



## Review

# A research synthesis of the impacts of successful educational actions on student outcomes

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## ABSTRACT

Successful Educational Actions (SEAs) are school-based initiatives oriented to provide high-quality education for all students. Identified by the INCLUD-ED research project, SEAs have been implemented in schools in different countries and researchers have studied their implementation and the impacts achieved. We undertook a review and synthesis of research findings on the implementation of SEAs with three aims. First, identify different types of impacts on students (3–12 years), second, offer a unified and comprehensive framework, and thirdly, provide suggestions for further research. We identified 63 studies that met our inclusion criteria and were coded descriptively. The findings documented in our reviewed studies accounted for impacts on the *individual level*, comprising (1) students' instrumental learning and (2) self-esteem and motivation; on the *group level*, involving (3) enhancement of interpersonal relationships and (4) cohesion and conflict reduction; and on the *community level*, comprising (5) family involvement and change towards school and (6) absenteeism reduction. The synthesis concludes with a discussion of the implications of those findings and further research suggestions.

## 1. Introduction

The 2018 World Inequality Report reported that inequality has increased in nearly all countries in recent decades (Alvaredo, Chancel, Piketty, Saez, & Zucman, 2018); this situation seems to be “a stylized fact in public discourse” (Clark, 2020, p. 1). In education, the lack of access to quality educational services and the persistent achievement gap across socioeconomic groups are concerns worldwide. Against this backdrop, Sustainable Development Goal 4 refers to the urgent need to provide a high-quality educational environment that is inclusive and effective in achieving a better and sustainable future for all (UN, 2019). The educational success of all students, regardless of their socioeconomic background, is of great concern among policy-makers, researchers, school leaders, teachers and families. Although poverty reduction requires a multifaceted approach, education has a crucial role in promoting social mobility,

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reducing social disadvantages and breaking the cycle of poverty (Aubert, 2011). Schools have a significant effect on the variations of students' educational achievement across different social and economic contexts (Silva-Layaa, D'Angelo, García, Zúñigab, & Fernández, 2020). Scholars have called the attention to articulate school-based actions that can interact with other social and economic interventions for overcoming inequalities (Lampert, Ball, Garcia-Carrion, & Burnett, 2019).

The INCLUD-ED project (2006–2011), *Strategies for inclusion and social cohesion from education in Europe*, contributed to this goal. INCLUD-ED findings led to its recognition as one of the ten examples of success stories, the only one in the social sciences, from the European Commission's Framework Programmes of Research (European Commission (2011). The project identified seven successful educational actions (SEAs) that are transferable and universal (Flecha, 2015):

1. *Educational participation of the Community* consists in family involvement in learning activities. International research has shown the benefits of family and community participation in the educational process. The INCLUD-ED Project (2006-2011) reviewed current research and concluded that participation of the community in education centres enhances students' performance. Educational participation consists of implementing actions to promote the participation of family and/or other members of the school community in decision-making processes and evaluation, as well as in learning spaces such as the classroom (Diez et al., 2011).
2. *Interactive Groups* (IGs) consist of arranging the classroom into small groups of students with the support of a volunteer in each group. The teacher manages the classroom tasks and supports the groups when needed. The groups are heterogeneous, reflecting the diversity of the classroom in terms of academic achievement, cultural background and gender (Valero, Redondo-Sama, & Elboj, 2018).
3. *Dialogic Literary Gatherings* (DLG) are sessions where participants share their thoughts and impressions about the best of universal literature. Previously, every participant read the agreed pages. In the gathering, through dialogue and with participant's contributions, they talk about the contents of the text and the topics they have derived from it. An enriching conversation emerges, allowing participants to deepen fundamental human concerns and promote knowledge building.
4. *Extension of Learning Time* is an initiative to extend learning beyond the formal school schedule. Extended learning time can accelerate learning by devoting extra time to learning activities outside the classroom (Morlà-Folch, Ríos González, Mara, & García Yeste, 2020). This initiative is managed by volunteers and increases the diversity of interactions of the students with people other than their regular teachers.
5. *Dialogic Model of Prevention and Conflict Resolution* is an initiative that consists of opening spaces for a dialogue among the different groups of the school community to define the community's coexistence norms that should be complied with by all members (Flecha & García-Yeste, 2007). The initiative is focused on prevention, so the actions are oriented to socialize children and youngsters in free violence spaces by promoting "zero tolerance for violence" (Rios-Gonzalez et al., 2019).
6. *Family Education* is training sessions for parents and other community members delivered in the school. The training sessions are managed and organized by the community, and the participants themselves are the ones who decide what type of training they would deliver according to their needs (e.g., literacy, local language or preparing the university entry exam for adults) (Girbés-Peco, Gairal-Casadó, & Torrego-Egido, 2019).
7. *Dialogic Pedagogical Training* is an initiative for teacher training based on relevant theoretical and scientific literature in pedagogy and education. This action fosters teacher continuing education based on valid arguments supporting teachers' commitment to high-quality education for all children (Roca, Gómez, & Burgués, 2015).

The findings of the INCLUD-ED project (INCLUD-ED, 2006-2011) supported educational policies and practices throughout Europe. Subsequent research projects have spread the implementation of SEAs and have created a network of educational institutions aiming to transform the classroom, the school and the community (e.g. Step4Seas, 2016-2019 and SALEACOM, 2015-2017). Many schools that applied SEAs became a Learning Community (LC), assuming a distinct manner of organizing the school decision-making process and promoting community participation providing a high-quality education for all regardless of their background. Several European Union institutions, such as the European Commission, the European Parliament and the European Council, have recommended the LC approach for preventing desertion from school as a priority in the 2020 European Union strategy (European Commission, 2011). The LC approach has spread strongly in Spain and Latin American countries. In fact, 832 schools exist working as LCs, including Spain, Brazil, Peru, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, Argentina and Mexico (Comunidades de aprendizaje Instituto Natura, 2019). However, approximately 8470 schools are involved in some way, with an LC implementing one or more SEA (Comunidades de aprendizaje Instituto Natura, 2019).

Researchers have been studying the implementation of the LC approach and the application of SEA in the schools for more than a decade. Currently, there is cumulative research at the study level that has collected evidence of various students' outcomes as a result of participating in these school-based initiatives so far and has been published in scientific journals. The specialized research literature on SEAs and LCs provides sound knowledge based on their organization, outcomes and impacts. Researchers have identified several types of transformation and improvement of students' educational outcomes, personal well-being and social relations. However, there has not yet been any attempt to synthesize this knowledge or to provide a unified framework to understand the different types of impacts on students participating in these initiatives. The present research synthesis focuses on the impacts of SEAs on individual student educational and social outcomes. Our synthesis aims to 1) identify different types of impacts on students as a result of participating in SEAs, 2) offer a unified and comprehensive framework of SEA's impact on students, and 3) provide suggestions for further research.

## 2. Methods

To respond to our research questions, we conducted a research synthesis (Cooper, 2017). Research synthesis can adopt a variety of forms, and our study follows an integrative approach, as we reviewed the findings of a body of research through a particular question (Compton-Lilly, Rogers, & Lewis Ellison, 2021) by focusing on issues related to the impacts of SEAs on pre-school and primary students.

We completed the research synthesis in different phases, using a systematic approach as part of the research process. First, we performed a literature search of relevant scientific databases and a manual search of the Community of Research on Excellence for all (CREA) database, a research group that lead the INCLUD-ED project and created the project of schools as Learning Communities (Registered in the Spanish Patent and Trademark Office, 2014). Second, we screened the literature retrieved and eliminated irrelevant literature based on inclusion/exclusion criteria. Finally, we analyzed the selected case studies following a mixed-methods research synthesis (Heyvaert, Maes, & Onghena, 2013).

### 2.1. Literature search and selection

To search the literature, we compiled a list of primary search terms based on our existing knowledge about SEAs and combined them (see Appendix 1). We conducted an electronic search of three databases from 2000 onwards: Web of Science, Scopus, and Scielo, as we expected these databases to provide comprehensive coverage. We used English and Spanish terms in all three databases. This search retrieved 914 records. We also searched the CREA website database and retrieved a total of 397 records. After duplicates were removed, we obtained the first sample of 1021 publications. Following the structural review approach of Moher et al. (2015), we excluded irrelevant publications based on titles (medical, health, informatics articles, and conference papers) and abstract reading (editorials, other non-research articles and articles not related to SEAs or LCs). Of the remaining 151 records, a full text was downloaded and reviewed for final selection. According to the goals of our literature synthesis, we defined the following criteria for inclusion/exclusion: articles to be included should report empirical studies (Criterion 1) focused on the impact of SEAs (Criterion 2) on students (Criterion 3) in preschool (3–6 years) and primary schools (6–12 years) (Criterion 4). A detailed reading of the full articles was carried out, resulting in a few more exclusions and a final sample of 63 articles (see Fig. 1).

### 2.2. Analysis of the literature

We performed the analysis of the literature in several rounds. First, a thematic analysis was conducted to structure all the themes

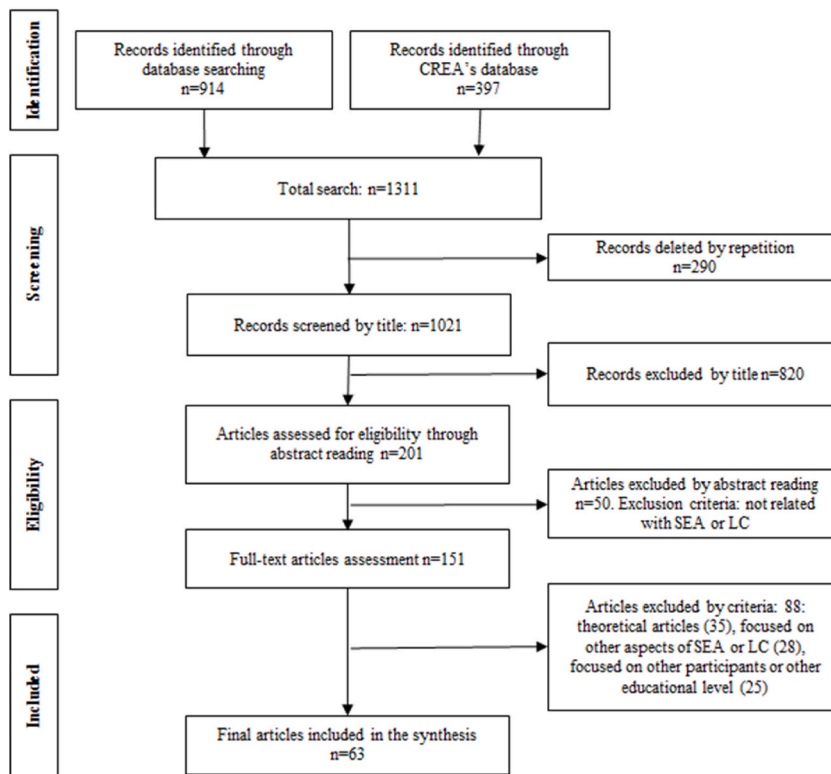


Fig. 1. Flowchart of the search and selection process.

related to the impacts of SEAs in preschool and primary students. This methodology allowed us to summarize the key features of a large body of data without losing a detailed description of the data set (Heyvaert et al., 2013). To do this, each article was read thoroughly by the four researchers (authors of the synthesis) independently, with the aim of identifying salient themes related to our research questions. We immersed ourselves in a first reading using open coding to conceptualize and classify findings. Specifically, we identified the findings of studies that were explicitly related to the impact of SEAs on students outcomes. Subsequently, we put together the results of this first round, we discussed and refined the coding and reached a consensus for a common coding scheme.

Second, we developed a codebook that named and described the major coding categories (see Table 1) (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). At this point, we attempted to maintain a rich description of the context, when available, to grasp the full details of each study (Doyle, 2003). To do this, we also included in the codebook additional descriptive information to extract from each article (reference number -we assigned a number to each study-, publication year, authors, title, type of SEA, data collection, methods, context description -location of the school, population description, socio-economic description-, country, educational level, number of case studies). We created a spreadsheet in Excel with all the mentioned categories we intended to extract information from the primary studies.

Third, we read each study thoroughly for a second time. In this round, we approached the primary studies with a defined coding scheme as we began the process of ‘reading as a reviewer’ (Compton-Lilly et al., 2021). We extracted the data and completed the spreadsheet with all the descriptive information and the analytical coded themes. For the analytical coded themes, relevant paragraphs of the primary studies were coded into the agreed category codes, extracting the exact words from the reviewed articles. It was often difficult to decide the selection and length of the text and the quotation to extract (Soilemezi & Linceviciute, 2018), so we agreed to extract complete, meaningful paragraphs. We coded 278 relevant paragraphs. Next, we discussed the complete coding by category and the classification of the coded paragraphs until a consensus was reached and a joint classification was established (see Appendix 2 for an example of a complete article analyzed in the spreadsheet).

Finally, we discussed the findings and created a full story for each category (Doyle, 2003), showing nuances and contrasts of the impact of SEAs in three levels: individual, group, and community. This process consisted in putting all the pieces together to create a full interpretation of our categorial scheme. At this point, we distilled the data into more than the parts alone, intending to create one coherent interpretation of the findings (Flemming & Noyes, 2021). This step was close to the writing of the results.

### 3. Results

We surfaced 63 articles that met our inclusion criteria (see Appendix 3). The articles contain research studies that cover data from 103 single schools and some of these articles reported data on the same case study (see Appendix 4). The reviewed articles mainly reported studies on interactive groups and dialogue literature gatherings. In terms of geographic distribution, the majority of the articles reported studies from Spain and in urban contexts. Thirty-six of the reviewed studies reported on the timespan during which SEAs were implemented to produce the results, spanning from 18 years to less than a year, specially for those articles reporting on quantitative research studies. Fig. 2 summarizes the descriptive characteristics of the reviewed articles.

Regarding the context description of the studies, thirty-three papers reported studies conducted in deprived contexts in schools serving families with high unemployment, labor insecurity and low educational background. Moreover, thirty-two studies highlighted students’ diversity as a salient feature of the school context. Articles spanned the 2009–2020 period, with a pick on 2015 (14 articles), one year after the INCLUD-ED project finished. Most of the reviewed articles have at least one author related to the INCLUD-ED research team, in many cases in collaboration with other researchers.

In terms of the research methodology, most of the reviewed articles used qualitative designs and reported on a single case study. Forty-two of the qualitative studies follow a communicative methodology approach, assuming an equal dialogue between researchers and participants seeking to build together scientific knowledge of social reality through the interaction of multiple and diverse voices (Gómez, 2019). Qualitative studies rely on multiple techniques of data collection such as semi-structured interviews, deep interviews, classroom observation, and focus groups. Participants of the studies are teachers, students, family members, community agents, education administration professionals, and members of the school management team. Moreover, four qualitative studies draw on communicative daily life story, that is, a dialogue between the researcher and the participant oriented to reflect on and interpret their daily life (eg. Molina-Roldán, 2015a). Eight of the reviewed articles used document analysis, such as school reports, students outcomes and standardized test results (eg. Flecha & Soler, 2013; Valls, & Kyriakides, 2013).

**Table 1**

Coded themes and categories.

Level	Category	Themes
<b>Individual</b>	Instrumental learning for all	improve academic skills, learning strategies, effort, students’ commitment, learning opportunities, students’ achievement,
	Self-esteem and motivation	self-confidence, higher educational expectations, motivation for learning, students’ attitudes towards learning
<b>Group</b>	Interpersonal relationships	peer collaboration, solidarity, friendship
	Cohesion and conflict reduction	respect for diversity, respecting norms
<b>Community</b>	Family involvement and change towards school	involvement, expectations, diverse role models, openness, satisfaction
	Absenteeism reduction	school-community bonds, sense of belonging

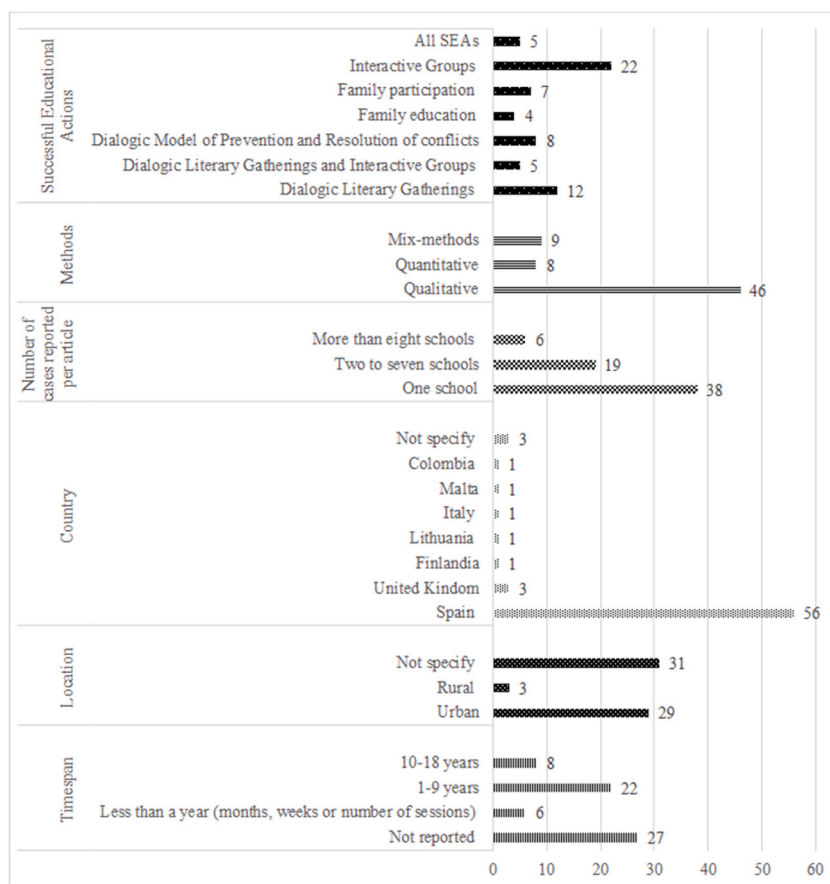


Fig. 2. Description of the reviewed studies

Note: Number of studies  $n = 63$ . Three articles reported studies conducted in more than one country.

The reviewed studies based on mixed-methods combined the use of semi structured interviews, communicative daily life story, classroom observations and questionnaires. In these studies, the qualitative data were more prominent, whereas quantitative data complement the analysis or contextualize the case studies (eg. Capllonch Bujosa, Figueras, & Castro, 2018; Alexiu & Sordé, 2011).

The reviewed studies using quantitative methods draw on self-reported questionnaires, and cross-sectional data (eg. Villardón-Gallego, García-Carrión, Yáñez-Marquina, & Estévez, 2018) and only three of them used a quasi-experimental design (García-Carrión, Yáñez-Marquina, & Estévez, 2018; Gutiérrez-Fresneda, 2019; Huéscar-Huéscar Hernández, Andrés Fabra, & Moreno-Murcia, 2020).

Following, we present the results of our synthesis, according to the three levels of analysis: individual, group, and community, highlighting the findings regarding the impact of SEAs on students.

### 3.1. Individual level

*Instrumental Learning for all.* Forty-one articles reported findings about the improvement of students' instrumental learning on specific subject-related learning outcomes. The reviewed articles reported improvements in students' learning outcomes most frequently in mathematics and language (Álvarez Álvarez & Puigdemívol Aguadé, 2014; Flecha & Soler, 2013; Ortega Palacios & Álvarez Álvarez, 2015; Soler, Morlà-Folch, García-Carrión, & Valls, 2020) and, to a lesser extent, either in language (Aubert, Molina, Shubert, & Vidu, 2017; Lopez de Aguilera, 2019) or in mathematics (García-Carrión & Díez-Palomar, 2015). However, SEAs are applied in many other subjects, such as IGs in sports (e.g., Castro Sandúa, Gómez González, & Macazaga López, 2014), in English classes (Zubiri-Esnaola, Vidu, Rios-González, & Morla-Folch, 2020) or in Religion (García-Carrión, Villardón-Gallego, Martínez de la Hidalga, & Marauri, 2020; Marauri Ceballos, Villarejo Carballido, & García Carrión, 2020).

The reviewed articles measured the students' learning outcomes based on school test results or national standardized tests. For example, García-Carrión, Martínez de la Hidalga, and Villardón (2016) showed through UK's standardized tests that the percentage of students reaching a higher than expected academic outcome in reading was 57%, while before implementing the SEAs, this percentage was 32%. In another study, Soler et al. (2020) revealed students' learning improvement in a Colombian rural school using standardized national tests in fifth grade. The authors demonstrated that "in 2016, 39% of the students scored in the satisfactory level while in 2017, after another year of LC project implementation, the percentage of students reaching this level increased to 72%" (Soler et al., 2020, p.

75).

While the majority of the reviewed articles focused on primary students, two articles (Rios-Gonzalez et al., 2019; Aubert et al., 2017) revealed improvements in learning outcomes in preschool students. For example, Aubert et al. (2017) found that 5-year-old children had improved their reading and writing skills after three months of participation in IGs, according to school assessments.

Several studies showed evidence of the benefits of IGs for immigrants. As an example, Valero, Redondo & Elboj (2018) argued that by using IG methodology immigrant 'students learn faster'. Another example is posed by García-Carrión & Díez-Palomar's case study of a school with a high percentage of immigrant students that was able to improve mathematics learning outcomes in five years with the implementation of IGs. The authors revealed that before implementing the IGs, only one child in four was able to pass the mathematics assessment, while after five years of participating in IGs, three children out of four succeeded in passing the test.

Moreover, the reviewed articles found that school benefits for students with special educational needs. In this regard, Valls and Kyriakides (2013) and Molina (2015a, 2015b) reported on the impact of SEAs on these students, arguing that IGs and DLG allow them to participate in the ordinary classroom doing the same activities as their classmates do. Melgar (2015) evidenced several case studies of students with special needs who had increased their engagement in the activities through participating in DLG. Valls & Kyriakides (2014) exposed a case study in which a student with speech and learning difficulties improved his educational outcomes by participating in IGs.

*Self-esteem and motivation.* Thirty-six articles revealed that SEAs foster high expectations, self-confidence and self-assurance among students, which in turn increase their motivation to learn. Several studies argued that students were more motivated to learn in the IGs and DLGs (e.g., Elboj, 2015). Moreover, articles reported that students participating in SEAs had higher expectations about their performance in school (García-Carrión & Díez-Palomar, 2015) and about their expectations of continuing studying in the future (Aubert, 2015).

Consistent with this finding, the reviewed articles accounted for an enhancement of students' self-esteem. Several articles revealed that students from underprivileged contexts felt "much better because they demonstrate to themselves they can do it" (Melgar, 2015, p. 931), students felt that "dialogic gatherings have helped them gain confidence in themselves" (Aubert, 2015, p. 860) and "immigrant students gained confidence in themselves and improved their self-esteem" (Valero et al., 2018, p. 789). Moreover, reviewed articles demonstrated that through the SEAs, students felt they could do things they were not able to do before, their self-confidence increased, and their learning outcomes improved. For example, Aubert (2015) and Elboj (2015) reported two case studies based on biographical narratives showing a great improvement in self-confidence and self-esteem of two students belonging to minority groups. The authors described the process of empowerment of these students through their participation in DLG.

Students with special educational needs also gained confidence and improved their self-esteem, so "they do not feel stigmatized anymore" participating in the same learning activities as their peers (Molina-Roldán, 2015b, p. 368). García, Gairal, Munté, and Plaja (2018) presented the case study of a student with special needs who had gained self-confidence and self-esteem by feeling she can also help their peers in some tasks. The reviewed articles manifested several case studies in which students with special needs are motivated to participate in IGs and DLG, and this is demonstrated through their explicit motivation when they are asked what is their favourite subject and their answer is 'Spanish Language', where DLG are implemented (Molina-Roldán, 2015).

### 3.2. Group level

*Interpersonal relationship.* In this category, we included 24 articles on all elements related to interpersonal relationships among students. In the reviewed articles, interpersonal relationships are expressed in terms of students help (Fernández Antón, 2015a,b; García Yeste, Gairal Casadó, & Gómez González, 2018; Rekalde Rodríguez, Vizcarra Morales, & Macazaga, 2018), cooperative attitudes (Díez-Palomar, Rué Rosell, García Wehrle, & Brown, 2010; Ordóñez-Sierra, Rodríguez-Gallego, & Rodríguez-Santero, 2017), supportive relationships (Aubert, Molina, Shubert, & Vidu, 2017; García-Carrión, 2015) and solidarity (e.g., Valero et al., 2018; Villardón-Gallego et al., 2018; Alexiu & Sordé, 2011). An article reveals that local and foreign students "together create a positive, equitable and non stereotypical climate, improving the relationships" (Valero et al., 2018, p. 794).

In this vein, different studies have found that students learn to collaborate, to know about each other and to have better relationships (e.g., Ordóñez-Sierra et al., 2017). Concurrently, García-Carrión evidenced that DLGs provided 'spaces where friendships flourished' (2015, p. 917) by showing the testimony of a student who expressed that the DLG allowed him to make friends as they started to share their ideas out of the classroom.

According to the reviewed articles, SEAs create an environment that allows students to express their own views and emotions, contributing to strengthening cohesion among students, fostering friendship (e.g., Aubert et al., 2017; Duque, Gairal, Molina, & Roca, 2020) and creating bonds of solidarity and mutual help (Chocarro de Luis & Sáenz de Jubera Ocón, 2015; Villardón-Gallego, García-Carrión, Yáñez-Marquina, & Estévez, 2018). Specifically, a study revealed that DLGs and IGs were related to students' prosocial behavior (Khalfouli, García-Carrión, Villardón-Gallego, & Duque, 2020). The authors observed that by organizing the classroom into IGs, preschoolers become part of a dialogic learning context that fosters flexible interactions; everyone is encouraged to engage and work together.

Moreover, several articles highlighted that students help each other in solving learning tasks. For example, Aubert et al. (2017) reported that students were willing to help other classmates learn the content of the class. These researchers accounted for students' collaborative behaviors towards their peers. Furthermore, García-Carrión and Díez-Palomar (2015) observed students teaching their peers how to solve learning tasks, which eventually helped them consolidate learning, and both share a common understanding regardless of their cultural differences. In the IG, the "whole group completes the task" (Valls & Kyriakides, 2013, p. 29) is a premise, so the classroom environment prompts the students to collaborate to solve the task.

*Cohesion and conflict reduction.* This category includes 33 articles related to classroom climate improvement, promotion of cohesion through diversity, respect and prevention of violence. Authors of the reviewed articles highlighted that SEAs nurture respect for gender, cultural and physical diversity, promoting all students to feel included (Elboj, 2015; Lopez de Aguilera, Torras-Gómez, García-Carrión, & Flecha, 2020; Martín Hocajo & Ríos González, 2014)

Aubert (2015), using the biographical method, accounted for the transformation experienced by a girl who was bullied by her classmates. The study showed that the student contribution to the DLG made their classmates and the dynamic of the DLG as a recurrent activity changed their minds about her and see her in a different way. Furthermore, a case study conducted in a Colombian rural school by Soler et al. (2020) found a reduction of 80% of the conflicts among students in less than two years of transformation of the school into an LC in a highly conflictive context. In a similar vein, another study that focused on the implementation of the dialogic model of prevention and resolution of conflicts showed a positive impact on school coexistence (Villarejo-Carballido, Pulido, de Botton, & Serradell, 2019). Through the quotes of participants the papers reveal that the school was able to spread the premise of standing out in support of the victim of bad behaviour, and now when students witness a violence situation they intervene and denounce it (Villarejo-Carballido et al., 2019). Carbonell Sevilla, Cantero Rodríguez, Navarro Sánchez, and Melgar (2016) also found that students increased an active rejection of bad behaviours by standing out against them.

Three of the reviewed articles focused on conflict prevention in physical education classes through the implementation of the Dialogic model of conflict reduction and IGs (Capllonch Bujosa, Figueras, & Castro, 2018; Castanedo & Capllonch, 2018; Castro Sandúa, Gómez González, & Macazaga López, 2014; Martín Hocajo & Ríos González, 2014). The authors observed that the implementation of these SEAs reduced considerably the emergence of conflict among students during the classes. Capllonch Bujosa et al. (2018) pointed out that IGs introduced cooperative games, promoting teamwork abilities, shared goals and fostering conflict resolution. Martín Hocajo and Ríos González (2014) reported on a case study where teachers applied the IG in the physical education class, norms were discussed by everyone. The authors found that by applying these actions, students were more engaged in the proposed activities, they followed the norms to a greater extent and conflict situations were prevented.

The reviewed studies also point to some limitations. Although the implementation of SEAs strengthens horizontal dialogue among all members of the community and in LC a great amount of time is dedicated to organize assemblies and to discuss coexistence norms, conflict do not disappear. Students may still need a mediator agent to solve the conflicts (Martín Hocajo & Ríos González, 2014) and adults (mostly the teacher, but also volunteers) are needed as a guide to ensure that all students participated in equal terms because this did not happen spontaneously (e.g., Valero et al., 2018). The role of the whole community is essential, and in this sense, Capllonch Bujosa et al. (2018) expressed that a lack of commitment with the norms by any members of the school constrains the results of the initiative.

### 3.3. Community level

*Family involvement and change toward schools.* Thirty-one articles reported different impacts on students through family involvement initiatives. Several articles found that family participation in IG and DLG improved students' learning outcomes (García-Yeste, Ruiz Eugenio, & Comas, 2019; Malagón Moreno & González López, 2018; Molina, 2015a; Puigdemívol, Molina, Sabando, Gómez, & Petreñas, 2017), learning motivation (Renta, Aubert, & Tierno, 2019) and conflict reduction (Padrós, 2014). This is particularly important in underprivileged communities in which families have been traditionally excluded or not reached to actively participate in schools. For example, García-Yeste, Gairal-Casadó & Gómez-González (2018) and Renta et al. (2019) exposed that school initiatives involving family members in contexts of social exclusion made them change their perception toward school, and this change had an impact on the learning outcomes of students. Villarejo-Carballido et al. (2018) point out that students take encouragement from their families, and when the adults who support them and protect them value schools, students are favourable towards school activities.

In addition, the reviewed articles indicated that when family members are invited to participate actively in SEAs, they are more engaged in supporting their children's school activities and homework (C. Álvarez-Álvarez, 2015; M.C. Álvarez-Álvarez & Guerra-Sanchez, 2016; Aubert, Molina, Shubert, & Vidu, 2017; De Botton Fernández, 2015; De Botton, Girbés, Ruiz, & Tellado, 2014; García-Carrión, Padrós Cuxart, Alvarez, & Flecha, 2020). Aubert et al. (2017) evidenced a case study in which families had increased their expectations towards their children's education, and now children are more enthusiastic about working hard and learning in school. De Botton Fernández (2015) provides an example of a mother that reflects on her participation in school initiatives, and how these actions help her to support her daughter in school work. Cantero Rodríguez et al. (2018) report on a case study where grandparents participated in family activities and students expressed that now they help them with school homework.

The reviewed articles reported that family education relates to an improvement in family members' basic skills (García Yeste et al., 2018), such as reading and writing (Flecha, 2012) and digital literacy (Flecha, García, Gómez, & Latorre, 2009). Consequently, better family skills related to better students' learning outcomes. García Yeste et al. (2018) found that family learning had had a positive impact on students' learning. The authors observed eight case studies where the improvement of students' learning outcomes were endorsed to family skill improvement. Flecha (2012) observed that family education increases students' motivation to learn when their families attend the courses, and family education transformed the learning context of the student at home. Similarly, Flecha et al. (2009) explained a case study where students' learning outcomes were linked to their mothers' attendance to digital literacy courses.

The reviewed articles reported that family involvement in school activities increased diversity and enriched the variety of role models for students (e.g., Elboj, 2015; García-Carrión & Díez-Palomar, 2015; Valls & Kyriakides, 2013). For example, García-Carrión and Díez-Palomar (2015) reported on how the participation of a Moroccan mother in the IG positively influenced other Moroccan students as a significant role model. The authors argued that the participation of this mother facilitated the Moroccan students to adopt "a central participation instead of a peripheral one" (García-Carrión & Díez-Palomar, 2015, p. 161).

**Absenteeism reduction.** Nine reviewed articles show that SEA can have an impact in absenteeism reduction. Researchers point out that SEAs strengthen the bonds between schools and communities (Chocarro de Luis and Mollà Peña, 2017) and generate a greater openness of the schools toward the community (Gómez, Munte, & Sorde, 2014), which in turn is related to a better record in school attendance (Cantero & Pantoja, 2016; Flecha & Soler, 2013; Gírbés-Peco, Macías, & Álvarez, 2015). Thus, these findings challenge the deficit perspectives of attributing absenteeism to a lack of interest in education on the part of some communities (e.g. Roma community). For example, Flecha and Soler's (2013) case study of an LC in a deprived neighborhood reported that, while in 2006–2007 there was a 30% rate of absenteeism, in 2007–2008 this had been reduced to 10% and in 2008–09 absenteeism was just occasional (Flecha & Soler, 2013, p. 461). In addition, Gírbés-Peco et al. (2015) showed a case study of a school that changed the tendency on absenteeism: after six year of implementing SEA, the absenteeism is inexistent.

The reviewed articles reported that including families in the decision-making process transforms the school-community relationship since parents change their perceptions about the school (Flecha, 2012, Domínguez Rodríguez, 2018) and have decided the type of school they want (Flecha & Soler, 2013). This relevant participation and their engagement through SEAs develop a 'sense of belonging' to the school, not only on an individual but also on a collective level, which in turn relates to the reduction of absenteeism, accounting for a small percentage of truancy cases (Gírbés-Peco et al., 2015). Concretely, Gómez et al. (2014) highlighted the importance of involving Roma males at school, upending another generalized belief that fathers do not want their daughters to attend high school. Ramis-Salas (2015) revealed a case study in which research participants express that the children of the families participating in school activities rarely missed school.

#### 4. Discussion and conclusion

Our synthesis explains that SEAs can have multiple impacts and provides evidence of transformation in different levels. Related to the first goal, the current research identifies different types of impacts on students as a result of participating in SEAs. We identified impacts on three levels, individual, group and community, and in six categories: (1) *Instrumental learning for all*, (2) *Self-esteem and motivation*, (3) *Interpersonal relationships*, (4) *Cohesion and conflict reduction*, (5) *Family involvement and change towards schools* and (6) *Absenteeism reduction*.

In this synthesis, the selection of articles focused on student outcomes, so most often the findings are related to *Instrumental learning for all*, that is, students' learning improvement regardless of the background. This collective body of research provides a picture of a broad spectrum of student learning outcomes, such as academic improvements in mathematics and language subjects, as well as metacognitive outcomes, including effective learning strategies or learning dispositions, such as effort and commitment to their studies. This finding connects with a dialogic learning approach (Flecha & Soler, 2013), where dialogue is the basis of cooperative situations of learning among students and other members of the educational community. The role of dialogue in learning has been central in a number of learning theories, explaining learning and cognitive development as a cultural process that occurs in interactions with others (Vygotsky, 1978), allowing sharing and knowledge creation (Rogoff, 1990; Wells, 1999). The current body of research about SEAs suggests that students learn more and better when learning is organized through initiatives that promote dialogue and meaningful interactions among students, teachers and community members.

Among nonacademic outcomes, researchers have identified that SEAs have positively influenced students' *self-esteem and motivation*. Studies in the current synthesis reported that students participating in SEAs were able to build confidence in their own capacities, improve their self-esteem and have higher expectations for their future. This is an interesting result, taking into account that these students usually come from vulnerable backgrounds. Other studies have shown that underprivileged students tend to lack confidence in themselves or have low expectations of their future, but they can change this self-perception when they are able to have positive interactions with their peers and significant adults (Khattab, 2015; Kim et al., 2014). In this sense, SEAs were implemented in LCs to transform the situation by helping vulnerable students improve their self-concept and nurture higher expectations for themselves.

The current research synthesis revealed impacts on *interpersonal relationships* and *cohesion and conflict reduction*, that is, impacts of SEAs on the relationships among classmates. The studies included in the review reported that students showed greater positive dispositions to help each other and that students displayed a greater commitment to their classmates' learning. Moreover, studies have reported that conflict among students has been reduced, as students were engaged in developing their own rules of coexistence. Researchers of the studies included in the current synthesis evidence that these transformations lead to the creation of a better climate in the classroom and schools, providing a better learning environment for all students to feel included. This finding is in line with previous research showing that schools' and classrooms' climates affect students' learning outcomes and that this is particularly important for underprivileged students who benefit more from inclusive and learning-conducive school climates (Valero et al., 2018).

While our synthesis focused on student outcomes, it is essential also to refer to the role of the community, whether they be classmates, family members or volunteers. In this line, the category of *family involvement and change towards school* shed light on students' outcomes as well. The studies included in the current synthesis revealed that SEAs and LCs transformed the negative perception toward school into a positive one, promoting higher levels of community participation in school life. In line with Clark (2020), the current synthesis revealed that this change had a positive impact on students as well when they observed their parents or other parents engaging in school activities, bringing in multiple role models as parents participated in classrooms as volunteers enriching students' learning experiences. Consequently, students tend to exhibit greater learning commitment and motivation toward school activities. This finding connects with the corpus of research about family involvement, showing the benefits of parents' engagement in students' learning outcomes (Epstein, 2011; Jeynes, 2017; Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2012; Roksa & Kinsley, 2019; Swain & Cara, 2019).

The studies in this synthesis contended that SEAs and LCs can *reduce absenteeism* among students. The *reduction of absenteeism* was observed as a positive outcome related to community participation in schools implementing SEAs and transformed into LCs. The reviewed studies showed that there is a reciprocal influence between community participation in schools and increased relevance of the school for the community, which made the students feel more engaged and committed to participating in school activities. Although few articles address this topic, it is relevant because these studies report cases where there was a very high rate of absenteeism, which may not be the starting point for all schools implementing SEAs.

The body of research reviewed here highlights positive results on the impact of SEAs on learners. However, the authors recognize some limitations. Most of the qualitative studies draw from a single case study, and quantitative studies rely on small and cross-sectional samples. Quasi-experimental studies highlighted limitations as well, such as the need to standardize initial conditions (Huéscar-Huéscar Hernández et al., 2020), to further replicate the study in other classrooms (Díez-Palomar, García-Carrión, Hargreaves, & Vieites, 2020) or the use randomly selection participants (Villardón-Gallego et al., 2018).

The findings in this synthesis revealed several gaps in the knowledge that should be addressed in further research. First, only two studies focused on preschool education with students aged 3–6. Although SEA has been implemented in all educational levels, there are more experiences in primary school than in kindergarten and preschool. This fact is reflected in the published articles. Despite this reality, it would be interesting to conduct more research at this educational level to obtain more evidence of SEAs' impacts at an early age.

Second, we observed that DLG and IGs are widely investigated, while the other initiatives have not been studied to a similar extent. One reason may be that DLG and IGs SEAs are the most implemented around the world. Another reason for this may be due to the focus of our synthesis on students' impact, and research about other initiatives reporting findings on family and community impacts were not considered. Nevertheless, we believe that researchers can increase their studies about the other SEAs to better understand the impacts on students' outcomes.

Third, most of the articles included in the synthesis were conducted in Spain. However, SEA and LC initiatives are also widely implemented in Latin American countries, but this research context is underrepresented in peer-review articles. On one hand, SEAs and LC approach is a school-based initiative, and usually schools do not have the possibility to conduct research and publish the results in scientific journals. On the other hand, local research about the impact of SEA and LC initiatives might still be marginal among latin american researchers. Nevertheless, we found one example of collaboration between Spanish researchers and a Colombian school implementing SEAs who were able to publish the research in a peer-reviewed journal (Soler et al., 2020). More of these collaborations are needed to foster research in latinamerican contexts.

Finally, regarding the research design, most of the reviewed articles comprises qualitative studies and, to a lower extent, they are based on mixed-methods and quantitative methods. The higher number of articles based on qualitative methods may be due to the tradition among researchers in this field. Nevertheless, our knowledge about SEAs and LCs would benefit from and expand with the combination of quantitative and longitudinal studies. Likewise, quasi-experimental studies would also contribute to our knowledge about SEA and LC impacts on educational and non-educational outcomes.

These findings have implications for school leaders and teachers, and educational administrators. Previous research about SEAs have shown positive impacts on students outcomes, and the current research offers a synthesis of this evidence in a unified framework. Our synthesis demonstrates that SEAs enhance learning outcomes by providing students with challenging collective activities and ensuring they have the resources to solve them with dialogue. SEAs are associated with students' self-esteem and motivation by promoting inclusion of all voices and value diversity. This finding is important for all educational stakeholders as these initiatives foster a better school climate, promote inclusion of all students and pave the way to reduce the emergence of conflict. Furthermore, our synthesis revealed that SEAs has the potential to transform the community, which in turn has a positive impact on students' learning. As research has shown, SEAs support Sustainable Development Goal Quality Education for all. Furthermore, it has recently been evidenced that during temporary school closures, schools were able to translate initiatives into virtual workspaces during the COVID-19 pandemic (Roca, Melgar, Gairal-Casadó, & Pulido-Rodríguez, 2020). Thus, school leaders, teachers and administrators might use this information to foster school transformations with the aim of providing a quality learning environment for all students even in a pandemic situation. Our synthesis revealed that SEAs offer the possibility to enhance the quality of education for those who most need it and contribute to social transformation through education.

#### 4.1. Limitations

This study is not without limitations. First, this literature synthesis focused on peer-reviewed articles only. It is worth mentioning that there is a great amount of other academic articles and school and administration documents that support the effects of LCs, or documents from other organizations such as Natura (Comunidades de aprendizaje Instituto Natura, 2019), that could provide additional information about the impact of SEAs. Second, most of the reviewed articles are authored by researchers that have at some degree participated in the INCLUD-ED or related projects, in collaboration with others. This reality responds to the increasing demand on researchers not only to publish the results of their research, but also to identify and report on the social impacts of the implementation of research results. While it does not minimise the rigour of the results provided in the publications (as peer-reviewed articles), the growing body of research on the implementation of SEAs in different contexts is expected to provide insights from very diverse research teams. Third, our review focused on the impact of SEAs on students' outcomes. However, the literature about SEA also reported the impact of these initiatives on other relevant actors, such as volunteers or the wider community. Other literature reviews could address the impact of SEAs and LCs beyond the school (e.g., transformations in the community and employment rates of the families). Fourth, our review sample focused on preschool and primary education comprising 3- to 12-year-old students, but SEAs

have been implemented at other educational levels that were excluded from this synthesis (e.g., secondary education, adult education, university).

### Author statement

**Teresa Morlà-Folch:** Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing - Original Draft. **Ana Inés Renta-Davids:** Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing - Original Draft. **Maria Padros:** Conceptualization, Writing - Review & Editing, Validation. **Rosa Valls:** Conceptualization, Supervision.

### Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2022.100482>.

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