefer to use Teams for older students who are taught remotely. Students in primary use simple tools that are appropriate to their age. Teachers mainly send them tasks on their parents’ Viber, email, or on Google Sites.

One of the unique things about this school is multi-age classrooms. Since there is a small number of students, they have two combined classes: one in Tordinci with students from first and fourth grade, and one in Antin with students from first and second grade. In these classes, they have teachers with many years of experience who combine teaching content in a way that they can work simultaneously with both age groups. They adapt teaching methods and use pair work, group work, self-regulated learning, digital tools, and technology, anything that can help students to learn.

They encourage collaborative activities, while the other activities mentioned are not used in their classes as much. Collaborative activities are the most common for doing projects. The school has an annual project on a certain topic and all teachers and students are included in this project. Every teacher chooses activities for this project, which are connected to their subject and they mentor their students throughout the project. Teaching methods and activities are adapted to the age of the students.
Collaboration and partnership

Collaboration is the school’s ability to move outside the walls of the school and work with different stakeholders. A school collaboration has three different stakeholders: parents (close to the students), other schools (collaboration with peers), and local authorities and collaboration with the local area.

There is a Parent Council at the school made up of parent representatives from each class. They discuss all the important issues concerning students, parents, and the school. They meet three times a year. Their contribution is very important because they help give their perspective on schoolwork and the challenges they and their children face, and suggest ways for school to improve. There are also parent representatives on the Eco board and the Co-operative board. They actively participate in eco-activities, the eco-school project, and the work of the Student Co-operative. The collaboration between parents and the school is excellent. Parents recognise the school’s efforts in all areas of its work and help the school to achieve its goals. They participate in school projects, they are involved in workshops with students and teachers, and they contribute their knowledge and expertise; they also attend school recitals and festivities, help raise funds for charity events, and promote the school in the local community. Parents recognise and praise the quality of the school. On several occasions, parents have transferred their children to the school because they wanted a better education for them.

‘A lot of parents prefer our school because it is better organised in general and has a richer curriculum. Our law does not allow students from other municipalities to attend our school. Each student has to enrol in the school in their catchment area.’ A student can enroll in the first grade of a primary school to which he does not belong according to the enrollment area:

- If this does not lead to an increase in the number of class departments determined by the enrollment plan in the primary school where one is enrolled,

- if enrolled in schools that run alternative, international and programs in the language and script of national minorities.

The school happily collaborates with other schools. They believe that collaboration strengthens schools and adds value to them. They mostly collaborate with schools from Croatia and other countries through eTwinning projects. Through the years, they have collaborated with other schools for the Christmas fair, and every year they invite different schools to be their partners.

(In the ‘Let’s travel to Europe’ school project, the school collaborated with a school from the nearby Laslovo village. They introduced us to the Hungarian language, culture, and customs. Students from both schools visited each other. Students from the satellite school used Skype in the classroom to meet a school from Thailand. In the ‘Young Reporters’ project, the school collaborated with students...
from Poland. We intend to greet them at their school and send our students to meet their peers in Poland. During these visits, students from both schools will present their villages, schools, countries, and cultural heritage. Together they will visit cultural sights in the region.

There are many advantages of collaboration between schools, students develop language skills, presentation skills, and communication with students from different backgrounds, which is important for social development. They strengthen their skills during teamwork and are empowered to take accountability for their work in reaching mutual goals. Students also have the opportunity to learn how to use different digital tools.

Collaboration with other schools is visible through teachers’ dissemination activities as a part of their Erasmus courses. About a dozen schools started doing Erasmus projects thanks to our teachers who introduced them to their project activities and instructed them on how to write their own Erasmus project proposals.

The school has a great collaboration with the local government, especially with the Tordinci municipality. The municipality has taken over the sponsorship for the International Eco School project and they pay the yearly membership fee. They also help organise the Christmas fair. For some students, the municipality pays for school meals. They provide some additional school resources for all students.

Through the public work project, they funded improvements on the satellite school building and its surroundings. The school collaborates with various organisations in the municipality such as football clubs, firefighter volunteers, and folk dance groups. For many years, they have collaborated with associations for people with special needs in Vukovar. Through its charity work, the school collaborates with the Red Cross organisation in Vinkovci.

No written documents are needed for these collaborative activities, it is all done through oral agreements. Since there is no pre-school or nursery in the municipality, the local administrator has suggested this kind of collaboration to their local government but they are still not close to reaching that goal. There is no library that is open outside the school’s working hours that is accessible to other members of the community. They feel cultural isolation since there are no cultural institutions, museums, galleries, theatres, or libraries.
Rural schools under focus

School: ZŠ a MŠ Luková

Location: Luková, Czech Republic
Country challenges

1. Teaching strategies to enhance cooperative distance learning (use of ICT, small group distance learning methods, etc.) and local curriculum.
2. Strengthen the relationship between school and local government.

Number of classes: There is one nursery class and two classes for primary education. One class is for 1st and 2nd grade and the second class is for 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade. The two primary classrooms are multi-age classrooms. Number of pupils: The primary education section has 30 pupils who are looked after by two teachers and two assistants (special needs teachers). The nursery has two teachers for one class, 26 students, and one assistant teacher (for small kids).

Number of teachers: All teachers are permanent – the assistants usually have a contract for one year but when the school knows that the assistance will be needed for longer, it employs assistants for longer periods. The school applies to the ministry for assistance when they have students with special needs. The staff are generally on permanent contracts. The two main teachers have been teaching for 16 years and over 25 years at the school. The nursery teacher has taught for about 16 years and the assistants for about five. The school is in the village of Luková in the district of Ústí nad Orlicí in the Pardubice region, in the Czech Republic. The village of Luková has about 700 inhabitants. The nearest town, Lanškroun, which has 10,000 inhabitants, is 4 km from the village. Geographically, it is a region with a temperate climate, in the foothills of the Orlické Mountains with an altitude of around 400 m. The region is economically average, with the electrical industry dominating. Most residents work in factories (Schott, AVX, Forez, Soma, etc.), services, and the agricultural trade cooperative Žichlínek. In each of the surrounding villages, there is a school for either first or second grade. In the town of Lanškroun, there are three primary schools with both grades. Currently, there are 30 primary pupils in our primary school and 26 nursery school pupils in our school.
Within the region of Lanškroun, there is no isolation or marginality; there is ongoing cooperation between small-class schools, now as a part of the MAP II (Local Action Plan) working group, which promotes activities in schools, cooperation between schools, cooperation with parents and the public, and offers various training courses for teachers or parents. The school also participates in the cultural life in the village – such as taking part in events and celebrations organised by the municipal authority or other local organisations (the firefighters association of Luková, Hunting association of Luková, and others).

The only isolation is the administrative area and the implementation of the new regulations and innovations due to the absence of non-teaching staff (an accountant or administrative staff) and a low number of teachers. The amount of the administration is the same as in large schools, which have more human resources to distribute the tasks among.
**Leadership and management**

**Vision**

The school vision is to give all children an education, regardless of their abilities or health status so they can apply their best abilities to practical life and further their education. The school education programme is called I can handle it. The motto is a Seneca quote, ‘We’re not learning for school, we’re learning for life.’ In the school, they believe that learning is something you do all the time – learning is an activity that can be done anywhere, anytime, and not just in the classroom. The teachers believe that learning happens not just because of grades but because there is an inherent need to learn things. The classes are based on experience and practice. For example, the biology class students do book learning and go out in the natural environment and see what they have learned in practice.

**Teacher organisations**

The school includes a nursery school and a first-grade primary school. Part of the building is shared, the gym, garden, and corridors. To manage everything well, teachers are divided into two working groups: a working group of primary school teaching staff and a group of nursery school teaching staff, with intensive cooperation between the groups. There are seven members of teaching staff is seven, and three classrooms.

**Space management**

Classes at Luková school run normally with a possibility of changing the time, space, and content.

For the nursery, there are two spaces, one is for playing and teaching, and the other one for eating, teaching, and sleeping.

For the primary school, there are two classrooms. The classroom for the 1st and 2nd grade is bigger because the children take up more space. The classroom for 3rd, 4th and 5th grade is smaller but has computers as more emphasis is on studying. The school has a small gym in the building, a garden, and a playground.

Elements of outdoor education are regularly implemented (mainly in science, craft, and PE lessons, an annual five-day-long outdoor education camp in the mountains or another interesting location, school project days).
Every year, the school takes the pupils camping in nature, biking and to visit museums and castles in the area. All these activities are in school time.

The school also uses a bigger gym, which is in the village, a playground, and a football pitch, which are next to the school and a swimming pool, which is in a nearby town (they take the bus to go there).

Pupils also learn how to ski and skate. The school employs ski instructors in the winter and the teacher goes with the students during the week (these classes are in official school time).

Curriculum – Spiral curriculum

This year, the Czech curriculum will be reformed due to the Covid pandemic. Luková school uses a spiral curriculum: teachers all teach the same thing but add more.

Example 1: The teacher starts with the seasons of the year for the 1st grade and adds more and more facts until the 5th grade.

Example 2: Learning about the solar system starts in the 3rd grade, then continues in the 4th and 5th grades, including more details and connecting with other subjects and topics as well, such as maths (big numbers), history (the famous scientists whose work contributed to a better knowledge of the universe and exploration of the planets, astronauts, and famous missions), and science (units of physical measurements, Earth spheres).

Teaching a spiral curriculum allows the topic for the groups to be organised in different ages when the students learn together in the same lesson.

Teachers communicate with each other. In this school, the teacher who teaches 1st and 2nd grade informs the teacher who teaches 3rd, 4th, and 5th who in turn follows what has been taught and develops it further.

Class management

The school has a timetable that varies for each grade. For example, the 1st and 2nd grade have the same number of lessons in the week. In the 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade, it is the same but the 3rd grade has two fewer lessons.

So when I start every morning, we start with Czech and everyone has Czech, but we divide the work for the various levels. The classrooms are multipurpose, used not only for teaching but also as an IT classroom, art classroom, and playroom. There are pupils of different ages working in their permanent groups, individually, or even in mixed groups, usually as a part of projects or joint activities. We support individual pupil progress and autonomous learning. For example, in the context of language learning, we allow pupils to work according to their knowledge, not according to the age group or class to which they belong. (Teacher, Primary School)
Teaching practices & strategies and ICT

Digital tools

Teachers regularly use digital content, especially for 3rd–5th grade, usually using MS Teams and MS Microsoft Office documents. Teachers also use interactive worksheets (www.lifeworksheets.com), especially for homework and self-study. The curriculum is based on the school education programme, which corresponds to the national curriculum for primary education. It is a spiral curriculum; it is necessary to try to implement some elements of a parallel curriculum.

Hybrid education

Distance learning took place at Luková school in spring 2020, autumn 2020, and spring 2021. Teachers preferred the hybrid delivery model. A portion of the direct teaching was delivered to the student via online communication.

The Ministry of Education has a school information system. Students and parents can go to this platform to see marks, messages, and videos that the teachers post (streaming service). The students can also do homework there. Students have an account to log into the system.

Students work on Microsoft Teams with shared documents. They also use Mathigon (mathigon.org), where they can learn maths.

The remaining portion of direct teaching is delivered face to face and via homework worksheets. Every weekday, online lessons are provided.
The school is controlled by the school board and the municipality. Parents usually participate in project days associated with the celebration of traditional feasts and holidays. They have the right to enter the building or to get information whenever necessary. A questionnaire survey for parents is regularly organised by the school (once every three years).

Collaboration between schools

There is ongoing cooperation between small-class schools in the region, now as a part of the MAP II (Local Action Plan) working group. Schools organise and participate in sports competitions, educational events, and teachers’ meetings to exchange experiences and discuss current issues.

Collaboration with local community

Schools are supported by the village council that provides extra funding and support when necessary and the school takes part in activities that the village organises. The school hasn’t signed collaboration agreements with any local associations. All cooperation is run on a voluntary basis.

The school library, gym, and cafeteria are not open to the public, because it is not permitted by the establishing document of the school.
Rural schools under focus

School: Primary school in Přmda

Location: Přmda, Czech Republic
The context

Country challenges

1) Teaching strategies to enhance cooperative distance learning (use of ICT, small group distance learning methods, etc.) and local curriculum.

2) Strengthen the relationship between school and local government.

- 14 teachers
- 3 after-school assistants
- 5 teaching assistants

Almost 190 pupils in nine classes: five classes are in the lower stage, these pupils are 7–11 years old; 4 classes are in the upper stage, these pupils are 11–15 years old.

Základní škola Přimda (primary school in Přimda) is a relatively small school in Přimda, a small town near the Czech-German border (10 km away), in the Czech Republic. Přimda is in a submontane region at an altitude of 700 m (the highest point is 848 m above sea level), in the Bohemian Forest, which is a protected landscape area.

Almost 190 pupils in nine classes: five classes are in the lower stage, these pupils are 7–11 years old; 4 classes are in the upper stage, these pupils are 11–15 years old.

Přimda has around 650 inhabitants and many of them work in the nearby factories (10–15 km from Přimda), in Germany, or in the forests. Přimda and its surrounding villages have around 1 600 inhabitants (including foreigners).

There are approximately 190 pupils in the school in grades 1–9 (ages 7–15). The pupils come from Přimda and neighbouring villages. Pupils from surrounding villages travel to school by bus. There are only some multi-age lessons, like PE (6th and 7th grade, 8th and 9th grade) and four optional subjects that are studied by pupils in the 7th, 8th, and 9th grade.

There are two multi-age-classroom schools not far from Přimda – in Rozvadov and Hoštka. Children from these two villages attend their local schools (up to the 5th grade in Rozvadov and up to the 3rd grade in Hoštka) and then
they continue their education in Přimda. For this reason, teacher teams organise joint activities and project days for nearby schools and nurseries to familiarise the children with the Přimda school and their future classmates.

The school has one building.

Photo 2 – The school building

The school has nine classrooms with interactive boards, projectors, and screens. Additionally, the school has several specialised rooms for different subjects such as ICT, art, biology, history, geography, physics, chemistry, and languages and a school library. Students also use the school facilities for sports, there are two gyms, a football pitch, a playground, and a swimming pool.

The school is not isolated or culturally marginalised for two reasons:

The school works with other schools in region (the multi-age-classroom schools in Rozvadov and Hošťka, the nurseries in Přimda, Rozvadov and Hošťka and other primary schools in neighbourhood.

There are cultural spaces, there is a small town museum and a library. The nearest cinema is located in Bor (1 km from Přimda) and the nearest theatre is in Pilsen (60 km from Přimda).
Leadership and management

Vision

The school’s vision is to prepare the pupils for their future lives.

The school does its best to develop the 21st century skills (critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication, information literacy, media literacy, technology literacy, flexibility, leadership, initiative, productivity, social skills) that pupils need to be successful. The school also puts emphasis on developing digital competences and sustainable development.

The school’s vision is included in the school’s strategic development plan.

Team teachers’ organisation – school clubs

There are two stages at Přimda school, the lower stage (1st–5th grade) and the upper stage (6th–9th grade).

In the school, there are three after-school clubs in which pupils from the lower stage (1st stage) are allowed to spend their free time in the afternoon (before they go home). The pupils relax, play games, do sport (e.g. dodgeball), create decorations, draw, or do some outdoor activities (walking, playing games). Club of funny logic is attended by pupils from the lower stage too. It used to be open to all pupils from the lower stage, but due to the coronavirus pandemic, only pupils from one class (4th grade) are allowed to attend. Pupils play board games that help them improve their logical thinking.

Three other clubs are for pupils from the upper stage: Club of communications in foreign languages is usually organised in the language classroom or in the school library. Pupils who attend it participate in eTwinning and Erasmus+ projects and they do the project tasks there and work with partners online. Pupils who attend Explorers club also participate in eTwinning and Erasmus+ projects and do their project tasks in this club. They learn more about nature and the environment. They work not only with their project partners, but also with pupils who attend the Club of communications in foreign languages (both the clubs cooperate). This club is usually held in the school library or school workshop, but pupils often do often outdoor activities too (to explore nature in the school’s local area). Reader’s club is for pupils who love reading. It is held in school library. Pupils who attend it improve their reading skills, read books and talk about them together, write their reader diaries, participate in Andersen’s Night, and they also participate in the activity called ‘Reading helps’, a charitable activity where they can help other children through reading books.

All the teachers (13), after-school assistants (3) and teaching assistants (5) make up one team that works together. Teachers and teaching assistants work together in lessons. The teaching assistants help pupils with special needs, and all pupils who need their help (other weak
pupils) and do extra classes in the afternoon. Pupils benefit from this cooperation.

Teachers from the lower stage also work with the after-school assistants. They plan project days, trips, and excursions together and the after-school assistants (and also the teaching assistants) help to plan them.

**ORGANISATION AND TEACHING STRATEGIES**

**Space management**

The school has **eight specialised classrooms** (for biology, ICT, languages, school library, history and geography, art, physics and chemistry, and the school workshop). The classes and groups of pupils rotate according to the lesson plan.

Referring to the **learning clubs**:

- Club of funny logic is held in a normal classroom.
- Club of communications in foreign languages is usually held in the language classroom or in the school library.
- Explorers club is usually held in the school library or school workshop, but the pupils often do some outdoor activities too (to explore nature in the school’s local area).
- Reader's club is held in the school library.

**Time management**

With reference to the **teaching calendar**, classes and lessons are the same as in other schools. Lessons start at 7:45 and last 45 minutes. After the first two lessons, there is a longer break for students to have their snack. While younger students finish their classes between 11:20 and 12:15, older students finish at 12:15 (on Wednesdays and Fridays) or at 13:10 (on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays). Some days, older students finish at 14:45 or 15:15 due to afternoon classes and after-school activities. In the afternoon, pupils can attend learning clubs where they are able to hone their skills in cooking, arts, maths, literature, and foreign languages. During their free time in the afternoon, students also work on eTwinning and Erasmus+ projects. The school also provides **extra courses for pupils needing extra support** in Czech and English language and maths. The teachers organise different **project days for pupils at this school and for pupils from the multi-age classroom schools and nurseries in the local area**.
Teaching practices & strategies and ICT

Curriculum

The curriculum is based on the school education program, which corresponds to the national curriculum for primary education. It is a spiral curriculum.

Outdoor education

Teachers organise different project days for pupils at this school and for pupils from the multi-age classroom schools and nurseries in the local area. These activities are usually organised by older pupils and are connected to nature, the environment, history, and culture. Many of them take place outdoors (Outdoor Classroom Day, Practise in nature (pupils learn how to behave and survive in nature), World Water Day (pupils clean the stream and springs), and Earth Day (pupils collect rubbish in the neighbourhood – in the near forests and meadows)). In winter, a ski course is organised and outdoor sports contests – skiing, triathlon etc. (pupils from neighbouring schools are invited too).

Multigrade collaborative work

In the upper stage, boys and girls don’t have PE lessons together. They are divided into two groups – a group of boys and a group of girls. There is a low number of pupils in some grades (e.g. in the 8th grade, there are only 20 pupils), that’s why we have to create multi-age classes for PE.

Before starting the 7th grade, pupils must choose one of the optional subjects (English conversation, ICT lessons, sports games, or science practice). They study this subject from the 7th to the 9th grade, so these are other multi-age classes. The reason for creating them is similar as for PE – the low number of pupils in some grades (for example, English conversation only has 10 pupils from three classes). The second one is the interest of pupils – they study the subject that they like or want to study in secondary school.

Peer education

Pupils are used to working in pairs or groups and thanks to their participation in international projects, they are also able to cooperate in international groups. Older pupils (6th–9th graders) often prepare different activities, tutorials, and contests for their younger schoolmates and for the pupils from neighbouring multi-age classroom schools in Rozvadov and Hořťka and for the children from the nurseries. Thanks to distance learning, pupils also have experience with self-regulated learning.
The older pupils learn that they have to be responsible for their own work, they learn to be more self-reliant. They strengthen their self-confidence. Peer teaching is very well accepted by younger pupils. Teachers practise using it during normal lessons at school to familiarise the pupils with it.

Role of ICT for distance learning

At the beginning of the pandemic, teachers created a G Suite account for remote and distance education. Google Classroom is a platform for education. There, teachers upload different teaching materials, tasks, tests, and quizzes for pupils. Pupils do their homework and send it to teachers via Google Classroom. For online lessons, teachers use Google Meet. As for digital tools, they use Word, PowerPoint, and different online applications like Quizizz, Quizlet, Kahoot, Google Docs, Google Slides, Google Drawings, Canva, Padlet etc. Google applications, Canva, or Padlet are used for cooperative education.
Role of parents

Parents are members of the School Council and the parent-teacher association, and they are regularly informed about their children’s results and all the events at school. They also help to organise some school activities like Christmas singing, School Academy, or enrolment into the 1st grade. They also participate in some of project days (for example they prepare some workshops during the international learning activities in Erasmus+ projects that are carried out in school).

Collaboration between schools

Přimda School cooperates with other schools in the local area by organising sports contests and inviting the teachers and pupils from other schools to participate in them (swimming contests, triathlon, reading contest). The school also organises project days for pupils from the nearby multi-age classroom schools and children from nurseries. The most important thing is that all the project days are organised by older pupils – this is valuable for them because they learn by doing too. The children and teachers from the kindergarten in Přimda also visit a gym where they play and do some sport activities.

Collaboration with local community

The school has not signed collaboration agreements with local associations but cooperates with many institutions in Přimda and its neighbourhood: the municipality of Přimda, the Headquarters of the Protected Landscape Area Bohemian Forest, the Museum of Bohemian Forest in Tachov, Forests of the Czech Republic, the local newspaper, the History Park Bárna-Tachov, and the West Bohemian Museum in Pilsen. Museums and the History Park, Forests and Headquarters of the Protected Landscape Area offer many educational programmes for pupils.

The local authority supports educational projects (for example, for the Erasmus+ projects, it participates in some of the activities during these international meetings) (e. g. planting the tree of friendship, the tree of liberty etc.) and supports the school and projects for reconstruction and renovation. (Thanks to this, three new modern classrooms have been built and now, the school is preparing a new project application for building a ‘future classroom lab’ and a new school sports ground).
Rural schools under focus

School: Le Freney D’Oisans, (école de montagne)
The context


Initiative

- ‘Innovative Digital Schools and Rurality’ https://primabord.eduscol.education.fr/
  https://primabord.eduscol.education.fr/ecoles-numeriques-innovantes-et-ruralite
- Intercommunal educational network.

Country challenges

1. Teaching strategies to enhance cooperative distance learning (use of ICT, small group distance learning methods etc.) and local curriculum.
2. Strengthening the relationship between school and local government.

Information

- Two classes, both multi-age classes covering nursery, preschool, and primary
- 14 students in one class and 11 students in the other
- Two teachers

Image 1. Landscape

It is a very small school with only two classes, which are both multi-age classes. One has 24 children and the other has 11. The classes are set up so nursery, pre-school, and primary children work at their best.

Image 2. Le Freney D’Oisans small school
It is not the only small school in the area but due to its geographical position, it is the only school available for four villages:

1. Le Freney d’Oisans
2. Besse-en-Oisans
3. Clavans-en-Haut-Oisans
4. Mizoën

There is intermunicipal transport because children travel from several municipalities.

Despite being close to ski resorts and the benefits of being located in an area whose economy is based on tourism, the school is geographically and culturally isolated. There is no high turnover of teachers. Teachers must travel several hours every day to reach the school.

Geographical isolation has an impact on the educational opportunities that the school offers.

The school is far from everything: there are no theatres, libraries, cinemas, or museums close by so it is difficult to work with professionals from the cultural sector. In order to maintain links with other schools in smaller villages, the teachers organise trips to the sea and gymnastics and maths challenges to prepare the children to socialise ready for middle school.

The educational network

Teachers report a lack of continuing education even if they benefit from the intercommunal educational network (regroupement pédagogique intercommunal). This system allows a teaching structure without a precise legal definition based on an agreement between two or more municipalities to establish, operate, and maintain an inter-municipal school or an inter-municipal class in one of these municipalities.

Within the intercommunal educational network, teachers created an networking session with the multi-age classes in Haut-Oisans in which the following take part:

- Auris-en-Oisans school (one class),
- Mizoën school (nursery class),
- Mont de Lans village school (two classes),
- Venosc village school (two classes),
- Le Freney d’Oisans school (two classes).

The financial contribution of each municipality for operating and maintaining the school or inter-municipal class is set by an agreement between the municipal councils.

Participation in this network prompted primary teachers to work together, pool materials, organise educational networks, prepare teaching roadmaps, and share assessments.
Leadership and management

Vision and team, teacher swapping model

The school’s educational vision rests on differentiated teaching and learning. The teachers try to adapt the activities because there are children who stay in school for at least 5 years, and they try to open the school to the outside world by offering more training. For example, the school collaborates with the nearby national park and changes the themes every year (for example, one year it focused on animals and another on plants). The school has therefore adopted a ‘swapping’ model.

For the last 15 years, teachers have been swapping levels every year. One year, they teach ‘cycle 2’ (the first three years of primary school), and the next, they teach ‘cycle 3’ (the final two years of primary school and the first year of secondary school).

The teachers have decided to do this to:

• avoid students only being taught by one teacher throughout their school life (also because the children may have a good or bad relationship with that teacher), and
• give teachers the opportunity to change, but still focus on the same theme or level.

These changes prompt teachers to discuss activities and methodologies with one another. Teachers seeing one another five to six times a year allows for dynamic exchanges and finding new, more efficient resources.

This way of working presents many difficulties for the content that needs preparing. The children work with plans prepared from one week to the next, and some same activities are carried out at different levels.

(E.g. reading and videos, and everyone has a notebook and their own exercises to do depending on their level). The teachers take care of those who are struggling most. Then, after a quarter of an hour, they move on to another level, set up silent readings and come back to see what has not been understood. This step is more or less necessary, depending on the subject. This is why it is also necessary to talk with the other colleague so that the students are not always doing the same thing.
Space and time

The old building, which dates from 1880, was built in such a way that the ground floor is reserved for the school and the first floor houses the town hall and accommodation for teachers.

About 30 years ago, another class was added to accommodate children from the surrounding area. The school has several areas, such as mezzanines, two small rooms, and windowed corridors to encourage work in small groups. In each of the two classrooms there is also a large space with a specific place for painting, computers, a mezzanine for reading, and places for group work.

Image 5. The learning environment

The school has a simple and regular timetable. There are four school days, Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday - 3 hours in the morning and 3 hours in the afternoon. In the morning, French lessons are held before break time and mathematics lessons follow. In the afternoon, time is set aside for sport and more practical activities or those organised in the laboratory, such as history, geography, and science.

Image 6. Photo of outside sports activities

Teaching strategies

The school maximises the use of didactic differentiation and group work. In terms of the choice of the type of curriculum, in addition to the parallel curriculum, the school also often adopts spiral and rotating curricula:

- Parallel curriculum: in French and mathematics.
• Spiral curriculum: in sciences, history, and geography. The school focuses more on one theme one year and on another theme the next.

• Curriculum rotation: in sports for example, there are activities that are continual and others that are specific to a year depending on the age of the children (one year circus, the next something else, swimming, skiing, athletics, games). The rotating curriculum is supported by the outdoor activities that take place every two years on the ‘educational school trips’ outside school.

In particular, for multi-age classes, the teacher and the students work in teams and as per the work plans, organise the activities into 15-minute sections.

Image 7. A multi-age class

The school practices outdoor education and also organises trips with other small schools in nearby villages. This can impact the activities carried out in the classroom (e.g. collecting tree leaves for science lessons).

Images 8 and 9 – School trip (https://www.ecrins-parcnational.fr/ungardeuneclasse/ecoliers-freney-oisans-observent-arbres)

Digital content

The school uses digital content to enhance students’ learning experience and expand the learning environment by networking with other schools and integrating several environments and online activities.

The classrooms have adequate equipment to allow students to experiment with and use many digital environments. The school has:

• Two interactive whiteboards (one per class)
• 20 ASUS mini-computers and,
• 10 iPads (one per child).
Images 10 and 11 - Technology

Image 12 – Technology setup in class [https://www.pinterest.it/pin/361273201328531873/]

Of the digital environments used, it is important to highlight:

- a forum managed by a local association (Freneytique),
- pages promoting the school’s activities on the associative website of the inhabitants of the village for example,
- pages on an academic site for all schools in le Haut-Oisans,
- the Monecole.fr platform for mental arithmetic,
- Reading Rally (pupils borrow books to read one after the other. Once they have read the book, they have to answer a questionnaire to assess their understanding of it) [https://rallye-lecture.fr/],
- Learning Apps,
- Tacit, the platform for developing reading (implicit meanings and vocabulary) [https://primabord.eduscol.education.fr/travailler-la-comprehension-en-lecture-avec-l-outil-numerique-tacit].

The applications and environments are used in the teaching and learning process and respond to the school’s unique differentiation vision.

Image 13 - Tacit application

For example, the objective of the Tacit learning environment is to enrich the vocabulary of students who are not of the same age nor the same level. The platform allows pedagogical differentiation and is very useful in multilevel classes.
The role of ICT for distance learning

The school has never used remote teaching as a teaching method and has no experience of twin schools through eTwinning projects. The only case where the school has provided remote teaching was in the case of an exceptional situation. However, this was only for 3 months in 2010. A parent of a student had set up a videoconferencing system so his homebound daughter could learn to read from her bed at home. In class, a computer sat on a desk in front of the teacher. She raised her finger to respond live. She wrote in the forum. Chloé learned to read, write, and count perfectly in her first year of primary education.

The pandemic has forced the school to resort to distance learning. The idea now is to invest in an environment that extends the classroom and allows for virtual classes. Internet connection issues will have to be overcome, otherwise it would risk further isolating and excluding children.
Ties with families and the region

The small school has the opportunity to communicate with associations such as Freneytique, which makes parents’ skills available for school activities with attention on IT support.

Networking between local schools is important. The educational network allows activities related to sports, and maths and spelling challenges to go ahead. However, there are other very important networks at national level for isolated schools. In particular, the INEE network (Innovation numérique pour l’excellence éducative) or the ENIR network (Innovative Digital Schools and Rurality), which make it possible to expand the technological equipment at small schools.

Finally, the municipality invests in the school, listens to teachers’ needs and finalises resources to contribute to children’s curricular and extra-curricular activities.

The town halls support and fund (in line with their means) the projects that the school offers.

Individual parents are very involved in school activities. All the activities offered are accredited by the School Council and the parents regularly make suggestions like climbing or visiting Vulcania (a theme park in the heart of the volcanoes of Auvergne). Parents also financially support the school by organising charity fairs and markets.
Rural schools under focus

School: La Balme school

Location: Rencurel, France
The context

Located in a village of 300 inhabitants with housing between 600 and 1,600 metres above sea level. La Balme school in Rencurel has around 13 to 20 students each year. One single class includes three levels of kindergarten and the first three levels of primary school. 3 km away, there is another school for older students. Two other primary schools, located in Villard-de-Lans and Pont-en-Royans, about 15 km away, at the top and bottom of the La Bourne valley, can only be reached by a road that is difficult to access.

Culturally speaking, the school is very isolated. Due to the cost of transportation, pupils cannot leave the area. The local council and school cooperatives do not have the financial means to cover the cost of school transport to the town.

Several schools meet to ski and get in touch with nature at a ski resort located 10 km away. This is an opportunity for students to meet other children, but it is always difficult to organise.

Once a year, the school takes the children to Grenoble (1 hour and a quarter by bus). The livelihood of a large part of the inhabitants depends on seasonal tourism. Parents leave the village with their children, but this means discovering other realities takes place without a collective dimension.

CHALLENGES (DATA FROM THE SURVEY)

Developing teaching strategies to improve remote cooperative education (using digital tools, distance learning methods in small groups, etc.) and implementing school programmes.

Strengthening the relationship between schools and local government.
The school’s educational vision can be summarised as follows: ‘Children must be stakeholders in their learning, to cultivate their willingness to learn.’

It is up to the school to put in place specific management and pedagogical proposals, so that students want to learn, which can improve concentration and academic results. This is the key to the working method implemented, even in classes where students of different ages learn side by side (3-year-old and 8-year-old students sometimes find themselves in the same class). Once the range of students being managed in the classroom has been taken into account, this class structure is very enriching.

Over the last ten years, the class has had between 13 and 20 students. There is only one teacher in the school. As it is a kindergarten class, the teacher is accompanied by a Specialised Regional Kindergarten Officer (Agente territoriale spécialisée des écoles maternelles - ATSEM), hired by the local council, and almost always by a classroom assistant.

The classroom assistant helps the youngest pupils on a daily basis (dressing, undressing, cleanliness, food and snacks). The ATSEM also has a pedagogical function. His role is to help children work, and to help maintain discipline (reminding children of the rules: ‘we walk in the classroom’, ‘we speak in a quiet voice’, ‘we put things away after working’, and so on).

The teacher benefits from 18 hours of training through educational animations, and support from a teaching advisor. These occasions also provide the opportunity to meet colleagues and exchange practices.
The classroom is organised into work areas that are divided into learning spaces designed to encourage independence and to differentiate between levels. In each area, the proposed activities are organised by increasing difficulty, to allow each child to progress at his or her own pace as part of an individual learning project. The resources are organised according to the progress of the different levels in the class. Thanks to this organisation, children know where they are, and what they will be able to discover next. This creates desire — the desire to learn.

The activities emphasise repetition in independent work, which encourages memorisation and integrating the concepts learned. Each activity is presented by the teacher to the student. The teacher always explains how to use the material. All of this helps make the student self-sufficient. In kindergarten, students work in groups, but when the teacher presents something new, she takes each child to one side. In primary schools, students work in groups. The teacher explains the instructions to groups of 4 to 6 students maximum. The teacher proceeds step by step. In classes with several different levels, teaching is more personalised.

Teaching activities give pride of place to independent work. They are usually self-corrected and can be performed individually or in pairs. A child may also present a new item to another. In the morning, students in the first three levels of primary school follow a personalised work plan.

Children in kindergarten choose their activities freely. Gradually, they take ownership of how the resources are organised, until they are able to choose their work according to their current interests and their level. Older children have a work plan on an A4 sheet that lists their activities. They are identified by photos and take the form of workshops that need to be completed every morning. A new work plan is provided every fortnight.

In the afternoon, children can freely opt for workshops in visual arts, science, geography or writing. They may also choose to work on projects alone or in groups. This involves understanding their relationship to learning, how they engage in a project, and how the project is organised for its duration.

Pupils take a moment each day to sing or take an English lesson in a group.

There is no break in the morning or afternoon. Instead, pupils have outdoor play time in the late morning or afternoon, depending on the season and the weather.

In addition to the facilities available in different areas of the classroom, children also have a digital workspace. The workspace includes educational programmes and videos on the concepts studied. Some of the resources have been created for the class, while others come from existing online resources.
Activities have a beginning and an end. Children begin to understand, over the course of the year, that they can complete certain activities quickly and easily, then move on to the next. Some children have good self-esteem, and they easily move from one activity to another. Others need to be supported by the teacher in this process. The teacher will ask them questions and get them to think about their learning.

Turning classes into multi-activity spaces is a concept that should be extended to outdoor environments.

Outdoor spaces have a place in educational projects. The school is currently designing a living cabin (a planted wicker hut weaved in the shape of a dome) to organise leisure activities. The idea is that children no longer spend playtime on concrete playgrounds, and can instead play on climbing frames, chat under a tree or observe insects.

The class is currently involved in a project to restructure the village park. It could be used as an outdoor educational space in the future. The commune of Rencurel is responsible for restructuring the park. It is involving the school in the work so that children and adults can claim ownership of the land.
The educational activities offered in different classroom spaces allow pupils to work on their desired skills. Digital skills are reserved for children aged 6 years and older. Opinions are divided on the value of exposing children to digital technologies at a young age. With digital tools, pupils work in a different way: they have access to games and videos. Children have a Pearltrees that brings together the concepts learnt in class by identifying them with a pictogram. This allows them to work on these concepts in their free time rather than at specific times, as is the case for the rest of the day.

Digital technology makes it possible to work on activities related to spelling, word processing, multimedia, calculation, numeracy, or to watch educational videos.

The idea is to empower children and enrich their work in different ways. They can easily correct their own work. They put the writing part aside in favour of more intense learning.

They can take stock of their learning: by filming themselves, taking photos of their work, by publishing an article online on the school’s website, or on commune’s newspaper.

During the pandemic, the school set up a digital workspace for parents to see or retrieve their children’s work. This made it possible to create links, send photos and discuss the learning carried out in the classroom. For the teacher: ‘The human relationship enriches learning in ways that are impossible to recreate via distance learning. Physical closeness, eye contact, trust, creating a class group that benefits the individual... all this is lost remotely.’

Digital workspaces are effective tools to improve parents’ access to the work carried out in the classroom. Today, this link mainly takes the form of videos and photos with comments they receive online. In terms of equipment, the school aims to equip itself with tablets, in order to increase the independence of students in their learning practices.

Collaborating with families and the local area

To help students progress, the school relies on families and partners.

Before the pandemic, the school organised educational evenings with parents so that children could demonstrate what they knew how to do. Now, teachers film the children and send the videos to their parents.

The village has about 300 inhabitants, so the inhabitants know each other and meet on informal occasions. The elected representatives of the municipal council serve as a link between the school and the local council.

The inhabitants participate in village politics, and therefore in school politics.
A discussion group is being created to rethink education in a collaborative way: reviewing the use of outdoor spaces, design tools to help parents better understand the work carried out in the classroom, continue and enrich educational activities and propose new educational projects.

The school collaborates with the library, which belongs to a network, in order to offer the schoolchildren thematic collections of books by period, as well as activities based on literature. The library is open on Wednesday afternoons. Each period has a common topic, and the teacher receives about fifty books for 7 weeks. Students can take them home, and they are also used in the classroom, which is an advantage.

The teacher mentions a certain loneliness in terms of discussing teaching, due to a lack of exchanges with other teachers, and is concerned about the risk of isolation for her students. However, the small size of the class means it is easier to support of students in difficulty.

The creation of a network of schools would make it possible to share practices and set up exchanges, through virtual classes and physical meetings. The objective would be for students to transition smoothly to secondary education.
Rural schools under focus

School: Konitsa Primary School

Location: Konitsa, Greece
(The first part of each case study will set out the context and describe the geographical situation and some socio-economic aspects)

Three primary schools – in Konitsa (northern part of the Prefecture of Ioannina).

Six classes, aged from 7 to 12 years

The average number of students per class is 12. There are no multi-age classes.

80 students in the school.

There are eight teachers for each class and there are two English classes. In total, the school has 12 full-time teachers. There is also a German teacher and a French teacher who work part time.

The school has two buildings. It has two playgrounds (asphalt and soil) with trees, a basketball court, and painted games on the asphalt (hopscotch, snakes and ladders etc.). In addition, there is an indoor gym and indoor toilets for boys and girls.

The school setting is quite conventional. There are desks and chairs like other schools, each classroom has internet access, and there is a computer in each classroom. There is one classroom with an interactive whiteboard.

The town was built amphitheatrically-shaped on a mountain slope of the Pindas Mountain range where it overlooks the valley where the river Aoos meets the river Voidomatis. Konitsa lies at an altitude of approximately 600 m. Its economy was initially based on agriculture but since the decay of agriculture, most inhabitants were forced to resort to new trades in the tertiary sector. In the aftermath of the earthquake of 1996, construction has been steadily boosted due to workers emigrating mostly from Albania.
Over recent years, local residents have mainly started working in tourism since Konitsa has become a tourist attraction for people who love climbing, hiking, and who are, in general, nature lovers.

Within a radius of no more than 50 km is also the most mountainous school in the prefecture in Distrito, at an altitude of 1100 m. In addition, there are two other schools in Konitsa, and schools in Kalpaki and Kefalovryso.

The school in Konitsa is not isolated or culturally marginalised. Cultural isolation is not an issue for the students since they can visit places such as the local library and some museums, but not cinemas or theatres. However, daily excursions to a nearby town are organised. Students sometimes visit other nearby villages that have cultural elements to see (e.g. the stone villages that are protected by UNESCO).
The school follows the vision of the Ministry of Education and has an action plan for every year, but there is no school vision per se. However, due to the characteristics of the student population that attend the school (children of locals, children of immigrants from Albania, children of refugees from Syria and Afghanistan, etc.) the educational aim of the school is towards inclusion, to lessen any inequalities.

The school follows the curriculum, as prepared by the IEP and the Ministry of Education, in combination with the improved digital books that are provided and the repositories of educational scenarios that exist. The daily timetable is the same (in terms of teaching hours) as every other school in the country. However, in each classroom, each teacher makes the appropriate adjustments according to the children’s learning and language needs. The school also actively participates in environmental and recycling programmes run by the Municipality of Konitsa.

During the pandemic, the school turned to compulsory distance learning using the official Cisco Webex Ministry platform. For this purpose, they provided some tablets to students who did not have the necessary equipment and technical means. The distance learning period lasted for 4 months, which did not initially go smoothly as there were technical issues; the Cisco Webex platform did not respond satisfactorily, and problems were observed with internet connection for many students.
The school’s financial resources are provided by the State and the distribution and management is carried out by the Treasury Service of the Municipality of Konitsa through the School Committee of the Municipality, which is also responsible for covering expenses for heating, supplies, and other repairs, which occur from time to time in the building.
This third part focuses on how schools manage school activities.

In this school, children are encouraged to develop their autonomy through collaborative activities. Teachers use inclusive strategies in the classroom that take all the needs of all the students into consideration. If a student has a specific subject they are gifted or interested in, there is extra help. This is both an individual approach/action and something that the school organises and promotes in their vision.

As for ICT usage, a lot of teachers use computers to help students understand lessons. They use the projector to provide visual support (videos etc.) in their lessons. In general, the school uses digital books that are used mostly by the language teachers. In fact, the school has repositories of educational scenarios that play a basic role in curriculum development. They have been used since quite recently and promote extra information for the lesson and the subject. This was a practice that took place mostly during distance learning education, a lot of exercises were assigned to teachers through the platform (some exercises and scenarios were used in school with the projector, teachers used them with children to help solve the problem all together through the same technique). During COVID, distance learning was very helpful, and since the children learned through this approach, they became familiar with it. It is now much easier for the school/teachers to integrate ICT and the platform into their daily routines now that normal teaching has resumed. The experience of distance learning could be continued and could become a way of working in the school, but since not all students have access to internet at home, and many students don’t have a computer, the school cannot use distance learning extensively or make it compulsory. Moreover, families with several children have difficulties in providing a device for each child. The government does not provide practical support in this regard.

The school does not have opportunities for eTwinning group activities with other neighbouring schools, because it wasn’t on the school curriculum. Last year, there was a programme that took place between Greece and Cyprus involving other schools from Cyprus. (An international project with two different countries). At local level, the school doesn’t have a cooperation or communication channel. Moreover, eTwinning and Erasmus projects also require technological skills and knowledge that many teachers do not have and the ICT teacher cannot work all day to design this kind of project.

The school organises collaboration programmes with the local library that students visit twice a week. They have the opportunity to borrow books, study there, and access literature. This is also supported by teachers.
The school cooperates with neighbouring schools on mainly service issues. It also collaborates with the Parents and Guardians’ Association, which supports events (within the school) and activities (outside of the school) organised by the Teachers’ Association both practically and financially.

Internally, there is a good relationship between parents and the school, but for basic things. For instance, if we plan a trip, parents help by giving extra money for this trip. They also offer to help at any other event that takes place on the school premises.

As far as alliance with the local area, there is some help for the provision of some equipment and sometimes parents provide money to schools for equipment or trips etc.

The school has a school library that was recently set up and is gradually being developed thanks to donations from the Municipality and the Parents and Guardians’ Association. It is not open to the local community in the afternoon. The school is not open or available for social events or activities after hours (Monday to Friday, 8 am to 4 pm). Before COVID, they was a lot cooperation with the local library and the environmental centre that children used to visit and where they would take part in a lot of events that were organised.

Cooperation between small and far away schools should be supported more, as it is very helpful for schools like Konitsa, which is isolated, to get access to knowledge from other schools that might also have the same issues and challenges as us. They can provide feedback on what is happening, and we can learn from each other.

Could a national network of small schools be useful to support the processes of training, mentoring between schools, sharing innovative practices, and organisational models?

This would be very helpful ideally, but would require organisation. As mentioned, collaboration and cooperation is very important. We could provide help and knowledge to each other.
(The first part of each case study will set out the context and describe the geographical context and some socio-economic aspects).

The Árpád Fejedelem branch school of Egri Kemény Ferenc Sports Primary School is in a village called Ostoros. Ostoros is near the town of Eger in the northern part of Hungary. The village is in the Ostoros brook valley. To the north of it there is an artificial reservoir. There are about 2,700 inhabitants in Ostoros. The standard of living is average and the rate of unemployment is quite low. Viticulture and oenology play an important role in the life of the village. Some families do this as their main occupation, others grow grapes to get additional income. The village doesn’t offer many job opportunities, so a lot of people go to work in the nearby town. In many cases, that means that their children go to school there, too.

Public transport is good so the nearby town can be reached in a short time.

The school is not independent since it is a member of the Eger Kemény Ferenc Sports School Primary School which is an eight-grade primary school in Eger.

The school in Ostoros has eight grades with 125 students. The main school also has a building in Novaj (a neighbouring village to Ostoros) with pupils in grades one to four and one multi-age class.
In the branch school in Ostoros there are 14 full-time teachers and 2 part-time teachers who mostly teach in the main school. They work as one teacher team in this branch school.
The school’s pedagogical vision is expressed in the Pedagogical Programme, and it focuses on the child and their personality. The everyday teaching is determined by the Jenaplan method. The school community aims to modernise, and they are open to the different elements of reform pedagogy. They prefer modern teaching methods such as cooperative teaching/learning techniques and project-based learning. The school also helps talented students and considers parents as partners in their pedagogical work.
Leadership and management

The whole school is directed by the head teacher, who fulfils his leadership duties with the cooperation of the two deputy head teachers and the heads of the branch schools. The school management involves the head teacher, the deputy head teachers, the heads of the branch schools and the team leaders. They make decisions, express opinions, and put forward proposals.
Teaching practices & strategies and ICT

(This third part focuses on how schools have managed school activities.)

The Jenaplan method is part of teachers’ teaching practice. The Jenaplan pedagogy was introduced in 2001 by the main school. When the Ostoros school became a member school, they adopted this method in the lower classes. The aim of the method and the school is to activate student learning and social instincts and encourage the students to move and act. In addition to face-to-face work, students also work individually, in pairs, and in groups.

The main characteristic of the Jenaplan method is the weekly plan, in which teachers plan the activities and tasks for the given week. This is available to students at the beginning of the week but can also be viewed on a closed online interface. Foreign language teaching starts in third grade for 2 hours per week and continues into fourth grade for 3 hours per week.

The main part of the programme is the Differentiated Development in Heterogeneous Learning Groups. It’s a strategy for handling groups that have students with different knowledge levels. It uses students’ existing knowledge and creativity. Knowledge construction and knowledge sharing is based on peer interaction.

In our school, we also adapted the Complex Basic Programme, which reinforces differentiated and personalised teaching. Besides acquiring knowledge, skill and aptitude development is highly important. The programme also helps with personality development.

There are five sub-programmes, which help to improve the learning outcomes (digitalisation-based, life-practice based, art-based, logic-based, physical education-based).
A lot of learning tasks are carried out in group work, though frontal work is also used when it’s needed for factual knowledge.

In the classrooms, there is a friendly learning environment that includes an open shelving system and a carpet. In the morning, the activities start with a discussion (circle time), during which the teacher and students sit in a circle on the carpet to discuss and prepare for their study work.

Students’ independent work, when the teacher helps and controls the students’ activity in the background, is also very important. The school also does projects organised around a given topic.

Students also do outdoor education activities since the school plans school trips and open-air classes for students in fifth and sixth grade.

The local school curriculum is based on the national curriculum. The syllabuses and requirements of the subjects taught in Ostoros school are in line with those in the national curriculum.

Almost all the books used in the school are published in PDF format on a special website. Books used in upper primary (classes five to eight) are also published in the form of ‘smartbooks’, which contain pictures, video and audio files, and interactive exercises. If teachers have an account on the school website, they can also create exercises and digital content, such as Powerpoint presentations, practice material, and exercises, quizzes, and online tests. For this, they use different web tools such as Google Slides, Google Forms, Learningapps, Quizlet, WordWall, and Kahoot! etc. The publishers of language teaching books also have a digital form of the books and other supplementary material on their websites. Teachers also use ready-made online material and exercises found on different websites (e.g. learningapps.org, teachingenglish.org.uk).

Remote teaching at Ostoros school has been used since the beginning of the pandemic, from March 2020 to the end of the school year, June 2020. During remote teaching, distance lessons (via video) were offered, which helped the students learn. Parents checked the weekly plan on a safe website (with a username and a password) and could download it as well. During remote teaching, every class used this weekly plan (not only grades 1-4 where the Jenaplan pedagogy is applied). The entire school used the Google Classroom learning environment. They organised the platform with courses for each subject and students joined them.

For many families, providing the devices for distance learning wasn’t a problem. On the other hand, a lot of students needed help from their parents, especially in the lower primary classes. As a result of distance learning, students’ digital competences and independence improved. The majority of students managed to regulate their own learning, though many of them needed assistance.

The role of parents has been strategic in the school before and after the pandemic. They have a parent association that collaborates with the school. They have the right to express an opinion on changes in the school rules. Every year, the parent association organises the ‘Children’s Day’ programme in our school in cooperation with the teachers. Most parents are satisfied with the school’s educational activities, though they think we should put more emphasis on skill development, health and environmental education, and fostering cooperation among students.
The school is small and it has a very important role in the life of the village. It collaborates with the main school, who they meet with at the beginning and at the end of the school year. There are regular meetings where teachers show their projects. Sometimes workshops are organised to promote knowledge sharing among teachers. The close contact with the central school complex allows teachers to learn from each other. In Hungary, professional meetings are frequently organised for teachers to share their own knowledge and practices.

The school has a good relationship with the local authority. When there are ceremonies in the village for national holidays, the students often take part in the programme. Even though the school doesn’t have a signed collaboration agreement with local associations, the local library often organises events for our students.
Rural schools under focus

School: Kossuth Lajos Gimnázium Nagyiváni Általános Iskolája

Location: Nagyiván, Hungary
The context

Country challenges

The school is the only school in the settlement. Most of the students are children of disadvantaged families. Based on national standard data, the proportion of students at risk of dropping out is high.

The school is only open in school time, from 7:15 – 16:00. It isn’t used for extracurricular activities.

Nagyiván - Tiszafüred

In 1984, the school underwent a major renovation and its external and internal aesthetics changed. As a result, the school became two buildings with a park in front of it. The schoolyard was covered with asphalt, making it suitable for sports. Warehouses, a technical workshop, and a boiler room were installed.

We receive our full budget from the Karcagi Tankerületi Központ. The local government has previously contributed significant amounts to the renovation of the school building.

Teachers: Our teaching staff, 10 people, operates almost as a family. We are constantly exchanging information. We try to help each other with our experiences and advice. We can count on each other in all areas.
The 10 teachers are permanent resources. They mainly live in the village or in the neighbouring villages. They are middle-aged teachers and have a lot of teaching experience.

**Students:** The school has 115 students enrolled. Some students choose to continue at our grammar school, but they mainly choose vocational schools in other towns.

Our **primary school** is in the north-eastern part of the country, just outside Hortobágy. There are two cities 70-80 km away (Eger, Debrecen) and there is a little town, Tiszafüred, 20 km from us. In Tiszafüred is the centre-school. The capital city, Budapest, is 180 km away.

In our village, there is only one primary school. In the nearby villages, there are state-funded and church-funded schools. Our school is the only one in a 50 km radius. Thanks to government support, children from poorer families can go to school, ensuring equal opportunities for all children in primary education.

There are many disadvantaged families living in the village. Children rarely have the opportunity to leave the village so they are isolated to some degree. At school, however, we try to give them every opportunity to improve themselves by participating in as many different programmes as possible. However, we cannot compete with the opportunities offered by a larger city. This is a tiny school with a family atmosphere. Everyone knows each other, we try to use the power of the community to encourage learning and build a sense of responsibility. We try to create a supportive, positive, and healthy environment for students. The school gives special attention to some students who suffer from poverty mainly in Nagyiván where people work in agriculture. For children from poor backgrounds, the school offers lots of programmes and opportunities to develop their skills and lots of out of school activities that they can take part in. For these students, there are other opportunities, for example travelling to neighbouring towns or other towns in Hungary, or taking part in cultural or sports programmes. The school tries to offer every possibility and programme for these students. The grammar schools work with other primary and secondary schools to let students collaborate with other primary schools in our area.
The schedule for each school year is determined by the ministry in charge of education in a decree from the Ministry of Human Capacities. It applies to all schools and educational organisations. Based on this centrally established schedule, schools are authorised to set out the local schedule of the given school year, which is included in the school’s work plan. The decision on this is made by the school management after consulting the school board, the parents’ organisation, and the student union.

Because there are many disadvantaged children, it is essential to maintain close contact with parents. Some of them find it difficult to keep in contact with the school, but the majority are very involved organising events and trips. We always share problems related to children (behaviour, learning) with them and try to work together. So, cooperation between the school and parents is essential for our school.

Our school collaborates with the secondary school in Tiszafüred in joint English events such as Halloween and Pancake Day. The central school controls our public school and six other nearby primary schools. We have joint meetings where we can share good practices with each other and suggest academic competitions.

We network with the schools in the same education district, we can keep in touch with the help of a digital educational platform called Kréta. Moreover, we use Google Classroom to share educational materials with students at home. The digital platform allows students to get all information about the current educational system and keep in contact with teachers, and homework can be organised via the digital platform. The school district supervises the school outcomes and gives teachers the necessary framework for their work. The head teacher supervises student’s results, and gives support to solve any issues that may arise.
The structure of the school day is the same in every primary school: teachers and students start at 7:45 and primary school students have five or six lessons a day. School lessons end at 1:45. Students then have a lunch break and afterwards they work on the activities for the following day under the supervision of their teacher. It’s very useful because families cannot help them properly because of poor family backgrounds. The school leader manages one grammar school and four primary schools. Moreover, he works with three deputies who are responsible for different fields of work.

Each deputy has the following duty and responsibility:

- For example, one of them checks, among other things, the documents related to the teaching of individual subjects.
- Another creates online platforms and helps students who need help.
- The third deputy deals with problems with the building or the electric system etc.

Everyday contact between the head teachers of the primary schools is essential to working well. Each primary school has a head teacher, and the deputies deal with all the head teachers.

The students’ families have low expectations towards education. Due to low family income, studying at university is not feasible for many students and this situation causes a high rate of student dropouts. The general situation has changed in the last 10 years with the increasing involvement of families at school. The new generations seek to open new horizons and, despite the difficulties in studying at a university and getting a degree due to the cost of the university fees, they are trying to change the future of their children. For the above reasons, the school has extensive experience in working with European programmes; we have seven national and seven European quality labels for projects that have been carried out in previous years.

According to the school leaders, the teachers in Nagyiván are more motivated than other teachers in taking part in training and projects and avoid burning out. They try to do their best to help their students in every field.
Teaching activities start at 7:45, and end at 1:30. The lessons are 45 minutes long. A lunch break and free time is included. Some students go home after lunch and some do their homework in the classrooms. Outdoor activities, so children can have real-life experiences like collecting rubbish and paper, and planting trees and plants, are planned during the school year including sports programmes and trips during the summer. The school’s pedagogical approach is based on embodied learning, individual learning (questions and answers), collaborative learning (teamwork, problem-based learning), and traditional learning (textbook, lectures). The curriculum is based on national and local curricula. The curriculum is developed according to specific topics with reviewing and practice periods. The overarching topics are outlined, the current curriculum is reviewed, the lessons are written and it is all put together, summarised, and feedback is requested. The school uses a spiral curriculum even though the school does not have multi-age classrooms.

The school has used digital content and distance learning since the beginning of the pandemic and still uses it from time to time if the virus situation requires. Before the pandemic, white boards and interactive materials published by MM publications Hungary, word walls, etc. were the standard.

The digital curriculum was used for 3 months at the end of the 2020 school year to improve the learning experience. It was a challenge for students and teachers. Students found it difficult to adapt at first, but by the end of the school year, they were accustomed to this form of learning. It was difficult to teach the curriculum using distance learning, the students required a lot of repetition at the beginning of this school year.

‘All pedagogical aspects have relevance in the education system’ says the head teacher, ‘but finding the perfect ratio and scope of their use to reach the balance in maximising their effectiveness is a pivotal issue.’
The school does not have a planned or signed collaboration agreement with local associations or service-learning projects. The village has a small library for residents and students.
Rural schools under focus

School: Istituto Comprensivo del Vergante

Location: Invorio, Italy
The context

Country challenges

Teaching strategies to improve cooperative distance education (use of ICT, distance learning methods in small groups, etc.) and local curriculum.

The Vergante school is in the lake area of the region. The local economy is heavily influenced by the landscape. In fact, the economy in the area is strongly connected to tourism and the environment, i.e., the lake and the pre-alpine hills. Schooling in Invorio is organised into three regional districts. There is a school in Arona (8 km from Vergante school), a school in Gattico (8 km from Vergante school), and another in Gozzano (5 km from Vergante school). There is an agreement between the education system and the nine municipalities it covers that regulates and strengthens their relationship. In the large area consisting of nine municipalities, two provinces, two local health authorities, and four consortia providing social assistance services, there are eight early childhood schools, seven primary schools, and three lower secondary schools. It is therefore a fragmented system and particular emphasis needs to be put on organisation to optimise economic resources.
The geographical location has a major impact on what the schools can offer. There are distances of around 15–20 km between the furthest school sites. These distances do not help in building good relationships and restrict good practices being shared. The pandemic situation allowed schools to see these distances in a different light and, in some cases, eliminate them. Relationships and communication have actually been enhanced. All the institutional subjects, classes, and themed virtual work groups that had worked together under a shared, zero distance goal were recreated virtually, rethinking classic school times and allowing families to participate in discussions and activities. Three essential processes were therefore initiated:

- involving institutions;
- involving families;
- eliminating distances between the various bodies.

There are still some weaknesses in transportation and connections.

The Vergante institute can be thought of as two entities in one. It is an extremely large institute spread across nine municipalities covering 19 school sites, 1400 pupils and over 200 teachers. At the same time, however, it is rather unique because since it is so fragmented across the region, it has slightly larger sites (with two sections) and sites for the primary school that have a single class in the mountain area. Therefore, classes are sometimes reduced to a dozen pupils, something that, even in the past, by virtue of such small numbers, resulted in mixed-age classes. In primary schools, one or two mixed-age classes are expected in the coming years as a result of changing demographics and a drop in birth rates. There are many mixed-age classes in early childhood learning where there are very small classes and children range in age from 3 to 5 years old.
Teacher turnover

The turnover rate varies a lot. There is a very low turnover rate for early childhood education (just considering teachers who are permanently employed by the education system, which is about 30% of the total), even if the formal and actual turnover rates (considering those who are not permanently employed but who have been returning for several years) range between 40% and 70%. So, overall, the average turnover rate is between 20% and 25%. Temporary teachers are motivated to return because the institute guarantees educational growth and because ‘professional friendship’ unites colleagues.

A very mixed image emerges of a very large institute made up of very small entities (for example, there is a school site in a very small municipality with 16 children in early childhood education where it is difficult to form even one section).
**Vision**

The education system’s vision involves developing and expanding a sense of belonging to the educational community for school staff, pupils, and parents. The education system aims to develop relationships with local institutions and local educational agencies. The institute’s progress on the adult education community school (IDA — Istruzione degli Adulti) involves the **Integrated Educational Plan for the Vergante area** (PEIV — Piano Educativo Integrato del Vergante), which since 2010, has involved administrations, well-known parishes, and third-sector parties in creating an ATS — a temporary association of companies — with the aim of creating a shared integrated educational project. There was an intention to expand the proposed educational programme, which resulted in funding from the municipalities to run some projects, and participate in calls for tender. This participation represents community education through creating municipal boards or councils of young people and parent committees, a coalition that was achieved last year through the community educational pacts. The educational pact was signed again and one of the connected projects aimed to relaunch this coalition. The driver of the project is participating in other tenders to involve as many sectors as possible to rediscover musical tradition, support teacher training towards inclusion, strengthen links with families, and develop cultural places and, therefore, library archives. The school is an open school whose activities are part of the PTOF (Piano Triennale dell’Offerta Formativa — Three-Year Educational Programme). The actions are approved by the school board with a parental component and by the teaching faculty.

**Organisation of the education system**

The education system has class councils, the internal board for school initiatives, and middle management with the aim of facilitating the needs of the organisation to organise and control the daily running of the school. Through the FIS (Fondo dell’Istituzione Scolastica — Educational Institute Fund), the school director can find some reference figures. The school always starts with the fact that difficulties can become opportunities; since the school director has so many school sites, they need to rely on middle management because, even if there is daily rotation on some sites (more than once a month for a few hours), since there are 19 of them, not every site can be visited or supervised. Therefore, the education system relies on middle management and the school site coordinator. This means there is a first level of organisation for the school sites and then a second level of staff and the school director, a slightly smaller group where special projects take place, the sector coordinators, and the area’s special projects teachers (which helps in drafting calls for tender and working with the school site coordinators to engage with the various entities associated with the third sector).
These are therefore individual figures: school site contact people, special project teachers, sector coordinators, and, during COVID, COVID school site contact people, and then a set of councils, from the most classic ones on inclusion to those dedicated to actions for bridging educational gaps, and those that are more forward-looking such as, for example, the curriculum for vertical skills (therefore an indication of the contact person and the work method).

The school director, together with the contact person, coordinates the strategic steps, involving a set of figures from the various entities to represent the local area, and prepares a report on the process. Regular meetings are scheduled to plan the work and monitor it to get an idea of the overall improvements.
Lesson organisation

Lessons are divided into two different periods.

Period 1: the teacher introduces the activity and shares the objective and how the work will be organised.

Period 2: in the longer part of the lesson in terms of hours, the students do the work to reach the final goal.

The class setting is ‘fluid’, this means that it changes according to teaching needs.
Teachers had long noticed the ineffectiveness of what they call ‘bus spaces’, one after the other, but there was always a need to break that pattern for collaborative and inclusive teaching. The idea was to create a real balance by implementing a practice known as ‘cube’, which has allowed shared educational paths to be created, usually six or more disciplines (with reference to a cube’s six faces).

The education system began to experiment with it in six subjects, sharing the same course and taking six different points of view and six different subjects with a similar seating arrangement and exceeding the time marked by the bell because it gave the class the opportunity to work on a concept throughout the morning. The children are able to develop the course since it is no longer based on the teacher who comes into the classroom but on the goal they have to achieve. The teacher who comes in therefore becomes a mentor teacher who supports the students and knows how to move them forward and how to help them.
Interest groups and peer education

There is debate about broad interest groups for peer education that goes beyond a single classroom. The content should not remain within the walls of a class. Content is placed within that class but goes beyond it. Activities for interest groups and peer tutoring are organised between pupils of different ages. These methods of working allow an increased interest in shared work and the opportunity to involve all students.

The cube subject courses will allow third-year students to start from something created for them by younger students to make the course simpler and clearer. The will to create to help others, pave the way, and invite someone to create something even better shows mutual help.

Care for the school environment allows positive emotions to be developed for teaching and learning activities.

Vertical curriculum

To facilitate the vertical curriculum, the education system is divided into three districts that are responsible for drafting UDAs/macro areas (UDA — Unità Didattica di Apprendimento — Didactic Learning Units) that involve all three school levels. The governing departments for the three levels have the task of outlining a handbook of the different teaching methods (cooperative learning, problem solving, circle time, flipped classroom) and routines. The goal is to overcome the transmissive nature of teaching and change the methodological system to share educational actions and innovative teaching methods that promote change.

Assessment

The faculty group works for ‘authentic tasks’. Students are involved in measuring their ability to apply knowledge or skills in order to solve a problem. This authentic assessment clashes with the traditional approach where learning and assessment are separate. Faced with a real problem to solve, students learn the process of developing a solution; teachers can facilitate this process (if necessary, by providing help) and the students’ solutions to the problem become an assessment of how well they can apply the concepts studied in a significant way.
Digital educational content

All teachers and students have a Google account, so they often use the Google Apps. In January this year, they made use of a platform called Aula01, which has exercises in subjects such as English, Italian, mathematics and INVALSI (Istituto nazionale per la valutazione del sistema educativo di istruzione e di formazione — the national institute for the assessment of the training and education system). Initially, it was only offered to pupils who were struggling, but later it was offered to all middle school classes.

With distance (or remote) learning (didattica a distanza — DAD), the education system started to create digital content in some of the institute’s classes. This content includes the cube, through which students approach content, starting with a theme and developing it in a multidisciplinary way. This is also called a cube-book, which is composed of six QR codes created by students, which summarise the content studied in six different subjects. Some lessons designed and written by students have been published on the RaiScuola portal. Students have produced audiobooks published on Spotify as an audio version and have written books on EPUB as eBook.

There is also a YouTube channel and a blog.
The future of distance learning

Distance learning must be maintained. Going ‘virtual’ has allowed schools to reach places and spaces that otherwise would not be possible, and offer specific support to students. For example, with Google Classroom, there is a network drive so a whole series of lessons, documents, and material is always ready for students to recap and deepen knowledge.

Despite the return to in-person lessons post COVID, schools have kept virtual classes ready for future emergencies. It is important to work with the digital host/provider and the digital team so that this practice does not get forgotten. Schools have also become aware that the students’ personal lives happen in the virtual world, so there is even more need for the education system to adopt this world and make it educational. It is a challenge that passes through DAD and DDI (didattica digitale integrata — integrated digital education).

Alliances with local entities and the relationship with parents

Families

There is no parents’ association. Parents collaborate with schools through the ‘Institute Council’ and with some classroom teachers. At the beginning of the year, parents elect their representatives. In general, they are very satisfied with the educational suggestions, thanks to the opportunity to collaborate and exchange ideas with teachers.

Collaboration with the local community

Collaboration with the community is envisaged in the PEIV, the Integrated Educational Plan for the Vergante area (Piano Educativo Integrato del Vergante), which was published on 18 February 2010. The main purpose of the project is to create an integrated local education system that, starting with the principle that all children, young people and adolescents are unique, sees a commitment from the entire community and every educational agency to support the growth of the human in question. The school is forming an educational pact with local entities for the education of young people and adults.

Networking

Cooperation between schools in the same network

The schools are part of Indire’s Small Schools Movement (Movimento delle Piccole Scuole) and they also participate in the following national networks:

- Teniamoci per mano (Let’s hold hands);
- Rete Senza Zaino (No Backpack Network);
- Rete Montessori (Montessori Network);
- Rete Formazione Docenti (Teacher Training Network);
- Rete per la Sicurezza (Network for Safety).

The continuous exchange of good practices has led to the creation of fixed appointments in teaching. Being part of a network opens a door onto the world, being able to discuss topics with many other people who continuously and constantly have ideas and experiences to share.

The schools need the Small Schools Movement to promote participation in calls for tender on issues that can develop vocational skills in peripheral regions.
Rural schools under focus

School: Istituto Omnicomprensivo Bobbio

Location: Bobbio, Italy
The context

Country challenges

Teaching strategies to improve cooperative distance education (use of ICT, distance learning methods in small groups, etc.) and local curriculum.

Information on the schools and their region

Istituto Omnicomprensivo in Bobbio is in northern Italy in a remote mountainous area in the province of Piacenza. It covers seven municipalities and is divided into 14 smaller school sites including five early childhood sites, five primary sites, three lower secondary sites, and one upper secondary site. There are under 500 pupils (aged 3 to 14 years) and 80 teachers.

In the 14 school sites there are a total of:

- Travo – 10 classrooms, eight classes
- Perino – four classrooms, two classes
- Bobbio – 27 classrooms, 16 classes
- Marsaglia – four classrooms, two classes
- Ottone – five classrooms, three classes.

There is a total of 50 classrooms and laboratories and 30 classes.

There are no specific classrooms for BES students (Bisogni Educativi Speciali – Special Educational Needs), who are normally integrated into classes, but for special situations and in the event of contingent needs, use is made of the reception area and the multifunctional spaces.

Istituto Omnicomprensivo in Bobbio is a mountain school system made up of 14 school sites over a very large area (about 50 km of valley), not all of which are easily accessible. The education system is the only educational agency operating in the area. This difficult location creates a situation of economic and socio-cultural isolation.

The area is organised into seven municipalities in the Union of Mountain Municipalities (Unione dei Comuni Montani). The union represents many small villages with very low populations. The demographic decline is linked to the ageing population.

Currently, the main employers are not employing excess workers. Therefore, many people commute (due to a lack of work and other secondary schools) to the capital (45 km from Bobbio).

The rich culture, history, landscape, and cuisine in the area attracts significant numbers of tourists, mainly in summer and on weekends. This has led to a moderate development in tourist accommodation and the growth of closely related commercial activities.
School sites, movement, and mixed-age classes

Getting around is difficult. Mountain roads mean longer journey times and public services are scarce and not always able to meet the needs of school users (for example, there are no services in the evening and very few on Sundays), which often makes it impossible for children to participate in cultural activities.

The most remote site is in Ottone. It has an early childhood class, a mixed-age primary school class (first, second, third, fourth, and fifth year), and a mixed-age lower secondary class (first, second, and third year). There are very few students but since finding an alternative educational service is impossible, the smaller Bobbio Istituto Omnicomprensivo school sites have been able to remain open, at least in recent years.

Another rather remote school site is in Corte Brugnatella. There is an early childhood class and a mixed-age primary school class (from the first to the fifth year) with 12 students.

The main school site, the one in Bobbio, offers early childhood classes in three groups, the primary school class from first to fifth year has one section (not mixed-age) and the lower secondary class has two sections (six classes). As of this year, the school system also includes the high school, a commercial technical institute that has one section and one specialisation in one class with two technical specialisations (international relations and finance and marketing).

There are some other very small sites. For example, the Perino-Coli school site where there is an early childhood class and a mixed-age primary school class. The Travo site has an early childhood class, a primary school with four classes, one of which is mixed-age (with 17 children), and three lower secondary school classes.

The community sees the mixed-age classes in the small school sites as a further sign of demographic impoverishment, ‘Fewer children, less of a future’. They are trying to do everything to attract new, young families.

Outdoor classes

Teacher turnover and rewards

The institute has about 90 teachers, including permanent and substitute teachers. Turnover is very low, especially for the earlier learning years (primo ciclo), because the resources generally come from the area, and it is therefore difficult to imagine any move to another employer. In the earlier learning years (primo ciclo), turnover is 10 % due to retirement and transition into permanent employment. The upper secondary school is in an even more critical situation, out of 15 teachers, only three are permanent, the others are all substitute teachers and often don’t have a full teaching post (they try to fill their time with assignments in other schools) due to the limited number of students, which does not allow sections to be formed. Substitute teachers generally move to the urban centre of Piacenza in order to find stable employment.

From an economic point of view, there is no incentive for professional teaching in small schools. In terms of career progression. This was a useful tool at no cost to the administration, which also served as a bonus for the service carried out in the most precarious territories.
The only incentives that the Istituto Omnicomprensivo in Bobbio can provide are investment in continuous training, creating ‘attractive’ school hours for those who have to travel far, and support for those who need accommodation or temporary accommodation.

**Isolation and Europeanisation**

The local setting has ancient and important cultural heritage. Bobbio, the main town in the area, was founded in 614 by an Irish monk, Saint Columbanus, and over the years, became an important cultural centre.

This helped the inhabitants become attached to the idea of being at the centre of the world and no longer having to experiment, grow, and reinvent themselves.

Isolation and cultural marginality are most evident in the neighbouring towns and villages even if it is not always fully understood by the inhabitants.

The process of Europeanisation, which has been stable for about 8 years, has allowed schools to be included in wider circles and build a specific specialisation that has allowed them to stand out and focus on the educational programme. Participation in Erasmus projects and eTwinning has facilitated intercultural exchanges, which is also an attraction for families and teachers from other areas who decide to move and work for an institute that is considered as highly innovative.
Vision

The education system has a shared vision with INDIRE’s Italian Small Schools Movement.

‘We are a continuously evolving educational community, an archipelago of territorial and international relations, a place of inclusion and cooperation in which the individual, who is at the centre of educational action, becomes a European citizen, aware, capable of active participation, attentive to legality and sustainability, and able to face the challenges of a complex and constantly changing world, because they have learned to learn.’

The vision, mission and values are indicated in the School Educational Plan and published on the institute’s website.

The community’s participation in school activities has always been very active in this area because there are many associations that see school as a laboratory in which and with which to carry out activities aimed at young people. Schools are open to these entities that contribute to enhancing the educational programme more systematically rather than sporadically. With the 20–21 School Plan, an idea of formal local coalitions emerged, and schools took part in the tender that allowed external experts to take part, and be compensated to increase initiatives and place them into a currently shared curriculum harmoniously. The education system set up an ATS, a temporary association of companies, and proposals are examined by the teaching board, which either changes them or adapts them to the needs of the school, enhancing the traditional educational. The education system has decided to pursue community education pacts that have made it possible to formalise the coalitions created and involve local administrations, in particular municipalities and the province. The Union of Municipalities (Unione di Comuni) allows some services such as transport or the organisation of the canteen to be provided in a cooperative way. Establishing these pacts will allow all the associations to be properly located and mapped and allow professional figures and parents’ hourly availability to be used to present shared projects that will respond to the needs of the community. Each September, the school updates its PTOF (Piano Triennale dell’Offerta Formativa – Three Year Educational Programme) with incoming and outgoing proposals for the community to build a sort of coalition history and progress.
The organisation of the education system

The education system has:

- the school director’s staff made up of key figures related to five main areas:
  
  1. organisation and management of the School Educational Plan,
  2. inclusion,
  3. innovation and Europeanisation,
  4. support for teachers,
  5. work-study programmes, and two deputy head teachers.

The school director is also supported by one teacher responsible for each of the 14 schools under an ‘umbrella organisation’.

In addition, at the beginning of the year, some teaching committees are set up to organise and support the growth of schools. The committees for this year are European and Foreign Languages Group, Innovative Library, Educational Plan Management, Digital Innovation, Self-Assessment, 3–6, Vertical Curriculum, COVID, Orientation, Documentation, and Relationships with the local area. Between six and 20 teachers regularly work as a group in each of these committees. Membership is open, but teachers are asked to be part of at least one committee and no more than two because the school wants to guarantee rotation (one year a teacher is on the language committee and the next on the library committee, for example) so everyone can contribute and not avoid commitments and, above all, to streamline the faculty’s work. Otherwise, such a complex teaching board with very different needs would become difficult to manage. The school only needs to think about early childhood and high school. So, the committees do the preparatory work and then the teaching board approves or refuses the proposals made by committees. Each committee has a contact person, this is the person who manages it independently, determines when, where, and how to meet and what the agenda is. There are committees – like the one that deals with forming classes – that only work at the beginning of the year, or the scholarship committee, which only works at the end of the school year – for which the hours required are even more than are provided. There are other committees for which the commitment is much greater, for example, the digital committee, the Europeanisation committee, and the committee focusing on the vertical curriculum.

In this case, the education system gives an additional financial contribution to teachers who work beyond the envisaged additional hours by preparing an attendance sheet and making the Institute Fund available. As for the upper secondary school, the (three) departments have been preserved, the literary department, the scientific and mathematics department, and the professional and technical department.
For these departments, there is also a contact person (who works independently) and a site coordinator who is part of the staff and who reports on what has been done.

Each school site has a teacher who essentially represents the school level per site in that municipality. This person has a full view of what types of technical or organisational issues – or any other issue – there might be and collaborates with the local community. They receive a yearly lump sum paid from the Institute Fund, which varies based on the complexity of the school site and the number of students it has. The teacher has frequent dealings with the school director and their staff. Each class also has a teacher who acts as a contact person. Regular meetings between teachers, both with and without the school director, allow the school’s organisation to be well managed.

In terms of teachers’ training, the national education system provides a certain number of training hours as mandatory. Unfortunately in Italy teachers’ training is not paid and it depends on single teacher initiative.

Each teacher can select their own training plan at the beginning of the year, present it, and then make a final statement at the end of the year detailing what they have done. The personal training plan makes use of the institute’s training plan that comes from the improvement plan (basically the Self-Assessment Report (Rapporto di autovalutazione – RAV)) and from identifying the critical elements and what schools want to improve. The institute’s training plan is normally funded by the province’s resources. There may be issues that might be interesting to the entire province. The discussion this year is on educational assessment instead of numerical assessment or other methods like this. Where possible, institute training is done in the presence of an on-site expert. The training plan also respects certain characteristics, the proposals that are made in the personal training plan, if approved by the teaching board and if consistent with the school’s aims, are authorised.

The projects carried out by schools also allow for an additional budget for training (for example, the Biblohi project, an innovative school library project that also allows for specific training on the library, Erasmus has allowed teachers to take language courses on an ongoing basis in the last 4/5 years, the National Digital School Plan (Piano Nazionale Scuola Digitale) identifies a focus every year). Therefore, being active in the various institute courses allows funds to be used and training to be promoted (for example, a course on crowdfunding was promoted because it connects to the community pacts very well).

**Teaching and organisational strategies**

**Environments**

Schools make use of various learning environments:

- an innovative school library;
- the language centre;
- the laboratory for green businesses;
- a creative workshop;
- a technology laboratory;
- a multi-functional laboratory;
- the outside for outdoor teaching.

The school library
Language laboratory

Many classrooms have abandoned a front-facing layout in favour of group-based and highly flexible configurations. In some schools, each classroom has special corners, such as a reading corner or a science corner. Most classrooms have an interactive whiteboard or an interactive screen. Every school has a mobile trolley for devices. In some classes, the decision was made to remove the teacher’s position because, for education aimed at skills and focused on the student, it was not useful at all. So, removing the teacher’s position was a consequence of the change in the approach to teaching. The teacher moves between groups of desks where children mainly work in pairs, threes, or fours in a work setting usually laid out as islands. The desks are on runners/wheels that allow the class layout to be changed quickly. Classes also have an open space that serves as a reading environment. In each classroom, there is a small library, a rug and perhaps some cushions where students can read independently or have times to discuss certain topics or have analytical discussions together.

Autonomy and accountability

The education system promotes self-management and autonomy for the children by planning experiences based on active methods like cooperative learning, project-based learning, outdoor learning, game-based learning, problem solving etc. Students are presented situations and problems with a few instructions and a short amount of time. They have to agree between themselves and assign roles to each other to then resolve the situation or problem. Working with service learning, project-based learning, or cooperative learning helps students become more responsible. Schools also work on socio-emotional issues like participating in international projects such as the Progetto Adolescenza (Adolescence Project) and the Progetto per Crescere dei Lions (Project to Raise Lions), which has made it possible to integrate specific activities that help children acquire socio-emotional skills that promote overall growth into educational planning. In many primary school classes, every student has a task and a role (e.g., pupils are responsible for a given task for 15 days) and they work in a token economy to create a positive circle. So, if they work well, they see benefits, both personally and as a group.

Outdoor education

For a few years now, the education system in Bobbio has been pursuing outdoor education. Participation in Erasmus projects has allowed teachers to understand how to approach subjects outdoors. The education system has led an eTwinning project for small schools on outdoor education, an experience that has encouraged many teachers to try and put this teaching method into practice. To date, not all of the institute’s 14 school sites do outdoor education regularly (each teacher goes outside at least once a week with the students, so the students have 3–4 sessions outdoors a week where the subject is studied outdoors using elements of nature or because the topic in question was designed to be studied outdoors) but the experiences are increasing. The sessions outdoors can be linked to projects or a single activity that takes place outdoors for a specific subject such as mathematics, grammar, art, or anything else. Generally, outdoor learning is active and uses techniques and methods such as learning by doing, game-based learning, TPR, and problem solving.
Outdoor education integrated into digital education

Teachers use various spaces, both those close to the school within the school’s boundaries, and ‘green’ spaces that the municipality makes available, which may be public places or partially set up municipal settings to carry out outdoor activities. Families have helped purchase portable stools that allow teachers to take their lessons anywhere. The outdoors allows for teaching based on experience, active teaching that sees the setting as a privileged place of learning and makes nature an important space and opportunity for learning.

The school in Bobbio integrates the outdoors with digital learning in terms of documentation or to develop activities by creating products or through in-depth web research. Several project activities are also done in collaboration with some local associations.

Managing mixed-age classes

There are six mixed-age classes in the school.

Two co-teachers facilitate the management of work groups by level or work in a single group for multidisciplinary projects. If the work is on a shared project, the management is of single classes, which all work on the same theme. Each student is given a different role and a different task. In large, mixed-age classes, first–fifth year, which are on more than one school site, there is generally an empty second-year class, which is used to split the group. For example, the first and second year classes in one group, and the third, fourth and fifth year classes in another for a project or a specific activity. In other cases, for example, the education system has purchased noise-insulating panels to be placed around work groups for very useful sound-proofing in mixed-age classes where the activities are different but done in the same shared space.

The role of the teacher

Participation in Erasmus has allowed teachers and schools to amass a wealth of expertise in active methods, contributing to a change in teaching approaches. The teacher assumes the role of a moderator rather than a promoter of knowledge. The teacher knows when to take a step back and how to push the students to ask questions and find answers. The teacher must take on a role that is no longer giving out information but organising, promoting, and bringing out the best in students who are struggling more. Active methods support children in their civic-mindedness and are easy to implement in small classes (think, for example, of the difficulty of a class of 26 or 27 children in an open space). If we want to invest in education and training, we must also modify these structural limitations in the numbers in classes.

Learning by doing

Since it has to deal with several school sites and cannot increase the number of subject laboratories, the education system has decided to create multifunctional laboratories that can be used in different ways with minor adaptations. Just like libraries, the multifunctional laboratories become classrooms or spaces where different activities can be carried out. In addition, work has been done on technological enhancements to make these spaces accessible remotely with large interactive screens, meaning that several classes can participate in the same activity at the same time.
The education system has a creative workshop for the primary school, an innovative library, a language workshop and, recently, it also participated in the plan for innovative educational environments, which led to the opportunity to create a green lab that will be available to the entire institute.

Spaces are prepared for laboratory and group learning. Activities that are more specialised than those done in a classroom are carried out in these laboratories. For example, in the language lab there is a large screen and all the tools needed to teach English, along with games, books, Chromebooks, and so on. Communication activities with other classes are carried out here, along with more specific activities. The library is used to do digitally integrated activities in the reading area. There are no strict rules, the laboratories are used freely by as many people as possible. All the computer labs have been removed (except for in the high school where the laboratory is needed) in favour of mobile trolleys to promote the implementation and use of devices in all subjects. The education system wants to integrate digital aspects as a learning enhancer into every subject. Digital integration also focuses on early childhood learning (e.g. coding unplugged, tinkering) to support STEM subjects from an early age.

Assessment

Schools and teachers use both summative and formative forms of assessment. Knowledge is assessed more frequently through summative tests while skills are monitored and require different forms of formative assessment. In terms of summative assessment, schools have some standardised tests, which are given at the end of each semester. These tests were produced in groups of different classroom teachers and adopted by all school staff.

In general, in some schools, during the formative assessment process, teachers are encouraged to:

- consider each child’s starting point;
- make learning visible by promoting the use of checklists among children, use accurate feedback, and some other ‘Assessment for learning’ techniques;
- focus on just a few aspects;
- promote self-assessment;
- facilitate a meta-cognitive review using various techniques.

The student outcomes, the course, group and individual performance, academic skills, and other skills are assessed. Starting this year, at the primary school, the new ministerial assessment method has been adopted, which is organised into four levels, first acquisition, basic, intermediate, and advanced. These four levels take various factors into account including resources, continuity, and situation. For this new system, for the first semester, the same objectives were adopted in each class. Subsequently, objectives were varied across classes, based on specific needs, background, pace, and teaching approaches. In the secondary school, assessment focuses more on results. A numerical system has been adopted as requested by the Italian Ministry of Education. In any case, regular proficiency tests are carried out. All standards and assessment indicators are published in the school PTOF (Piano Triennale dell’Offerta Formativa – Three Year Educational Programme).
Remote and distance education and the role of ICT

The education system used distance teaching even before the pandemic to support educational continuity for fragile or temporarily ill students, or in the event of environmental difficulties and isolation.

The whole school uses Google Workspace for Education, a protected environment which each student can log into with their own account and where communication can be managed between class members, teachers and parents, and between teachers. Classroom blogs and Google Classroom have been created and used to manage lessons done through distance learning. Blogs also help document meaningful experiences in the community.

In addition to the Google Workspace for Education platform, several webtools have been introduced in teaching to support student learning including remote learning. The most used are Nearpod, Canva, Quizizz, Book Creator, StoryJumper, Wordwall, Quizlet, and Spark.

Distance learning is provided immediately for health-related provisions, but it can also be specifically requested by parents who have difficulties. For example, transport problems can arise with small schools (a collapsed bridge or part of the valley no longer being reached easily), which can justify doing activities remotely. To facilitate this and other more specific situations related to at-risk children and children with illnesses, each class has a microphone and video camera. Teachers are now able to run the activity in person and remotely at the same time.

Distance learning

Since they have been trained in numerous eTwinning and Erasmus projects, teachers can use distance learning for wider applications and to develop projects outside of school. Depending on the case and the type of education, some students with DSA (disturbi specifici di apprendimento – specific learning disorders) have been shown to be more active in distance learning, and in this case, there is more space for digital learning.

In general, the level of digital integration is high and the institute aims to achieve digital transparency, making it a daily and standard tool in every subject. Guidelines were also promoted for the use of BYOD (bring your own device), which will soon be facilitated by the arrival of fibre on all school sites.
Families

Collaboration between the school and parents is normally very effective, with a few differences from one school to the next. Schools with a strong storytelling approach (supported by ICT, blogs, and social media) and that run activities within the community or that are supported by the community usually have better support from families.

As part of the annual self-assessment process that schools do through questionnaires given to families, the institute’s work and the activities for children are seen in a positive light. However, the education system in Bobbio is an umbrella organisation with very different solutions, needs, and approaches and it is not easy to get an objective analysis of the results. The questionnaires provide similar results even if the families have very different school experiences.

Currently, the presence of parents in school is limited. All-inclusive institutes do not have an institute board because the composition of these bodies, where parents of students participate in running the institute, has not yet been set out. As an exception to this shortcoming, a committee member with limited active participation in the school’s strategic choices is appointed. They are limited to assessing the appropriateness of the use of resources, the budget, the annual programme, etc.

Families do, however, play an important role in the community pact. Through a Google Form, the education system requested collaboration in terms of skills, and time available to integrate families in teaching and imagining, and support for teachers in activities outside of school, perhaps as part of outdoor education, help in pre-school, support for the ‘walking bus’, or time to help manage certain collaborative projects that can be developed within the class or when working in groups.

Collaboration with the local community

The education system has planned or signed collaboration agreements with all the municipalities and has developed a community pact with the Union of Municipalities (Unione dei Comuni) to initiate mutual support actions, communities for schools and schools for communities.

The education system offers service-learning activities with local associations.

Schools make use of a library (Bibloh), which is open to the local community, and the hope is that it will soon be open after school hours. The plan is to expand it using MLOL, MediaLibraryOnLine, which allows children and families to choose from thousands of books and download them to read on a Kobo/tablet. Furthermore, this free service offered by schools to families includes Spotify and a newspaper library.
Since 2013, the education system has been involved in a process of Europeanisation that has reduced isolation and allowed the system to embark on a path of systemic innovation. This process, which is linked to other national initiatives such as the National Plan for the Digital School (PNSD – Piano Nazionale Scuola Digitale) and the Three-year Teacher Training Plan (PTFD – Piano Triennale di Formazione dei Docenti), has contributed to the system being more connected to Europe and the rest of the world. Europeanisation and the use of ICT have been crucial in reducing the level of isolation felt by schools. Unfortunately, not every school site and not every class is involved in Europeanisation, and this limits the many possibilities of dealing with isolation. The education system is working hard to overcome the difficulties faced by some teachers by supporting them digitally and linguistically and providing dedicated training.

**Networking**

Cooperation between schools in the same network

The schools are part of a provincial framework, a network of schools brought together by the Italian Ministry of Education for continuous training and the network management of objectives and events. Participation in networks is very valuable and is an incentive to do more and do better. The network lets bodies emulate each other (and pushes them to do things better and differently to others) but it also allows them to standardise, collaborate, and help each other.

The network of small schools has been asked to take a step forward and establish ‘hub schools’ (scuole polo) as a point of reference in the areas in question, which will probably allow for further expansion and for expertise to be shared more effectively among various contact points.
Rural schools under focus

School: College Sanmat Primary and Special Unit

Location: Gozo, Malta
The context

Country challenges

Teaching strategies to improve cooperative distance education (use of ICT, distance learning methods in small group, etc.) and local curriculum.

The school is in the village of Ta’ Sannat on the island of Gozo. It caters for two rural villages (Ta’ Sannat and Munxar) and Xlendi bay (Munxar locality). The school is part of Gozo College which includes 10 other primary schools in different areas of Gozo, a middle school, and a secondary school. In the building, there is ozo Office for the Commission for the Rights of Persons with Disability (CRPD) and the Gozo section of the National Literacy Agency.

The school has a -school (four classes), a mainstream primary section (nine classes grade 1–6) and special unit (five classes with students with severe disabilities).

This is the only school in Malta where students with severe disabilities learn under the same roof as neuro-typical students. Only the special units have multi-age classrooms.

All the classes have a class teacher who is assisted by a learning support assistant, as in each class there are less severely disabled students who are able to follow with some extra help. In the special unit, there are two classes for severely disabled students, which have one class teacher and three learning support assistants.

There are 33 educators with a permanent contract. They receive no incentive from the State to stay on Gozo, but there is an allowance for teachers of students with special needs.

There is also a group of teachers who move around the schools who specialise in art, drama, music, physical education, and science. Their timetable is organised by the Gozo College in collaboration with the 11 schools in the group, so each teacher spends 1 or 2 days in each school.

In Gozo, teachers do not have the same job mobility as in Malta. When a teacher starts teaching at a particular school, they will usually stay at that school for a long time. This has a great advantage as teachers get to have more experience with their students and their problems and have a better approach towards them.

Isolation

The school does not suffer from isolation and isn’t culturally marginalised.

In the last 10 years, the number of students has been stable. The school receives students from various countries (Holland, Switzerland, and Portugal in particular) because of its good reputation. There are also refugees from Syria.

Most students are from middle-class families.

There is also great exchange with schools abroad through Erasmus+ and eTwinning projects.
The school’s vision is summed up as ‘School as a building community’. The school is designed as a system where everyone learns from each other (students, teachers, school, and the community).

‘Student from student, student from teacher,
teacher from student, teacher from teacher,
the school from the community, the community from the school.’

The other important value is that everyone is different. This is achieved not just through the formal curriculum but also through the ‘hidden’ curriculum, which is based on what students experience everyday in their classrooms under the same roof as students in the special units. ‘We have assemblies where neurotypical students and students with disabilities convene together without issues or problems.’ Teachers say that their students are inclusive, tolerant, kind, and empathetic.

There is one head of school and three assistant heads. Each assistant head is assigned to a particular area. One deals with logistics, one with sciences, and one with languages. The headteacher deals with special needs students.

The group of teachers who move around schools are organised by the Gozo College according to an annual plan that is outlined at the beginning of the school year. They spend 1 or 2 days in each of the 11 schools, depending on the number of classes. They also have a strategic function, they are specialised teachers (art, drama, music, physical education, science) and they can share new practices and ideas among the 11 schools that make up the network. During the COVID pandemic, they served as replacement teachers (also virtually) for teachers who could not attend classes.
The school uses traditional teaching methods (mainly chalk and talk) but aspires to use more active methods.

Each class teacher adapts the goals (curriculum and programme) to every student with the help of the learning assistants. The teacher sets the topic and the learning assistant adapts the programme for each individual. In the special unit, the content is adapted for the whole class, they also have time assigned to other subjects like music and art.

ICT equipment is not used as much as the headteacher would like. Teachers can sometimes be hesitant to use ICT in the classroom.

The school has a big playground and a garden with trees and local plants. There is also a vegetable garden, a chicken coop (they collect eggs every day), and an aviary for turtle doves.

Gardening is part and parcel of the curriculum. Teachers are also encouraged to teach outside a lot, especially with the younger children (maths, art, storytelling).

**Remote and distance education and role of ICT**

ICT equipment is not used as much as the headteacher would like. Teachers can be hesitant to use ICT in the classroom. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of ICT has increased. For online teaching, experience in projects like Erasmus+ and eTwinning was very valuable.

The headteacher says that when lessons are delivered online, it makes the teachers more cautious and thorough. Lessons can be more focused, efficient, and effective.

That is why the school wants to promote ICT learning for the future.

Online teaching with students with severe disabilities is extremely challenging compared to teaching neurotypical students online, but the feedback from the parents was excellent.

The school does not use digital content.
The local authorities only help financially by paying for books and other activities.

There is a parent’s association, which is now more involved in fundraising rather than educational activities. In the future, the school hopes that parents can give courses to students about their expertise (e.g. a beekeeper parent can teach beekeeping).

The school has signed an alliance with the Federation of Conservationist Hunters.

**Networking**

The school has been involved in Erasmus+ for the past 15 years. As part of Gozo College, the school is involved in many networking activities among the 11 schools in the network:

- Teachers’ meetings: teachers of a particular year discuss their experiences and suggest initiatives on how to make teaching and learning more useful;
- The team of teachers who move around schools: they share ideas and practices from one school to the other;
- The College of Gozo monthly meeting where all the headteachers of the schools meet to mainly discuss organisational and logistical issues;
- Sports activities, before the COVID pandemic.
Rural schools under focus

School: Zebbug Primary School

Location: Gozo, Malta
Rural Schools Under Focus

Case Studies on innovative practices

The context

Country challenges

Teaching strategies to improve cooperative distance education (use of ICT, distance learning methods in small groups, etc.) and local curriculum.

The school is the only primary school in the village of Zebbug. It has two classes at pre-school level, six classes at primary level, and one class for migrant learners, where migrant students learn Maltese. There are also extra lessons for students who need further support (special needs students).

The school has the Dyslexia Friendly School quality mark.

It is funded by the government and does not use local council buildings.

It is a one-floor building.

The school has roughly 115 students. Teachers have noticed a decrease in Maltese students while the number of non-Maltese students coming from the close by village of Marsalforn is increasing as the village is expanding as a destination for foreigners.

The school is part of the Gozo College (cluster of schools).

All the schools in Malta and Gozo are organised into 10 different colleges, one of them is the Gozo College.

Isolation

The school does not suffer isolation and is not culturally marginalised.
The school’s vision is to be a ‘caring school’ where no child is left behind. The school welcomes a lot of foreign students and takes care of students with special needs, especially learners with dyslexia (the school has the Dyslexia Friendly quality mark). The teaching strategies used for dyslexic learners are applied to all other students too.

Teachers use varied strategies to deal with this complexity. A significant number of students join the school in the middle of the year. That’s why teachers have experience of teaching different levels of knowledge in the same classroom.

Students’ emotional wellbeing is supported by the school.
There is one teacher for primary years (from year 1 to year 6), two pre-school assistants, and learning support assistants. Students in Malta do not repeat the same year if they fail it. ‘They need to move on to the next level. As a result, classes tend to have students with different abilities and teachers need to teach students at different levels of knowledge in the classroom.’ There is a teacher for extra lessons who students who are behind can do extra work with to reach the same level as the rest of the classroom.

The school has an Eco school Label (it is the fourth Ekoskola Green Flag school). Caring for the environment and green skills are one of the main focuses of the school. Students do research and projects on the topic. For example, last year, students wrote to the restaurants in the area asking them to stop using plastic straws. They also did research on their families’ monthly consumption of straws.

The school has a garden where students can take care of olive trees. The school produces olive oil with students and sells it to raise funds. Students learn about farming and how to grow other vegetables.

The school also participates in the Globe (Global Learning and Observations to Benefit the Environment) programme in citizen science and the LEAF (Learning about Forests) https://www.leaf.global/ programme.

The school is very committed to outdoor education and would love students to be able to make wise decisions about the environment.

The school also has a large turf playground, which is used as an open classroom where maths and physics are taught, for example. It is also used for physical education activities, sports events, and reading sessions.

Remote and distance education and role of ICT

The schools have digital whiteboards and pupils in years 4, 5, and 6 have a tablet, which is used for lessons. ICT and remote teaching have been used a lot during the COVID pandemic. For online lessons, Microsoft Teams was used. The school has improved a lot in using technology and distance teaching, but ‘Nothing can compare to the traditional face-to-face method.’ The headteacher also thinks students prefer traditional teaching to remote teaching.
The School Council is made up of the headteacher, three teachers, the School Council president, and three parents. There is cooperation with the parents and various activities are organised through the council.

The school generally cooperates with the other schools in the Gozo College network in extra-curricular activities and sports competitions. This year, collaboration has been restricted due to the COVID pandemic.

There is no official collaboration with local councils, although the local council is always ready to help when needed.

In the school, there is the local council library, which is operated by the local council.

In the afternoon, the school’s ground is used by the Zebbug football team for training as the team’s headquarters is in the school building.

**Networking**

The school participates in various projects that encourage cultural and scientific exchanges between teachers while discovering educational sites in Gozo and Malta. Due to COVID, these activities are no longer active.

As part of Gozo College, the school is constantly in contact with the other schools in the network (13 public schools on the island). There is also a monthly meeting for all the school headteachers (mainly organisational).

This year, the school is not participating in the eTwinning project, but is taking part in an Erasmus+ project on xenophobia with Austria, Estonia, Holland, and Spain.

The school has already taken part in some foreign exchanges. Due to COVID, they were restricted to online sessions. The school hopes to start visiting and hosting student teachers from other countries as soon as the pandemic makes it possible.
Rural schools under focus

School: Publiczna Szkoła Podstawowa w Jełowej

Location: Jełowa (Opole), Poland
The context

Jełowa school is situated in the south-western part of Poland, 15 km from the city of Opole. The village Jełowa is inhabited by 2000 people. There are many companies and factories. Some of them are significant and are well-known in our voivodeship as well as in the whole country.

Within a 50 km distance there are many schools. In the community of Łubniańy there are 3 primary schools: PSP Łubniańy – 5 km, PSP Luboszyce – 15 km and PSP Brynica – 10 km.

The school, located in one building has 144 students enrolled. The school building has 13 ordinary classrooms, one common room and one gym. Three classrooms are located on the first level and seven on the second level (there are two seventh grade classes and two eighth grade classes). The Polish education system is organised into 8 grades: 1–3 are attended by the youngest students and grades 4–8 are attended by older kids.

The classroom is very small, between 49–59 square metres. Currently we have two classes in grade 7 and two classes in grade 8. We do not have learning or educational issues in the mentioned classes. Grade 7 is divided into two groups of 14 pupils each and grade 8 is divided into two groups of 13 and 12 pupils.

Opole town

Isolation

The Opole school does not suffer from isolation or cultural marginality. There is a Public Library in the village. The school staff piloted the “School in the neighbourhood” and organises many cultural and sports events.

For 8 years we have been among the top 10 schools in the general (sports) classification of the Provincial Games of LZS Rural Schools in the Opole Voivodeship, and in 2022 we took 3rd place.

Moreover, there is only 5 km between the school and the cultural centre ‘Łubniański Ośrodek Kultury’, which organises further interesting cultural events.

The Challenges of the Country

Teaching strategies to improve cooperative distance education (ICT usage, distance learning methods in small groups, etc.) and the local curriculum.
The school educational vision follows the general education curriculum intended for state primary schools. The education in a primary school in Poland is compulsory for eight years. The most important educational target of a primary school is taking care of integrated biological, cognitive, emotional, social and moral development.

The curriculum is divided into two stages:

- stage I (early school education - intended for the youngest learners (grades 1–3) aged 7–9);
- stage II (education divided into different subjects).

The school employs 25 teachers. The school does not have any lack of staff for the current year nor any problems with the employment of new employees.

Managing the school is the headmaster’s main duty and he does not have any headmaster’s assistant. The headmaster is responsible for all processes in the school, the safety of pupils and employees, planning the learning and educational process, and monitoring and evaluating all actions to be realised in the school. The headmaster prepares all the above-mentioned plans in the first part of September as the school’s supervision plan. Before the beginning of educational activities on 1 September, he discusses together with the teachers the yearly school plan, a yearly teacher’s development scheme and a school event schedule. Afterwards, he submits the school plan to the schoolteachers and parents. The school’s vision and leadership concept is modern, innovative, effective, and secure, and must be accepted by teachers and parents and addressed to the students and their parents.

The school plan, its functioning and development is developed every five years and it is modified according to the situation in the school. It is the result of the work of the Pedagogical Council, the Parents’ Council and the Students’ Self-Government in cooperation with the school Principal. It results from the adopted direction of work and takes into account any system changes introduced in education, conclusions from pedagogical supervision, and above all, the results of internal evaluation as well as observations and needs of the local environment. The vision and mission of the school, modernised in 2017 and still up-to-date, are automatically intertwined with the concept of the school’s work for the years 2019–2024. It is also intertwined in the environment because there are challenges that the school community has to face. Noticing, considering and internalising them helps to face threats and seize opportunities.

A detailed strategic analysis of various areas of the school’s functioning (SWOT analysis) is the preliminary activity for defining a strategic plan and the overall long-term goals. The results of the analysis are strengths, weaknesses, opportunities (aspects that we want to develop and improve, because they can positively affect the school)
and threats (situations that should be avoided, because they can weaken the institution).

On the basis of the above-mentioned scopes, I create achievable, realistic and flexible school activity plans. Within their scope I establish in particular the aforementioned concept of school operation and development, as well as school’s financial plan, work plans, teachers’ professional development plans and many others.

The vision and mission of the school is included in the most recent school document after the statute ‘Educational and preventive programme’. The concept includes general plans for the functioning and development of the school, a description of the teaching and educational dimensions as well as topics such as safety, leisure, sports, innovation, expansion and the modernisation of the school building. To implement the concept in the next five years the school head must obtain the approval of representatives of parents, teachers, trade unions, the leading body/office and the supervisory body/office. The next one is due in 2024.

The Mission of the school is well highlighted in the school’s statute:

‘Every day we work together for the success of our students and the satisfaction of their parents, and the indicator of this is their satisfaction and the prestige of our school in the community. The priority in our school is a high efficiency of education, preparation for further education, and ensuring conditions for comprehensive development.’

‘We are a modern, safe and friendly school. We work as a team respecting and supporting each other. We teach creativity, with an emphasis on responsibility for our own decisions. We are open to the world and the changes taking place in it, eager to learn from its scientific and cultural achievements. Our school is rooted in local and national traditions. We educate our pupils on the basis of respect for other people, respect for the system of values, as well as cultural and historical heritage. Each student in our school achieves success to the best of their abilities, learns to live in and for the environment. We shape students’ sensitivity to the good, the truth and beauty. The highest good for us is the student.’

A graduate of the PSP Jetowa School is a Pole who can live with dignity and move around in the world around him and:

1. is prepared to undertake higher education;
2. enjoys learning;
3. adheres to generally accepted moral values;
4. is able to make decisions independently and bear their consequences;
5. is able to express and justify own opinion;
6. cooperates with others in harmony;
7. is curious about the world and sensitive to other people;
8. is kind and tolerant, respects his own and other human dignity;
9. understands the value of learning and the need for personal development;
10. takes care of mental and physical health as well as their own and others’ safety;
11. is able to use knowledge in life situations.

Twice a year, the school head submits a self-assessment and professional development survey to schoolteachers. It takes place at the beginning and in the middle of the school year in order to update their needs. After the first analysis, the headmaster develops an annual professional development plan for the teachers. Depending on the needs of the school or innovations and while planning the path of professional development, teachers may apply for co-financing of selected forms of professional development.

The principal can decide, according to the students’ necessities, to invest in teacher’s professional development or hire a new teacher to face student’s needs.
The school has 13 classrooms (among them ordinary classrooms, one school common room and one gym). Thus, 12 classrooms are assigned to the primary school without mixed-age levels. Care for students who have finished classes takes place in the common room. The school operates in a standard work system like every school in Poland—according to the present law. Teachers practise outdoor education during PE and Biology lessons and take part in educational programmes Dzieci mają wychodne (Children’s Day Off) for the youngest grades 1–3. Peer tutoring is used regularly, and self-regulated learning and an individual approach are the pupils’ task.

A parallel curriculum is a possibility for pupils who learn the language of the German minority. Such pupils can choose to take part in lessons of their own history and geography in German. Our school does not practice a spiral curriculum. Teachers can choose the curriculum they follow or create and realise their own curriculum.

Moreover, they can use digital content in Multibooks and practise active teaching during lessons. They usually create digital content for the virtual wall newspaper which is displayed in the school corridor. Each teacher is equipped with a laptop computer to deliver remote education since many of them do not have one (some PCs are borrowed and some are donated). In the last years the demand for PCs increased so teachers developed IT skills and gave online lessons. Students develop IT skills in grades 1–3 as level of competency.

Finally, they also use different educational platforms and tools, and digital tests which support the educational process.

Teachers are organised into 10 working groups:

1. two educational teams: for younger and older students;
2. educational quality analysis and educational research;
3. mathematics and natural science team;
4. sports and recreation;
5. humanistic and social team;
6. several support teams for students with special needs (with decisions about the need for special education).

Each group has strictly defined tasks to be performed during the school year and is led by a teacher. Groups work on a schedule and as needed. Together they develop an action plan for the entire school year. Teams of teachers perform very responsible tasks influencing the quality of the school’s work.

The tasks of the groups are:

1. planning and organising the processes taking place in the school;
2. coordinating activities at school;
Remote teaching was introduced in the school because of the Covid 19 pandemic. Currently the school follows standard face to face education at school.

The school has been working with distance learning for approximately 185 school days:

- in grades 1–3 there were 86 days of face-to-face education at school (46.5%) and 53.5% via remote education.
- in grades 4–9 there were 61 days of face-to-face education at school (33%) and 69.7% via remote education.

The members of the teams, their functioning and tasks are specified in the rules of work and the organisation of teaching teams.

Remote and distance education and role of ICT

In the current situation, cooperation has not been formalised but the schools express their will to establish partnerships with groups from other schools, both remotely and face to face. In November 2019, during a visit to the partner city of Arnstein in Germany, the school opened a partnership dialogue with the Mayor of Arnstein, Franz Sauer, but the pandemic stopped their actions.

At the moment, the school is not involved in eTwinning or Erasmus projects.
The parents collaborate with the school very often. We collaborate with a very active parent association and many other parents are willing to cooperate and help in organising events, school trips, contests and sport competitions. Parents express their satisfaction with the educational, sports and cultural activities of the schools. They express no complaint about teachers’ activities.

The school offers to their students after school activities such as:

- additional English classes,
- additional German classes,
- additional Maths classes,
- additional Polish classes,
- sport classes,
- music classes,
- art classes,
- drama classes.

**Networking**

Currently the school does participate in collaboration with local associations, as well as in development and implementation of various educational projects. The school also collaborates with universities. There is a library only for the use of our pupils.
Rural schools under focus

School: Mladost Primary School
Location: Tomaševac, Serbia
Country challenges

Teaching strategies to improve cooperative distance education (ICT usage, distance learning methods in small groups etc.) and local curriculum.

Mladost Primary School is in Tomaševac, a small village in the Central Banat District, 28 km away from the main city of Zrenjanin, in the north of Serbia. It is a state primary school with four lower grades and four higher grades.

The village public transport to Zrenjanin (the biggest city) runs twice a day, although most people travel by car.

The Zrenjanin municipality has 28 primary schools. Between around 5 and 7 km away from Mladost Primary School, there are three other similar schools. This a very highly populated area, so every village has a school, although there are low student numbers in many of them.

The Central Banat District is a rather poor region. There aren’t many job opportunities. The main economic income is from agriculture. Most people commute to the city of Zrenjanin for work.

The school has 78 students across 14 classrooms, 18 teachers, and 3 members of staff with a supporting role like psychologists. The number of students has decreased in recent years.

Students who go to high school take the bus twice a day or stay in student dorms as the journey by bus is quite long.

Isolation

‘Isolation and cultural marginality are visible, but we don’t see it as intentional’, it’s more the result of the geographical and socio-economic characteristics of the area. In the Tomaševac village, there are no cultural events, and ‘the social and educational capacities of the population are rather modest’. The school hasn’t got enough funds to organise trips to the main city of Zrenjanin, where students can take part in cultural activities organised for children their age.
The school aims to present itself as a modern institution that uses active teaching methodologies, digital content, and ICT, and which is ‘ready to introduce a modern approach and creative ideas’. It’s a school where relationships and communication among the members of the community are considered very important. It’s a place where teachers and students can ‘feel comfortable and happy’.

The school has one main building for 14 classrooms and a cafeteria. There is also an outside classroom and sports courts. The building is quite big, there is definitely more space than required by the number of students, so all the classes can take place during the morning hours. The building is very well equipped and nicely decorated, it looks more like a big city school than a small countryside one.

The 18 teachers are organised into subject-based teams (e.g. a team for languages, sciences, etc.). The teacher teams can work with the same teams from other schools, support each other, exchange good practices, and organise extracurricular activities together.

There is a Teachers’ Council, which is the highest authority in the school, and class councils for making decisions in matters relating to the classes.

To fill their time, most of the teachers (not those that work with children aged under 11) have classes in other schools nearby too. This presents a big issue for organising the timetable and sometimes for extracurricular activities.

Teacher training is only at a national level, organised by the Ministry of Education and the Institute for Improvement of Education. Teachers have to reach a certain amount of points in order to fulfil the national requirements laid down in the in-service training.
Even before the pandemic, the school largely used digital content and ICT. They stated that it was one of the first schools in Serbia to use technology in classrooms and participate in national projects like the electronic diary and digital classroom. The school is also well equipped with computers, projectors, laptops, and a few interactive boards.

Since March 2020, they have extensively used Google Classroom and online teaching. The school has its own account on G Suite for Education and all teachers and students have their own accounts. They found distance learning to have had some quite positive effects on most of the students. They are more engaged and have a higher level of independence, motivation, persistence, and desire to do research. Some students improved their performance when working at home and some are more engaged when classes are online.

That is why the school is doing research on remote learning, looking at different educational models and different digital software.

So far, they aren’t involved in any eTwinning projects, but they are willing to do be, as they are aware of the benefits for students and teachers of being involved in international projects as a distinctive element for learning and professional development.
The school doesn’t have any signed collaboration agreements with local associations. Service-learning projects used to be more common in the past; at the moment they are less so.

The school library has almost 10,000 books and it is open to teachers, students, and former students within the school opening hours. Teachers can sometimes be part-time librarians.

There is also a city library that organises events for many schools in the area, for example a competition for students: the best summary of a chosen book wins a prize. Or sometimes they organise events with well-known poets; students can also participate in a poetry competition and win prizes.

By law, every school must have a Parents’ League. The Mladost Primary School parents’ league has a representing member for each class. Parents are used to being very close to the school as they participate in the activities offered. They can also donate money for specific things and make decisions about school meals and trips.

Parents are very satisfied with the school’s activities.

Networking

School networking is not indicated in the national programmes, so it is something that happens in schools thanks to individual initiative.

The Mladost school has developed meaningful collaborations with other schools. They are used to working to organise and manage activities and projects such as Evropsko selo (Europe Village Project).

For 13 years, the school has also been working with a school in Slovenia. They are connected by a very special friendship and meet every year. When they meet, they focus on learning about different cultures and traditions and share experiences.

As Serbia hasn’t been a candidate for the European Union for a long time, the school hasn’t had many opportunities to take part in European projects, although they are very willing to participate as they consider international exchanges to add value for the whole school community.
Rural schools under focus

School: Petro Kuzminjak school

Location: Ruski Krstur, Serbia
The context

The Challenges of the Country

Teaching strategies to improve cooperative distance education (ICT usage, distance learning methods in small groups, etc.) and the local curriculum.

Petro Kuzmjak is a public school settled in a small village called Ruski Krstur, located in the municipality of Kula in Vojvodina Province, in the north-western part of Serbia. This is mostly a rural area: agriculture is the main economic activity, even if there are many small furniture entrepreneurs. No big industries are present. This area has also been the centre of the Ruthenian community (a Slavic minority) for more than 260 years.

Even if there are other schools in the surroundings, this institution is of particular importance for the community: first of all, it is the only school in the world where the Ruthenian language is taught; second, it has a long tradition as it has been functioning for more than 270 years; third, it is a grammar school located in a rural area which is a very rare condition; and last, it covers primary and secondary education (students from 7–19 years old).

Attended by 500 students, 250 are in primary and 250 in secondary (organised into a secondary grammar school and a vocational school for tourism) Petro Kuzmjak school is considered a small school. There are also 91 teachers and school staff. Multi-age classrooms are not present, except one in the primary for students with special needs.

As a small school, teachers and staff have the opportunity to give each student the time needed, and that is probably the reason why the school doesn’t suffer from early school leavers.

The school is also a boarding school where students from the surrounding villages can stay during the week. The school follows the state curriculum from primary to secondary; students with special needs follow an individual educational programme. There is also a vocational school for tourism which could represent a strategic asset for the economic development of the area.

The school is supported by the state which recognises it as an innovative school. But regarding any additional funding given, even for the materials they need in the Ruthenian language: ‘The school is being treated like any other school.’

Isolation

The school doesn’t suffer geographical isolation, but is marginal in accessing funding programmes: ‘It is very difficult for a small school to find fundings especially when the school is situated in a rural area.’ The school leader supposes it occurred because rural schools in general don’t have much writing skills to apply for funding opportunities; in addition, there are less opportunities for funding small schools as maybe people and institutions are reluctant to invest in a such a small project.
The vision of the school is ‘to bridge the gap between tradition and modern life.’ Petro Kuzmjak school is committed to preserving the Ruthenian culture and language and at the same time to looking at modern trends in education.

The school has three buildings, but classes are hosted in one building which is insufficient to guarantee the proper organisation. The other two buildings are not in good condition and need renovation. Due to the lack of space, classes must work in two shifts.

Collaboration among teachers is high, and they support each other.
The use of technology and innovative pedagogies is on average high as many teachers include them in their classes. In the last few years, the school pushed a lot on the use of technology and distance learning and worked hard on introducing the students to the critical use of social media.

The school also encourages students to learn science. Due to the richness of the activities on science, Petro Kuzmjak became an Ambassador for STEM School Label project organised by European Schoolnet. They also have a STEM club inside and organise Science fairs and open workshop activities.

As for the learning approaches, they found that the presence of all levels of education is beneficial for students. It enables peer learning and different combinations of activities which they have noticed contribute more to the students learning as they appear to be much more motivated.

The school provides an individual programme for students with special needs and organises extra lessons for those who have extra needs. Being a small school is advantageous because it allows you to know each student’s needs.

Outdoor activities are included in the curriculum. The school has allocated space in the main hall of the school for open classrooms. They also have summer classrooms in the school yard. Thanks to the many collaborations with cultural Institutions the students can have classes outside the school: e.g. before the pandemic they had the museum night in the local museum. They can also have lessons in the centre for science promotion in Belgrade and students of secondary education can attend professional orientation classes at the University.

Some activities are organised during school hours and others are extracurricular. They follow the standard timetable.

Remote and distance education and role of ICT

The school even before the pandemic had a good level of ICT in all the classes. Since 2017, Skype calls have been introduced to establish connections with other schools worldwide. Mystery Skype, project activities, joint tasks, and presentations by scientists and different professionals have been organised to work together at distance. The school is also involved in eTwinning projects (usually, one or two classes).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of technologies and distance learning increased. Experienced teachers helped less-experienced colleagues; the school also provides group trainings. Google Classroom and Google Meet are used for daily activities and teachers know how to create digital content and materials. Teachers use different apps for their lessons, such as Kahoot, Geogebra, Bitmoji, Padlet, Google forms.
Different kinds of IT tools are used: Mbot robots and Microbits, 3D printers. Good practices are documented on the school website.

The school learned by experience that blended learning fits best for its students, as not all of them are equipped at home with proper technologies or have required competences; for example, young students need parents’ assistance to follow the lesson.

Within the Erasmus plus they have established a strategic partnership with teachers from Finland, Austria, and Hungary on the “Logifaces-analogue Game for Digital Mind” project to develop teaching strategies for integrating technology with an analogue puzzle Logiface and adjust it to the school subjects.
Collaboration and partnership

The school is considered a solid part of the community.

They feel very strongly supported by the institutions, especially from the National Council of Ruthenian Minority. Even the local community is very much involved in organising activities, especially cultural activities: poetry evenings, theatre and cultural manifestation.

Parents are very close to the school; they are very much involved in school activities, especially at primary level and collaborate in different kinds of workshops according to their expertise and interests.

Through their representatives within the school board, they exert influence on school policy.

In general, they have positive attitude towards the innovations and support it.

The school has still not experienced service-learning projects, but they have the idea to invest in this direction.

They have a school library, but it has not opened to the community.

During the interview they expressed the desire to be more considered by the State as a unique and minority school so to overcome the preconception that minorities are linked to the past and not follow contemporary trends.

Networking

The school strongly cooperates with universities and professionals from the territory around and organises visits to many educational institutions (e.g. Centre for Science Promotion, National Council, universities). Their students give workshops to students coming from the other institutions.

They participate in Erasmus plus projects and eTwinning projects, but they expressed the desire to increase participation.
Rural schools under focus

School: CEIP Encarnación Ruiz Parras

Location: Puente Genil, Spain
The context

Country challenges

Representatives of the MoE suggested some challenges that each school should overcome:

Issues: low numbers of students enrolled, teacher and student isolation, lack of teacher training development;

Educational challenges: teacher training, multi-age classroom management, teaching strategies to improve cooperative distance education (use of ICT, distance learning methods in small groups, etc.) and local curriculum;

Policy challenge/priority: new innovative approaches to distance learning, networking models;

Initiatives: ‘School libraries 2030: Spaces for transformation and promotion of educational innovation’. 16 schools in the Castilla y León region will start their school films with the help of regional educational administrations. Since 50% of the schools in the project are in small municipalities, initiatives in rural areas are supported.

INTERCRAS sports games (between different CRAs) to promote socialisation through sport for students in CRAs (rural areas) in the La Rioja region CRA group of rural schools.

The Rural School Observatory aims to improve education in small municipalities and is responsible for promoting research, documentation, preparation, and production of teaching materials or adapting existing materials, and collecting and sharing good practices and establishing them common point of reference and exchange of experiences.

Buildings: There is a nursery and primary school with three nursery units and 10 primary school units. In addition, there is a specific classroom used for students with special educational needs part-time.

The school is divided into three different areas, the early childhood education area, the special education area, and the primary education area. The buildings are colour coded. Blue is for nursery, green is for the library and classes for students with special needs and yellow is for primary classes (there are nine classes for primary, one for special needs, and four for the nursery).
However, these spaces are not completely separate. All students use the same playground and participate in school activities together.

The playground is very old so the school is trying to maintain it as best possible. It has different courts.

However, we try to organise as many outdoor activities as possible.

In Marinaleda, a new building or ICT facilities are not possible, so we are trying to find support from the community and involve families. For this reason, meetings with teachers and families are organised to discuss school issues. Parents have their own association and they are represented by a group of parents and grandparents.

Marinaleda doesn’t have a public library, that is why the school made its library a public library. That is why the parents are very involved in the school library.

Teachers: There are 20 teachers, more than half of whom are temporary.

The teachers are divided into different classes. Most of the subjects are taught by a single teacher, who is the tutor of a group of students. The rest of the subjects, such as physical education and languages, are taught by specialists.

Once a month, teachers meet to discuss the general needs of the school and once a week, teachers who teach in a specific cycle meet to organise the work for their cycle. The school organises interactive activities between children, parents, and grandparents. The activities in the classroom bring all the family together and make them work in small groups. These activities aim to improve the relationships between the school and the community and to make the community more committed to education and support our schools.

Students: Currently, we have 232 students enrolled, of which 65 are in the nursery, 160 are in primary, and five are in the special education classroom.

Marinaleda’s economy fundamentally comes from agriculture, but contrary to what may be expected from a rural area, there is a low unemployment rate due to the high percentage of auxiliary workers, among other reasons. Although the economic activity is focused on working in the fields, there are also industries related to the agricultural sector such as a packing agricultural products in factories, an oil mill, and an oil packing cooperative. Apart from these types of work, there is also part of the population that works in construction, as there are a few family companies in this sector. In general, family income is...
Although technological resources have improved a lot in the last 10 years, we are still a long way from responding to the new demands of today’s society. The changes are very slow in rural areas and when they do happen, they are often too late. There is cultural marginalisation for students. We would like them to experience concerts, or visit cultural monuments, but opportunities are scarce and the costs are high for the living conditions in rural areas such as ours and cultural and educational activities are not encouraged.

The town has a library, an adult school, and a old people’s home. However, these spaces are only open in the afternoons, they are closed for the rest of the day.
System innovation

The school is recognised as a learning community and has committees where all sectors of the educational community are represented: teachers, students, families, and local institutions. This collaborative work philosophy means our school is involved in many plans and projects in our autonomous community and Europe despite the lack of technological resources and infrastructure.

The most important thing for the school is to improve the relationship with families and strengthen the collaboration between the school and the local community. We are trying to work more with families and involve them as much as possible so we have their support and can improve education in the area.
Our school is the only nursery and primary school that has students from two small towns, Marinaleda and Matarredonda. More than half of the staff are temporary teachers. This makes monitoring and maintaining the continuity of our projects in the school very difficult. However, the management places a lot of emphasis on the new teachers who join our school. The school’s management team consists of a principal, a head of studies, and a secretary who are also teachers.

The CEIP Encarnación Ruiz Porras educational community is based on the concept of dialogic learning. Our goals are school success and improved coexistence for all students.

The participation of all school stakeholders can cover all aspects of the centre, from management to planning, training, implementation, and evaluation in the classroom. Our school understands that this new way of working through projects, where students and teachers interact with other European schools, is fundamental in the training and education of our students and as a rural school, we have a European dimension, which very difficult to have otherwise.

Families’ low expectations of education and the low economic opportunities to study at university has caused a high rate of school dropouts. However, this situation has changed in the last 10 years. The new generations are seeking new horizons and, despite the difficulties of studying a university degree due to the cost, parents are trying to change their children’s future so they can get a university degree and economic independence with better salaries. This change is seen with the involvement of families at school.

For the reasons above, our school has extensive experience with working with European programmes. We have seven national and seven European quality labels for projects that have been carried out.
Our school has been working hard to try to adapt as much as possible to the social changes caused by the economic crisis and to the needs of our students to work with digital tools. Promoting cooperative work and an entrepreneurial attitude makes it possible for our students to find solutions to their needs, interests, and social demands at school.

A good example could be the number of projects our school is involved in, not just eTwinning projects but also projects offered by our education delegation in the province of Seville. This year, we are working on an eTwinning project related to The Beatles and their songs. The project is interdisciplinary, working with different subjects on the curriculum (language, mathematics, English, etc.). This way of teaching is more motivating for our students.

We are unique in that our school is open to all members of the community. It is a learning community in which families, associations, and volunteers actively participate in the life of the school, both in the school’s management processes and in the development of student learning.

The activities are planned to be run in the classroom but we also organise activities outside the classroom and in collaboration with other school years and levels. Many of these activities coincide with events such as World Peace Day or Carnival.

Some examples are:

**Games on the floor:** [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z20z4VPFWU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z20z4VPFWU)

**Living walls:** [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GpvSgZXOU-0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GpvSgZXOU-0)

**Seville on bike:** [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G0-cFIYS_p](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G0-cFIYS_p)

Most of these activities are carried out in the playground when the weather is nice. Families also take part in activities that several groups participate in at the same time.

We also organise what we call interactive groups. Parents help teachers to organise tasks. The class is divided into small groups and each group is represented by a parent. Teachers explain the task to the volunteers and they explain it to the students. One of the most positive aspects is that each student works at their own pace and gets help from teachers and classmates.

One of the characteristics that defines our school is the participatory and collaborative environment that we want to create.

Promoting socialisation for students with teachers is one of the most important goals of our school. (For example, Christmas meeting between Larissa and Marinaleda pupils: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dk8_8vTMTfo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dk8_8vTMTfo))
We worked remotely on small activities where we asked our students to participate using the eTwinning platform. Distance learning and teaching has been good for our students and families because it allows them to work independently from home. In addition, the use of new technologies is always very motivating for our students, and they really enjoy working in this way.

(For example: Teaching during the pandemic https://es.padlet.com/marinarandapedro/ceiperp).

Many of our projects are organised so that students of different levels and ages can work on them, for example, the school garden, children’s rights, peace, and gender equality. Each group contributes according to their level. Students with extra educational needs attend regular classrooms part-time to work with the rest of their peers in classes such as music or physical education. When we organise activities for a special event, we use cycles and students with special needs are integrated into the groups depending on their age.
The school has a parents’ association that actively participates in school life. Our school is a learning community and all sectors of the community are represented, teachers, students, families, and local institutions.

Activities with parents and local associations: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=In6FOuHPAPk&t=40s. All sectors are represented in the school’s governing body.

Once a month, parents meet to discuss different aspects of the school. In addition, proposals are collected from the different stakeholders to work together inside and outside the school. The school is therefore the most important institution in the town. Here, activities are organised for the benefit of the whole community. This is why the participatory and collaborative environment is so important. Our idea is to try to provide continuity in teaching that allows students to finish their studies in secondary school and continue in their professional life or at university.

But this does not happen in many cases. In fact, students with good academic results tend to go outside Marinaleda to other secondary schools with better academic results. Marinaleda doesn’t have a public library, which is why the school made its library a public library. That is why parents are very involved in the school library. The idea of a community school is also based on a school library that is open during school hours for students. During this time, the teachers are in charge of managing it. In addition, there is an afternoon schedule where the parents are in charge of lending books and organising activities such as talks.

The different spaces inside and outside the school are old and constantly need renovation to avoid further decline. The council should invest more in education and public spaces to promote cultural activities.

We try to participate in many international projects because we also receive support from local authorities. We are not a prestigious school, but we are trying to do our best. We work a lot with eTwinning and Erasmus+ projects.
Rural schools under focus

School: CEIP Mencia De Velasco

Location: Burgos, Spain
The context

Country challenges

Representatives of the MoE suggested some challenges that each school should overcome.

The following emerged from the survey:

Issues: low numbers of students enrolled, teacher and student isolation, lack of teacher training development;

Educational challenges: teacher training, multi-age classroom management, teaching strategies to improve cooperative distance education (use of ICT, distance learning methods in small groups, etc.) and local curriculum;

Policy challenges/priorities: New innovative approaches to distance learning, networking models.

Teachers’ training, multi-age classroom management, Teaching strategies to improve cooperative distance, education (ICT usage, distance learning methods in, small group, other....) and local curriculum

The school is in a small town. There has been great degree of depopulation in recent years. This depopulation is because the town had factories that have now closed down, and because young people are leaving to go to the nearest big cities like Madrid and Burgos, and do not return to their hometown. In our school, we are trying to teach young people that it is important to come back and build new lives in the town. Our school is not small per se. Buildings: The school has two buildings, the old building and the new building. Next to the school is a public sports hall that is used for physical education lessons.

Teachers: 25 teachers, 13 of which are class teachers, three English teachers, four special educational needs teachers, two PE teachers, two music teachers, one religion teacher, and one psychology pedagogist. The school is divided into early years education and primary education. Some teachers are class teachers and others teach subjects such as music, English literacy, and music.

Students: 206 students

There used to be two classes per level, but this not the case anymore. Some extra classes are used for support. Half of teachers are full time with a permanent contract and the other 50 % cover temporary positions. Our school does not have multi-age classrooms.
Our school is in a rural area called La Bureba in the province of Burgos (Spain). It is in the north of Spain.

In the past, our town grew bigger because it attracted a lot of workers. The industries do not exist anymore and therefore we are gradually becoming a small town again. The school was built because there was a need for a new school due to development. Our school has a lot of migrant students from Romania, Bulgaria, and Morocco.

Some years ago, it was a very populated area, but we have been affected by rural depopulation. Many families prefer to go and live in bigger cities and we are conscious that if the situation continues, our school may disappear. Our main two-year Erasmus+ project goal is to fight against rural depopulation.

In terms of socio-economic factors, the town is made up of middle-class families, whose main income comes from harvesting or working in factories. Some have their own business, but we would love to promote this a bit more so our students want to open businesses in the area in the future.

It is not the only school in the area. There is another primary school in our town and a secondary school that our students move to when they finish primary education.

We are not isolated or culturally marginalised and do not feel culturally isolated.
The school is a British Council school. We are trying to teach pupils that they are learning skills that will help them and that they will use throughout their lives. The school also tries to share the vision that everyone can learn from one another.

MECD-British Council (Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport) is at the basis of the school vision. English is not taught as a foreign language but through literacy. We do different kinds of projects and try to be as coordinated as possible among all subject teachers.

This programme is good for us because some families decide to enrol their children at our school because of it. As mentioned before, this is not always the case as some families choose a school closer to their homes rather than depending on the projects developed in each school.

The school does a lot of international programmes (Erasmus+, eTwinning, British Council) but parents prefer the school in the town centre.
Leadership and management

The school has a headteacher, a head of studies, and a finance manager.

The head of studies is responsible for the school timetable, teacher leave, and sick leave, and takes care of replacements. The headteacher is in charge of the whole school.

The head teacher and head of studies also have a lot of paperwork, so they balance their work time. Due to COVID, this balance has been disrupted so some teachers do more paperwork.
Due to the pandemic, we had to use remote teaching from March to June 2020.

At the moment, we are involved in three eTwinning projects involving six classes in total.

The Year 4 primary education class is doing their first eTwinning project. It is a small project that introduces students to the eTwinning world.

The Year 5 primary education class is part of Erasmus+ project KA229, ‘Get plugged to rural life’. Our main goal is to fight against rural depopulation. Five European schools have this as their main goal.

The Year 6 primary education class is doing a 1-year eTwinning project about the Olympics.

We follow a half-Spanish half-British curriculum and many of our subjects are taught in English.

We do not have a specific room for students with special needs. These students are in the same classes as other students. Students with more specific issues have one-to-one classes with the special needs teachers. In our school, we do not have students with severe disabilities. We have had some cases of mild autism. These students worked one-to-one with special needs teachers.

We do not have a lot of outdoor activities. The school has a big playground provided by the town hall and the head of studies prepares the timetable.

In the top-level classes, every student has a tablet and there are tablets that are used by students in lower classes. These tablets are used with a timetable. We also have a computer room where students go once a week. The school also has a library with e-readers and five computers that can be used by students in the afternoons for research.

Some families do not have a computer, so the library helps. The school has already planned to lend tablets to these families for students to work at home.

There is also a scholarship for families who are poor so they can buy a computer.
Parents collaborate with the school. They take part in many school activities, especially events such as Halloween, Christmas, or Carnival.

The school does not have a planned or signed collaboration agreement with local associations but works closely with the local council. If there is anything we need, they are always there to help us. They are in charge of maintaining the school. We also have a relationship with the special needs centre in our town, we used to do workshops with them every year. We visit their facilities with our students so we are aware of the work they do.

There is a parent-teacher association that helps a lot with activities (theatre at Christmas, and local festivities) organised by the school. We also collaborate with a special needs school and the town council. The school library is open for two hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon. It is mostly used by teachers, but parents use it too. There is a collaboration between the council library and the school library to lend us books.

The school library used to be open every afternoon for the school community, but now, due to the covid-19 pandemic, things have changed, and it is no longer open in the afternoons. Before the pandemic, it was also open in the afternoons, from 16.00 to 18.00, so students could attend extracurricular activities or visit the library.

The council library has a room that the school can use for talks and theatre performances.

eTwinning and Erasmus are perceived by the parents as very beneficial for students because they have an opportunity to meet people from other countries and open their minds. Teachers are benefited by this internationalisation in terms of training and professional development.

Our school would like to form a partnership with other small and rural schools and exchange examples, best practices, and expertise. We think that an international network like this would be beneficial. In Spain, we already have a small group through eTwinning, but a bigger network would be better.
Rural schools under focus

School: Lycksele School

Location: Lycksele, Sweden
The context

Country challenges

Teaching strategies to improve cooperative distance education (use of ICT, distance learning methods in small groups, etc.) and local curriculum.

This is an upper secondary school with 650 students and 130 teachers. There are 41 classes including classes for students with special educational needs. There are about 35 classrooms in total.

The school is in Lycksele, which is the main town in a sparsely populated area in the north of Sweden. This school is the only upper secondary school within a 50 km radius. In terms of the socio-economic context, students mainly come from middle and low-income families. From a cultural point of view, there is great marginalisation compared to the rest of Sweden, but the city has a large Sami community.

The school has two buildings, one for more theoretical subjects (such as English and mathematics) and one for more practical ones (such as nursing and mechanics). Both buildings are in the same geographical area. Students who are studying to become builders need to be able to get to the ‘construction site’ where they practise their skills.

Students can choose from a multitude of courses, some that are more theory-based, and some that are more practical. Each course lasts 3 years (grades 7, 8 and 9).

There are about 35 classrooms (fig. 1 and fig. 2) and some have equipment for practical activities such as to learn how to be a mechanic, for example.

Figure 1. Classroom

Figure 2. Classroom

Most teachers have an open-ended contract. Only members of staff who are not qualified teachers have a fixed-duration contract. In Sweden, there are insufficient numbers of language teachers and, therefore, they have to work in several schools at the same time including distance learning with one class whilst simultaneously teaching another in person.
Teachers do not have financial incentives to teach at this school but they have the opportunity to participate in various training activities including in other parts of Sweden, which are reimbursed by the school.

**Isolation**

Students and teachers have the opportunity to collaborate with students and teachers from other schools. For example, some students work in a single class with students from a small Swedish school to learn French, doing shared lessons. Sharing foreign language lessons between schools has given students the opportunity to study French, German, and Spanish, which would otherwise not have been possible, since, in Sweden, as already mentioned, there is a shortage of language teachers. This school also organises Sami language courses in cooperation with other Swedish schools.

There is also the opportunity to collaborate with other schools in Europe but this is difficult to achieve since it requires schools to run on the same timetable (for example, start times, breaks, and end times) or to find common work periods. For example, if they take a shared French lesson, the lesson must start and end at the same time for all the students.
The school’s educational vision, which is currently being reviewed, focuses on lifelong learning. This school’s main objective is to prepare students for the life they want to live, regardless of whether they decide to continue their studies at university or enter the world of work and to have the necessary skills to continue learning throughout their life (Swedish schools allow adults to return to high school to study even if they have already obtained a diploma) or change the course of their life if they think they made the wrong decision.

There are five different units in this school, one for adult education and four for secondary school education. Each unit includes several programmes, and each programme includes certain subjects. For example, if a student chooses the economics programme, they have to study eight subjects, including Swedish, English, mathematics, science, economics, and history. As already mentioned, teachers are grouped according to the subjects they teach. Some subjects such as Swedish and social sciences are studied by all students in Swedish upper secondary schools regardless of the school they attend and the programme they choose.

There is only the national curriculum in Sweden; there are no local curricula.
This school has classrooms and workshops for practical activities. Every student has a computer. Early childhood and primary school students all have an iPad. Every teacher has their own computer and there is Wi-Fi throughout the school. This school is open to the use of technology and uses it extensively.

Hybrid teaching solutions are used in this school. For example, for French lessons, some students are taught with the teacher physically present whilst others are taught remotely.

Initially, teachers did not share distance learning strategies and materials with colleagues, but starting to do so has had a definite positive impact on how teaching has been organised. Furthermore, if at the outset, there were several issues relating to the lack of technology or the technology in the hands of students and teachers being old, the latest-generation technology is now available. So, technology has gone from being an obstacle to being a facilitator.

As for outdoor education, although the school has a sports area, it is rarely used by students. Students do, however, do many practical activities related to their course of study outdoors, such as driving trucks or building houses. Students at this school, which is a municipality organiser, have, for example, built a riding school for the municipality.

As far as teaching strategies are concerned, each teacher is free to choose the best approach in compliance with the national curriculum. Teachers’ creativity is valued and they produce digital materials.
Remote learning is used. The French language teacher who was interviewed, for example, provides remote lessons to students whilst simultaneously giving the same lessons in person to students in the classroom. The teacher uses digital tools such as Google Docs, to work with remote and face-to-face students simultaneously. An adult is with the remote students in their classroom and this person follows and supports students in the case of difficulties and is ‘the hands and eyes’ of the teacher working remotely. They distribute paper materials and check that students are paying attention and following the lesson. The teacher works to interact with and build a relationship with these remote students as if they were in the classroom. Once or twice a year, the French teacher meets the students taught remotely in person to build a stronger teacher-student relationship.

The students in this school are typically between 15 and 19 years of age and regular meetings are organised with parents to discuss their child’s performance at school. For remote students this is harder to put into practice.

This school has various relationships with local entities. As a school that also prepares young people for the world of work, it cannot ignore the need to have contact with local bodies, for example the hospital to train nurses.

The severe shortage of language teachers has prompted schools to network to solve the problem of language teaching. But there are no projects at school level. It is the teachers themselves who decide to collaborate with other teachers they know. It would be better to establish formal networks between schools to teach foreign languages without having to leave it entirely to the initiative of individual teachers.
Annexes

Hrvatska
- Ož Tordinci
- OŠ Ravica

Česká republika
- ZŠ Příma
- ZŠ a MŠ Luková

France
- Freney D’Oisans
- École de La Balme

Ελλάδα
- Konitsa

Italia
- Istituto Comprensivo del Vergante
- Istituto Omnicomprensivo Bobbio

Magyarország
- Egri Kemény Ferenc Sportiskolai
- Kossuth Lajos Gimnázium Nagyváni Általános Iskolája

Malta
- Gozo
- Zebbug

Polska
- Jelową (OPOLE)

Србија
- Mladost
- Petro Kuzmjak School

España
- CEIP Encarnación Ruiz Porras
- CEIP Mencia De Velasco

Sverige
- Lycksele School
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