

Running Collaborative Competence Groups - Exploring Experiences From Five Countries

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Abstract

Collaborative competence group (CCG) is a research method within the collaborative research tradition. These groups are in line with a co-creation approach in which multiple stakeholders contribute to finding solutions to shared problems. Although CCGs have increased in use over the past decades, research on this method is limited. In this article, we explore and discuss the development and work in CCGs in an Erasmus + founded project: Co-creation through social inclusion in education (COSI.ed). The CCGs have been conducted in five countries over a three-year period: Denmark, Norway, Poland, Portugal and Spain. We have analyzed documents used in the CCG work and focus group discussions among the CCG facilitators. The findings show how it is essential to recruit adequate stakeholders and how the network can contribute as gatekeepers in this identification. Preparation for the CCG meetings is essential, and a close collaboration with the main project team is crucial. A feedback loop is created by requesting feedback from the main project team and bringing back feedback from the CCG discussions. The facilitators experienced that it could be challenging to involve all stakeholders in the discussions. We discuss how it is possible to foster solutions for sustainable CCGs. We also discuss the challenges and possibilities associated with the facilitator role. Moreover, challenges related to the power imbalance are discussed. We conclude that CCGs can be used as a tool for co-creation in collaborative research within a broad range of disciplines.

Keywords

collaborative research, competence groups, stakeholders, facilitator, co-creation, young people

Introduction

In this article, we explore and discuss the method collaborative competence groups (CCG) in the Erasmus + project: Co-creation through Social Inclusion (COSI.ed) (COSI.ed, 2024). This is the first project to use CCGs on a large scale as the groups have been following COSI.ed in five countries over a three-year period from 2021 to 2024. We present the model and how the groups have been conducted and reflect on the challenges and opportunities of such an approach.

We describe the tradition of co-creation and collaborative research in which CCGs are rooted. Moreover, the concept of “competence groups” is explored and examples are provided to demonstrate how these have been carried out as a point of departure for the development of CCGs in the COSI.ed

project. We present the COSI.ed project and how CCGs have been organized and conducted within the project’s various contexts.

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Co-creation and Collaborative Research

CCGs have been developed in line with a tradition of collaborative research in which people involved in the research participate in the research process. Collaborative research is rooted in the civil rights movement (Davidson et al., 2009; Ness & von Heimburg, 2020). The involvement of stakeholders' voices can be described as a democratization of research and knowledge production (Chou et al., 2015; Crow, 2010; Edwards & Brannelly, 2017). The key epistemological assumption for a collaborative approach has been stated by Borg et al. (2012) as co-creation of knowledge: "Knowledge is embedded in the lives and experiences of individuals and that knowledge is developed only through a cooperative process between researchers and experiencing individuals" (p. 1). Thus, the research tradition is placed within a social constructivist paradigm in which knowledge, the social world, social relations, and practices are perceived as a discourse created through processes of communication between people (Fosnot, 2006; Philips, 2011). In this tradition, knowledge is regarded as something that is created and developed in context rather than being "something out there" waiting to be discovered (McNamee, 2010).

The collaborative approach is in line with the concept of co-creation, which was originally rooted in the private sector. It has been adapted by the public sector to involve citizens in problem-solving activities aiming to find new solutions to public challenges (Aastvedt & Higdem, 2022). Co-creation implies that various stakeholders are involved in a process aiming to add production of public value in example service development, and policy recommendations. Baptista et al. (2020). The process of co-creation is seen as interactions and the exchange of resources, knowledge, competencies, and ideas between the participating stakeholders. According to Torfing et al. (2016), co-creation involves two or more public and private actors in a process aiming to solve a shared problem, challenge, or task. The goal is to lead to new ways of solving the problem through improvements of outcomes or innovative step-changes that transform the understanding of the problem (Torfing et al., 2016, p. 802).

In collaborative co-creational processes, stakeholders may offer interpretations, analyses, and solutions that are deeper and more nuanced than those that might be understood by academics or policymakers. Moreover, by involving stakeholders, there is also the potential to develop more practical implications and new solutions as the stakeholders are closer to the field of practice (Krane et al., 2021). Stakeholder involvement in research, service, and policy development may contribute to more useful outcomes by producing better-quality research and developing services that are more appropriate to user needs (Ives et al., 2013). Furthermore, this type of involvement could be a way of empowering stakeholders and engaging "users" or other voices that are silenced or not often heard. In particular, this could be related to young people and children whose voices are often not heard directly

in research (Krane et al., 2021). The involvement of young people in research and service-development has shown benefits for youths, organizations, and communities (Shamrova & Cummings, 2017). The latter authors have pointed out how intergenerational dialogues and changes in the power dynamics between service providers and young people have been promoted in the collaborative processes.

In the context of school and education, critical pedagogy, which validates the student's knowledge, and contribution as a way of facilitating youth empowerment (Anderson, 2020). The basic tenets of critical pedagogy appear to be an important foundation within this context, also outside the school, as it simply provides reflective tools to rebut common-sense assumptions and to engage, creating the conditions for experiencing empowerment toward achieving justice. Critical pedagogy states that creating dialogical interactions that provide equal opportunities for all voices to be heard (Crabtree et al., 2009; Giroux, 2020). In the emancipatory traditions of voice (Arnot, 2006), the cultural dimension and appreciation of voice emerge as resources and effects of consciousness and transformative action (Macedo & Costa Araújo, 2014; Macedo, 2024). As people are expected to do in CCG, Freire (1981/2000) denounces the silencing of voices in education and states the need to take into account the culture of the oppressed; including their language, ways of developing their disciplinary work, and the knowledge of the world from which they can transition to the more structured knowledge, developed by means of school work (Freire, 1981/2000).

Competence Groups

A "competence group" is a research model within the tradition of collaborative research, which underlines the importance of letting alternative voices be heard and enables user involvement (Trivedi & Wykes, 2002). In this tradition, experiential knowledge based on first-hand experiences is considered to be valid knowledge (Krane et al., 2021).

There is no distinct definition of the "competence group" concept. However, a common feature is that it brings together stakeholders with relevant personal experience and invite them to engage in collaborative dialogues as a part of a research process (Sommer, 2019). The competence groups are arranged as arenas where chosen stakeholders meet multiple times for a defined period to take part in a research process together with professional researchers. Klevan (2017) states that this approach is best understood as a co-creative dialogical and relational process.

In the past decades, competence groups have been included as a research strategy in a number of studies. Examples include Borg and Kristiansen (2008), Borg et al. (2011), Gullslett et al. (2016); Veseth et al. (2013), Ness et al. (2014), Sælør, Ness, and Semb (2015), Klevan (2017), Brekke et al. (2017), Sommer (2019), Ogundipe, Borg, Sjøfjell, Bjørlykhaug, and Karlsson (2019), Semb et al. (2019), Kour et al. (2021), Trangsrud, Borg, Bratland-Sanda, and Klevan (2021),

Soggiu, Karlsson, Klevan, and Ness (2021), and Tønnesen et al. (2023); all of whom used competence groups as a part of their research approach.

Most competence groups have been carried out in the context of mental health research. In her research project, “Support for young persons with mental health problems”, Sommer (2019) initiated a competence group that included three young people who had experienced mental health problems, and four practitioners with experience in supporting young people with these conditions. She described how the competence group participated in parts of the study and data analysis. She also reflected on challenges related to the power relations in the research project as she, as a professional researcher, was setting the agenda and making the most significant decisions (Sommer, 2019).

In educational research, a competence group contributed to exploring the teacher-student relationship in upper secondary schools (Krane et al., 2016a, 2016b). The competence group consisted of two students, two teachers, two parents, one school nurse, and two researchers. Krane (2017) describes how the group contributed to knowledge with interactions and dynamic processes that exceeded the individual group members’ experiences from school life. She also described how the group contributed validity and reflexivity to the research process as the group members had hands-on experiences from the research context.

Competence groups are similar to other approaches in the collaborative research tradition such as stakeholder advisory boards/councils or community advisory boards which are structured groups comprised of diverse representatives from various sectors that have an interest or stake in the research project (Halladay et al., 2017; Masoud et al., 2021). These representatives provide guidance, feedback, and input throughout a research process. Another approach is Community of Inquiry (COI), applied by Cassidy et al. (2008) to the field of educational action-research. Similar to competence groups COI focus on the development of collaboration and a sense of community between groups composed of diverse stakeholders debating and proposing solutions and recommendations that should be transferred both to the community and to the policies that regulate these resources and actions. There are no fixed definitions nor distinct lines between these various approaches and the different concepts are used in different traditions. However, a common feature from the studies involving competence groups tend to highlight the expert by experience, the co-creation and dialogical processes within the competence groups (Klevan, 2017; Krane et al., 2021). Moreover, the competence groups, have a heterogeneous composition and are placing a strong emphasis on collaborative competence building among members of both the research group and participants and prioritize the development of practical, action-oriented skills and the implementation of solutions in specific contexts.

The examples of competence groups carried out for more than a decade provided inspiration for the development of the structure of competence groups in the COSI.ed project. As the COSI.ed project emphasizes the ongoing process of

collaboration and co-creation in these groups, the groups were called “Collaborative Competence Groups (CCGs).” Despite the rather extensive use of competence groups, none of the abovementioned studies have performed a thorough description of the method or analyzed the group processes of these competence groups; nor have the challenges, opportunities, and facilitation of these groups been comprehensively discussed. In this article, we address some of these issues by exploring and analyzing the use of CCGs in five countries over a three-year period.

Collaborative Competence Groups in the COSI.ed Project

The “Co-creation through Social Inclusion in Education” project (COSI, 2024) was founded by Erasmus+ and implemented between January 2021 and July 2024. COSI.ed is a partnership of 11 entities encompassing different profiles, including schools, universities and educational institutions from Denmark, Poland, Spain, Portugal, and Norway. The goal of the project is to contribute to the development of a more inclusive and egalitarian educational model adapted to the needs and society of today in various educational and cultural contexts. Subsequently, the project aims to provide policy recommendations to significantly reduce early leaving from education and training, increasing the percentage of students who complete their education.

To reach its goals, COSI.ed works on upscaling the model of the previous Erasmus + project, “Marginalisation and Co-created Education” (MaCE), which aim to include disadvantaged learners to excel at school and work (Gravesen et al., 2021). In line with a co-creation approach, COSI.ed entails engaging relevant stakeholders in CCGs. The CCGs tasks is to analyze, contribute input, and provide advice and support throughout the project’s trajectory, both domestically and internationally in the five participating countries. According to the project design, the CCGs have been established in each of the five participating countries. The assignment of the CCGs is to contribute to the COSI.ed project by providing feedback based on varied perspectives and experiences in developing the COSI.ed model. The objective was to facilitate co-creational processes through open dialogue and reflections in dynamic processes between the stakeholders in the COSI.ed project. The feedback obtained and the recommendations and proposals for improvement from the CCGs were considered both at regional and international level and were included both in the generation of the regional COSI.ed models and in the proposals for the inclusion of the methodology in the educational and social policies of each of the countries participating in COSI.ed. In addition, the heterogeneous composition of the groups with different stakeholders allowed the transfer of the model and the results of the project to different educational and social contexts. Therefore, CCGs had a crucial role to play in improving the model and transferring it to different resources in the community in which they operate. To increase the chances of achieving this effect, a

principle of balanced participation was applied, introducing the following proportions of members: 2–3 young people, one student, one teacher, one researcher, and one policymaker. Each country is responsible for arranging three CCG meetings per year during the project period.

A CCG facilitator is responsible for leading the groups and organizing their work. In the COSI. ed project, each country appointed a university teacher to act as a CCG facilitator. The facilitators joined two online training sessions before the CCGs were established. The sessions were conducted by an experienced CCG facilitator. The training covered the theoretical background and development of CCGs, examples of CCGs, and the facilitator's role in establishing and running CCGs. Typical group processes from previous competence groups in other projects were also addressed.

Research Questions

Competence groups have been used in collaborative research projects for more than a decade. Nevertheless, the concept of competence groups is loosely defined, and the process of this method is scarcely explored in research. COSI. ed is the first project to use the method CCGs on a large scale in an international context. In this article, we describe and reflect upon the processes of running CCGs in the five national contexts within the COSI. ed project. The research process will focus on the three research questions:

- (1) How can CCGs be organized to facilitate for co-creation between different stakeholders?
- (2) What are the challenges in involving young people and other stakeholders in CCGs?
- (3) What aspects need to be considered when running CCGs?

Method

This study has a qualitative and reflexive approach. The authors have researched their own practice by discussing, reflecting, and analyzing the practices of CCGs in five countries over a period of three years.

Participants and Data Collection. Data was gathered in focus group discussions and through the analysis of documents connected to running CCGs. All participants are university teachers who have acted as facilitators for CCGs in the five participating COSI. ed countries. The five facilitators (the authors of this article) participated in semi-structured online focus group discussions. Participatory observations and experiences with CCGs in COSI. ed were discussed. We also conducted a critical analysis of project documents including recordings, meeting minutes, project descriptions, and training material for the CCGs.

Analysis. An analysis was conducted inspired by a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The analysis of this study includes two levels: the content level from the CCG

documents and the level of experience based on the diverse experiences of the national facilitators. As Braun & Clarke (2022) is a highly flexible approach we analysed the data both inductively identifying codes and key themes and deductively looking for patterns in preliminary themes.

The first stage of analysis was performed by three of the authors performing an inductive analysis. Data was coded in vivo, and key themes and issues important to the research questions were identified. A framework of preliminary themes was developed based on the identification of key issues during the initial data analysis. This framework included the following themes: member recruitment; communication and how to keep in touch with the CCG members; how and where to conduct the CCG meetings; meeting frequency; what types of documents have been used; how to create a positive climate and atmosphere during the meetings; how to address the power imbalance; CCG meeting topics. In the next step of the analysis, using a table as a deductive tool, all of the authors filled in their experiences and reflections for each preliminary theme. This table was further analyzed by two of the authors and discussed among all authors. This led to the development of the four themes presented in the “Findings” section of this article—1. Recruitment of CCG members; 2. Preparations for meetings; 3. Organizing the CCG meetings and; 4. Conducting the CCG meetings.

The abovementioned themes have found different representations and solutions in different countries, responding to diverse cultural and institutional contexts. Exploring them allowed us to present the CCG concept in practice and make it useful in diverse cultural contexts. The themes presented below in the “Findings” section provide broad and comprehensive findings.

Research Ethics. The data collection in COSI. ed project is in line with the guidelines and legislation in each of the five participating countries, the ethical procedures followed in each country is described in Table 1.

Strengths and Limitations. A strength of this study is that it includes data and researchers from five national contexts. This contributed to a large body of data from various national contexts and gave us an opportunity to analyze the material across countries. A limitation of this study is that it only involves facilitators' perspectives of CCGs. The facilitators are experienced in their roles, which is important for knowledge development because research on the CCG methodology is scarce. However, further research should involve the perspectives of various CCG members' experiences of being involved in a CCG.

Findings

In this section, we present a framework of approaches to conducting CCGs based on the analysis of data from five national contexts. In the analysis, we developed the following themes: recruitment of CCG members, preparations for CCG meetings, organizing the CCG meetings, and conducting the CCG meetings

Table 1. Research Ethics.

	Denmark	Norway	Spain	Poland	Portugal
Ethical guidelines followed	The Danish data protection Act VIA university privacy policy https://en.via.dk/about-via/privacy-policy	The Norwegian Act of research ethics The personal data Act https://www.forskningsetikk.no/en/legislation/ The USN research guidelines: https://min.usn.no/forskning/forskningsetikk/forskningsetisk-rammeverk The data collection and storage was approved by 'Sikt - Norwegian agency for shared services in education and research' (reference ID: 751558)	Organic Law 3/2018, of Dec 5, on the protection of personal data and the guarantee of digital rights The research protocol of university of the Balearic Islands by the research ethics Committee (CER) https://www.uib.eu/research/structures/committees/cer/Regulations/	Code of ethics for researchers by the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN) Rector's Committee for the ethics of research involving Human participants Data Protection Officer at the university of Warsaw https://odo.uw.edu.pl/	Guidelines of the national Committee of data Protection, available at https://www.cnpd.pt/organizacoes/orientacoes-e-recomendacoes/ Code of ethics of academic conduct of Porto university (order no. GR.06/12/2017) https://www.up.pt/porta/documents/8/codigo-etico-de-conduta-academica-uporto.pdf
Information of study	All participants were given information about the purpose of the study, and their right to withdraw their participation and revoke consent at any time. They were informed of their rights concerning the protection of personal data	All participants received written and oral descriptions of the study and the project The participants were informed of their rights to withdraw and revoke consent at any time The participants were informed of their rights concerning the protection of personal data	All participants received written information about the study: Funding, and the intended use of the study results Info about the right to withdraw their participation at any time	All participants were given description of the project and the and forwarded for information before the declaration of participation. In the case of minors, this description was also provided to parents or their legal guardians They included all necessary consents and information regarding the possibility of their withdrawal	All participants were given detailed information about the purpose of the study, and the intended use of the study results. Informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality and information of participants' right to withdrawal without any consequences
Consent	Both written and oral consent from the participants was obtained	Written informed consent was obtained from all participants	Written consent was obtained from the participants	Written consent were obtained from participants Participants under the age of 18, consent was obtained from both their guardians and the participants themselves	The school provided general consent for students' participation as part of their learning processes. Students provided continued oral consent about what could and could not be included as data
Data storage	Data is anonymized and stored in the repository of VIA university College according to data protection law and management	All data is stored in a specific safe zone in the university according to the SIKT (ID 751558) approval	Data is anonymized and stored in the open repository of the university of the Balearic Islands, complying with the existing legislation on data protection and management	All data collected during the research is stored securely on official work drives provided by the university	The data is stored under the surveillance of the project's coordinator and co-coordinator, who have exclusive access to the data that was anonymized and stored

Recruitment of CCG Members. The first step in setting up a CCG is to identify stakeholders in line with the project's goal. Stakeholder identification is crucial to responding to the goal of the project and taking into consideration the viewpoints of the parties involved. In the COSI.ed project, the composition of the CCG was defined during the project design. Nevertheless, the process of selecting the members for the CCGs varied between the countries, particularly with regard to their specific profiles. There were also differences in how the representatives of each category were recruited. This is presented in Table 2.

As noted, the differences in the formation of CCGs depend on the composition of the partnerships in each country and also on the backgrounds of the facilitators. In COSI.ed, all of the facilitators were rooted in academic backgrounds, so the ways of reaching some stakeholder groups were quite similar. The methods used to establish contact varied for groups with whom the facilitators did not directly share a background (i.e., teachers and young people). In these cases, support from partners or other intermediaries was necessary. The data also shows that policymakers are recruited from different policy levels in each country. As each country has a different political organization, the policymakers were recruited from the level that was regarded as the most profitable in each country.

In analyzing the data, we identified some common challenges in recruiting young people into the CCGs. The

facilitators had experienced that young people were the most difficult members to recruit because they were not obliged to participate as a part of their job. The facilitators underlined that they needed help from teachers to recruit and retain young people for the CCGs. Moreover, in some countries, it was decided to arrange the CCG meetings directly in schools to increase the chances of young people participating. The facilitators stressed the importance of consideration when choosing the venue in order to make it easily accessible for all members of the CCG.

One facilitator recalled: "I started to fix the dates according to politicians' availability but opted for starting with students because they were the most difficult to reach." Moreover, several facilitators described challenges regarding maintaining continuity in young people's participation throughout the project. They explained how it can be a challenge to keep the young people as permanent members in a group spanning several years. As young people are often associated with a school for a short period, frequently moving on to work or another school, it is challenging to engage them on a long-term basis. Several of the facilitators decided to include more than two young people in CCG because they experienced that this made the group more sustainable.

The findings show that creative cooperation between partners and the network is necessary for recruiting an inclusive group of relevant stakeholders.

Table 2. Recruitment of CCG Members by Category.

CCG member/ stakeholder category	Denmark	Norway	Spain	Poland	Portugal
Young people	Designated by the partner institution	Designated by teachers in the implementing institution	Designated by the partner institution	Representatives of a youth organization operating within the city's municipal structures	Designated by the partner institution
Researcher	Facilitator-initiated contact; cooperation with COSI.ed team members	Facilitator-initiated contact; cooperation with team members	Facilitator-initiated contact; cooperation with team members	Facilitator-initiated contact; cooperation with team members	Facilitator-initiated contact; cooperation with team members
Teachers/ practitioners	Facilitator-initiated contact within partnership	Facilitator-initiated contact within partnership, designated by implementing institution	Facilitator-initiated contact within partnership	Facilitator-initiated contact, designated by implementing institution	Facilitator-initiated contact within partnership
BA/MA students	Facilitator-initiated contact; in connection with classes offered within the project	Facilitator-initiated contact with student class; volunteered	Facilitator-initiated contact	Facilitator-initiated contact; volunteered	Facilitator-initiated contact; volunteered
Politicians	Facilitator-initiated contact	COSI.ed national team initiated contact	Facilitator-initiated contact	Previous cooperation with team members	Facilitator-initiated contact
Facilitators	Among partners within the teams	Among partners within the teams	Among partners within the teams	Among partners within the teams	Among partners within the teams

Preparations for CCG Meetings

The key tasks of the facilitator are to organize meetings and maintain contact with members of the CCG and the COSI. ed team. All of the facilitators highlighted the preparation for CCG meetings as an essential part of this work. Based on the data collected, we have developed two categories relating to meeting preparation: maintaining contact with members between the meetings, and collaboration with the COSI. ed team.

In general, communication within the CCGs was organized on two levels, classified as “basic” and “additional.” Basic level communication was mostly conducted by email and usually concerned the group as a whole, aiming to set deadlines and address other organizational issues. This level of communication was also used to maintain contact with the CCG—for example, by passing on project-related materials or invitations to project-related events. Additional contact was usually less formal and used more personalized forms of communication; this was used in situations where some information needed to be verified, as a reminder of meetings, or to make additional arrangements with individual members. The facilitators experienced that the adult members were easier to reach by email, whereas the young members were easier to reach by mobile and SMS. The facilitators also explained that they had indirect contact with these young members through their teachers, who also participated in the CCG.

The documents used in the work with CCGs are part of basic communication. Our analysis shows that meeting agendas were used by all national CCGs. Some additional documents were only used in some national settings. These include formal invitations to participate in the CCG, formal nominations designating the person as a member of the CCG, and parental consent forms for minors. The differences in the use of these formal documents shows the cultural and organizational diversity represented within the project. In countries where a more formalized practice is being followed, formal documents appropriate to national conditions and legislation have been developed. Conversely, these documents are not used in countries following a less formalized practice.

A crucial preparation for the CCG meetings is the collaboration with the COSI. ed team. The aim of the CCG is to provide input, feedback, and suggestions for the COSI. ed project. Analysis of agendas, and discussions with facilitators, show a close collaboration within the project team. In COSI. ed, all CCG facilitators are members of the project team. As a consequence, they are part of the project development and participate in project meetings. The facilitators discussed with the other team members which aspects of the project required feedback from the CCG. The CCG meeting agendas and minutes show that during the initial phases of the project, the COSI. ed project team wanted input on the general project topic and the suggested model. The feedback from CCG was brought back to the COSI. ed team, who discussed it and tested the method. The facilitator gathered new requests from the

COSI. ed team, which formed the agenda for the next CCG meeting.

During the next phases of the project, the COSI. ed team requested feedback on the development of the model and implementation of the model, as well as policy recommendations. This feedback from the CCG meeting was brought back to the COSI. ed team, who discussed the feedback and requested new feedback. This developed a feedback loop between the CCG and the COSI. ed project, which is illustrated in Figure 1.

In this way the CCGs were key not only in the feedback and review of the proposals, but also in the elaboration of recommendations that directly influenced the final outputs of the project. These recommendations were not only integrated into the academic products, but also formed part of the outputs for stakeholders and the wider community.

Organizing the CCG Meetings. The CCG meetings were organized by each country’s facilitator.

In Denmark, CCG meetings were arranged in person as requested by the group members. Two meetings have been held without young persons at the teacher department. At the first meeting, the young people had not yet been appointed. At the second meeting, the appointed young people backed out at the last minute—perhaps because the meeting was held at the teacher department, which was “foreign ground.” In this meeting, the teachers and the facilitator tried to relay the young peoples’ input. The young people always attended when the meetings were held during school hours at the school, in familiar surroundings.

In Norway, the facilitator arranged all the meetings to be in-person, as requested by the group members. The young persons highlighted that they preferred in-person meetings. All of the meetings were held during school hours at the school where the COSI.ed project was conducted. At the end of each meeting, the members agreed on a time and date for the next meeting. The young people, the teacher, and the policymaker attended all scheduled; whereas the higher education student and the researcher were not able to attend every all meeting. Key people from the COSI.ed project participated in each meeting as visiting members of the group, where they presented themes and topics they wanted to discuss with the CCG.

Meetings in Poland were conducted online, which was a condition stipulated by some of the members of the CCG. During the first meeting, the members identified the afternoon hours as the most convenient time to meet. Therefore, all meetings were scheduled in the afternoon to enable all stakeholder groups to attend. The Meetings took place over Zoom and use a variety of tools to support active participation. The members were sometimes divided into breakout rooms during the meetings and the teachers explained and communicated with the young persons in case of complicated matters.

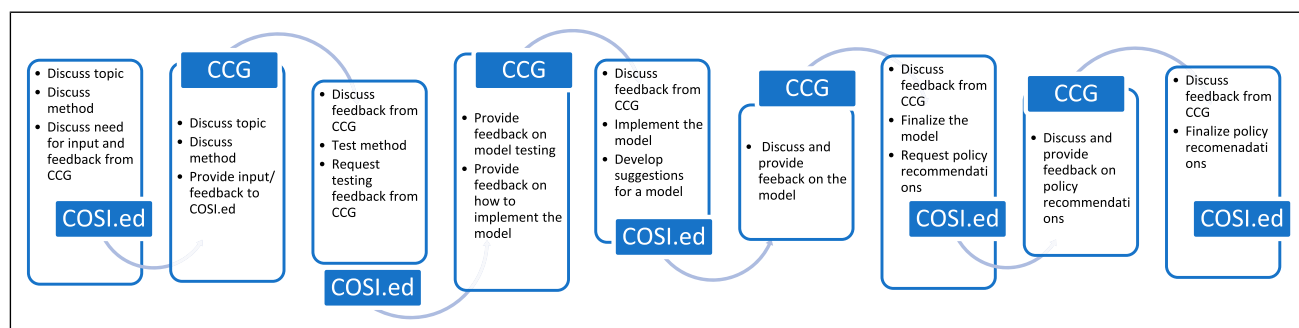


Figure 1. Feedback loop between COSI.ed and CCG.

The facilitator in Portugal opted for in-person meetings. The first meetings were held at the university. Prior to the CCG, some preparatory meetings between the researchers and young people were conducted at their school, which was their preferred location. When students were unable to join the CCG, the researchers acted as intermediaries, bringing their ideas to the CCG.

In Spain, all of the meetings were held in-person in a building conveniently located in the city centre. During the first meeting, the group members discussed the meeting format and agreed to schedule future meetings during morning hours. There were some turn-over of young persons in the group as they finished their school courses and left the project.

Four of five partner countries decided to conduct the CCG meetings in-person, stressing the great value of in-person meetings. All of the CCGs organized the meetings after discussions and agreement with the group members, taking their needs into account and aiming to enable all members to participate. The CCGs were used as a supporting tool in social action and decision-making in close collaboration with the national COSI.ed teams. The facilitators underlined how it was necessary to be flexible when planning the agenda and frequency of meetings in order to adjust to the COSI.ed team's need for input and feedback. One of the facilitators also mentioned other matters that they had to take into account when organizing meetings:

We try to meet on a regular basis. At the end of each meeting, we schedule the next meeting. We have to take into account the educational and institutional contexts important for all parties: public holidays, exams, end of the school/ academic year, etc. The key factor for deciding on a new meeting is, however, the need to discuss an important issue related to the project.

To adjust to the different phases of COSI.ed, central actors from the main COSI.ed team were invited to some of the CCG meetings. These actors presented different topics from COSI.ed and asked for feedback and input from the CCG.

One of the facilitators also pointed out some challenges they faced in organizing CCGs according to the project design: "We have not been able to meet as often as we would

have liked due to the incompatibility of schedules between the professional members and the young people's work or internships."

Another challenge was to maintain the continuity of the CCG members. Several of the facilitators experienced challenges related to young people who had quit school while involved in COSI.ed, noting that it was difficult to keep in touch with them because young people don't have a long-time horizon—they don't make plans for "next year" or "next month" in the same way as adults, who have a scheduled work cycle. Therefore, they found that it was a good idea to remind these members a few days in advance of an upcoming meeting. Another issue was teachers who had quit their jobs and dropped out of the CCG. The facilitators described how the lack of continuity of group members led to challenges in the group process. One facilitator explained: "[...] student and teacher continuity were not ensured and we almost had to start from the beginning all the time [...]"

However, the facilitators also emphasized how a high degree of flexibility and different measures as described below contributed to maintaining group stability. The measures taken were the result of challenges that arose from working with a diverse group of stakeholders, with particular emphasis on the young people's participation.

Conducting the CCG Meetings. The CCGs established in COSI.ed aim to act as a direct tool for co-creation in the project. The facilitators described how they conducted the CCG meetings as venues for discussing topics and related to COSI.ed. The collaboration between the CCG and the COSI.ed team was described as the feedback loop illustrated in [Figure 1](#).

The facilitators highlighted the importance of clarifying the purpose of the group both during the recruitment of members and in the first meetings. This included presenting the concept of co-creation and emphasizing the equality of the group members as a basic rule.

One or two members of the COSI.ed team were invited as guests to CCG meetings. They presented topics, interventions, preliminary models, and policy recommendations; and asked for feedback and input from the CCG. As a result, several participants from the COSI.ed project have presented topics

for discussion in the group and contributed to the interaction between the COSI. ed team and the CCG.

All of the facilitators described challenges related to the young people's availability and commitment, and addressed challenges related to the power imbalance within the groups. They presented several examples of how they conducted the CCG meetings to facilitate interactions and discussions between all CCG members. The facilitators described how they set aside time for small talk and getting to know one another. They also emphasized how they constantly reminded the group of "the importance of active participation, and above all that all opinions are necessary and have the same value," with particular emphasis on the young people's assessments and opinions. The facilitators pointed out the importance of encouraging all group members to speak. They also described using collaborative tools and active methods during both in-person and online meetings. If the young people were unable to speak out, the facilitators acted as intermediaries to bring their ideas to the group. In addition to these methodical approaches, some other common approaches were used for icebreaking within the group—for example, short breaks, snacks, and meals. They also used humour and small talk to facilitate a safe atmosphere and help the group members feel more relaxed. One facilitator underlined: "Working with a CCG is very much about creating the climate of that group. It has been important to facilitate a safe environment around the meetings."

Another facilitator added: "Informality and flexibility are our best tools." The importance of using simple, understandable, and non-academic language was highlighted as crucial. The facilitators explained that the language was tailored and adjusted to the group to ensure that all members understood and were able to participate. Attention was also paid to the choice of topics, which were selected to be understandable and of interest to all members of the group. The facilitators highlighted how it can be useful to introduce the topic of conversation in advance, so that group members can prepare for discussion. Preparatory meetings with facilitators or other group members (teachers) were offered to young people who expressed challenges in understanding the topic.

Discussion

Despite different national contexts and variations in the way of conducting CCGs within the COSI. ed project, some of the problems as well as effective solutions have turned out to be common. The shared experience gathered during the work of five CCGs allows us to discuss the problematic issues as well as the opportunities and limitations of its effectiveness. The analysis of CCGs' work in the five diverse national settings presented in this paper suggests several areas of developed strategies and measures. We present our discussion around 1. Fostering solutions for a sustainable CCG; 2. Handling the power imbalance of the CCGs; and 3. Challenges and possibilities in the CCG facilitator role.

Fostering Solutions for a Sustainable CCG

Our findings show several challenges in fostering sustainable CCGs, with some significant issues related to the composition of the group and the facilitators' tasks.

As indicated earlier, there is no distinct definition of a CCG. Moreover, the structure of these groups is not fixed. Based on our findings, a crucial foundation for developing a sustainable group seems to be the composition of the group. In the composition of the CCGs, we found that the topic and the aim of the project should be guiding principles in defining and identifying relevant stakeholder members for the group.

The collaborative research tradition, which underlines the democratization of knowledge, emphasizes the importance of including and strengthening certain groups that are often overlooked and not heard (Crow, 2010; Edwards & Brannelly, 2017). This is also in line with the Freirean tradition, which emphasizes the importance of liberating approaches that give oppressed people a place to express themselves (Freire, 1981/2000). A competence group comprised of only young people or "relevant users" may offer a platform for such expression and have an impact on research and developmental projects. Several studies involving young people as stakeholder representatives in research have shown that their contributions have been useful and provide reflexivity and perspective in which the analysis and insight of the researcher alone is not sufficient (Krane, Klevan, Sommer, 2021). However, in the COSI. ed project, the primary goal is to provide solutions to difficult social and educational problems. Thus, the CCGs were composed in line with a co-creation approach, which implies that different stakeholders sharing a problem should be involved in developing new solutions together (Baptista et al., 2020; Torfing et al., 2016). The co-creation in CCGs considered not only all the phases of the research process, but also in the transfer of the results obtained to the educational and social resources of the community, as well as in their inclusion in educational and social policies. To address the solution constructively, it is important to compose a sustainable group with relevant stakeholders.

The optimal composition of a CCG is dependent on the aim of the project as well as the inclusion of central stakeholder groups. This requires a great deal of understanding of existing social problems as well as the social structure and sensitivity to possible situations of exclusion. A challenge in composing CCGs is how to recruit relevant and committed stakeholders as members. In COSI. ed, all of the facilitators were academic teachers, and stakeholders were invited to participate by similar methods. However, the findings showed that the facilitator had support in recruiting members to whom they did not have direct access. As the COSI. ed project addressed the educational setting and policy development, the stakeholders were pre-defined as young persons, higher education students, teachers, policymakers, and researchers. The general structure of the group was common to all participating countries. However, some adaptations were necessary to adjust to

specific national and local contexts. Based on the adaption of the different national CCGs, participating politicians and young people in each country were recruited from different contexts. Although the facilitators had a central role in the recruitment process, they were assisted by other COSI. ed team members and networks. This shows that is crucial to involve significant networks and collaborating partners because they are gatekeepers in the recruitment of relevant stakeholders.

Our findings show that a flexible composition of CCGs makes it possible to adjust and adapt to different kinds of projects and contexts. However, a limitation in the composition of CCGs is that this type of imposed structure only allows the involvement of predefined stakeholders involvement. Thus, it only includes limited perspectives from a limited number of group members. It would be possible to have more open-ended groups including group members on a rolling basis (Brown & Pehrson, 2019), such a structure would include more voices and could open up the potential for broader perspectives. However, this would hinder the group's ability to create a sense of belonging, continuity, and permanent contact. Our findings show that a sense of belonging and stability within the group is crucial to creating a safe environment, which is paramount to the group process. The CCGs have been open to inviting one or two guests to attend their meetings. This alternative structure seems promising and could strengthen the feedback loop between the main project and the CCGs.

The findings of the study show that the composition of CCGs is flexible. However, the group members should be carefully chosen in order to represent the relevant stakeholders according to the project's topic and aim.

Handling the Power Imbalance of the CCGs

This study shows that the involved CCG members are highly heterogeneous when it comes to age, education level, background and life experiences. Such differences lead to incongruity and power imbalances that can be challenging to handle in a co-creation process (Krane et al., 2021).

Regardless of national contexts, our findings show that the composition and initial phase of the CCG are crucial to establishing collaboration within the group. Considering the composition of a CCG, it is crucial to pay attention to participation and power relations. In CCGs involving young people, it is especially important to consider the power imbalance that results when the majority of the group members are adults. The number of representatives of particular stakeholder groups within a CCG may affect their active participation. The CCGs originally involved two young group members, and some groups decided to include more young people during the process. Increasing the number of young members could be beneficial to strengthening their participation and perspectives in CCGs. Our findings further showed experiences of turnover and challenges with stability related to

young people participating in the CCGs. An important issue seems to be that all adult members are selected based on their profession. These members participate as part of their paid work, whereas the young people do not receive payment for their participation in the group. This imbalance in compensation has been previously addressed in studies of collaborative research as an obstacle that increases power imbalance and can prevent engagement (Krane et al., 2021). In our study, it was still possible to include young people in the group. However, equal terms and payment should be considered when planning such groups.

Our findings show a strong emphasis on the importance of the first group meetings and building a sense of belonging. Brown and Pehrson (2019) underline how anxiety and the feelings of both excitement and stress are normal feelings for group members because they are attending a new group. In this present study, we found that the facilitators stressed the importance of creating a positive group atmosphere to prevent anxiety and promote a safe environment. Using humour and small talk was presented as one way of creating a sense of belonging and establishing a safe and informal atmosphere to help people integrate with the group. Moreover, the findings underline that the heterogeneity of the group members also requires effective verbal communication in a comprehensive language that includes all members of the group. This is in line with other studies that have found that academic language can increase the power imbalance and be an obstacle to partnerships and co-creation (Sangill et al., 2019). Thus, humour, small talk, and clear communication can contribute to counteracting the power imbalance, and this kind of communication seems crucial to collaboration within CCGs.

Another issue is the selection of appropriate topics for discussion during CCG meetings. Based on our findings the topics for discussion should be part of the experience and of interest to all—something that all of the members can relate to and understand. The choice of topics should relate to perspectives that are important to the project but also relevant to the experiences of each stakeholder group represented in the CCG. The abovementioned elements may constitute soft factors protecting against the disintegration of the group or an excessive turnover of its members. This seems important, especially when working with groups that present challenges in creating continuity due to their members' professional or personal changes or growth—for example, young people within the COSI. ed context.

In line with the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of Children (1989), education, social policy, social work, and other activities for young people should be implemented with their participation (United Nations, 1989). Moreover, facilitating young people's contributions is highlighted as important for their empowerment, and contributes to their educational development (Anderson, 2020). The co-creation of ideas and activities seems to be crucial in planning effective forms of work involving young people (Krane et al., 2021). Young peoples' involvement in the process of deliberate

participation is also related to their empowerment and creates the conditions to enable them to take action (Gallager & Kushnir, 2022). Within the implementation of the COSI. ed project, the voices of young people were highlighted as crucial and essential. A pitfall in such involvement is tokenism, which implies that young people are only superficially involved and do not have a real influence on decision-making (Hart, 1992). This study shows that facilitators can highlight the importance of young people's participation and make an effort to mitigate the power imbalance. A question that could be raised is however: Could focusing on young people's participation lead to an assumption that their opinions are always right? It is important to recognize that young people are as heterogeneous as adults and represent a multitude of experiences and opinions. The question is not who has the right answers. In co-creation, the aim is to facilitate the negotiation of knowledge and decision-making. This is in line with Shiers' (2001) typology of youth involvement, which describes openings and opportunities in pathways to youth participation and shared decision-making. The intention of CCGs is based on the idea of equality of all stakeholders' contributions (Borg et al., 2012). It could be questioned whether real equality is ever possible. Full democratization, understood as full stakeholder control of the process (Hart, 1992), was not our aim in this study. However, we consider that the model implemented represents a move towards greater participation and co-creation, as the CCGs not only advised, but their contributions were integrated and shaped the project outcomes. The present study shows that when power relations are taken into consideration and addressed in facilitation and communication, CCGs are one way to involve young people in research and shared decision-making. The CCGs are not just about "listening to youth voices" but a contribution to intergenerational dialogues and a co-creation of knowledge between group members of different positions and ages.

Challenges and Opportunities in the Facilitator Role. According to our findings, the facilitator role is crucial and impacts all stages of the CCG process. The findings show several leadership-related challenges present in all five national contexts. Our findings show that the facilitator must balance recruitment, organizational tasks, structural tasks, and communication.

According to the findings, the facilitators' tasks cover a broad range of assignments. They must handle practical tasks like sending out meeting invitations and agendas as well as more complicated tasks such as facilitating a positive atmosphere within the CCG and interacting and collaborating with the main project team. Although these tasks might seem simple, they can be time-consuming as well as crucial to actively involving all group members and ensuring the efficiency of the feedback loop.

Our findings show how the heterogeneity of the group profits from what could be described as an "equity-based approach" (Unterhalter, 2009). By this, we mean a form of implementation of all the facilitator's tasks that accounts for

diversity among the group members and responds to their needs in terms of emotions and actions. The facilitator should balance the group members' social positions, equalizing them within the group by introducing the principle of equality from the very beginning. Introducing the principle of equivalence of opinions and non-judgment while taking into account different positions is a particular challenge when conducting discussions within CCGs. Thus, using an equity-based approach and manifesting the importance of those meetings, their agency, and the role of everyone's participation is an effective way of conducting the groups.

As the process of running CCGs is highly dynamic and sometimes challenging, the possibility of obtaining support for facilitators also seems important. None of the facilitators in this study mentioned co-leadership. To handle the complex tasks of conducting CCGs, it is worth considering including a co-facilitator. In co-leadership, the facilitators could support each other with the possibility of consultation and joint decision-making on how to run the group or implement specific tasks (Atieno Okech, 2008). Another support strategy could be to offer supervision or mentoring facilitators from experienced facilitators in individual or group sessions.

In our study, we found that the facilitator role covers a complex variety of tasks, skills, and interventions. These findings call for facilitator training focused on recruitment and how to establish and conduct sustainable groups. Moreover, the training should also focus on communication skills and how to create a safe environment within the group as this is fundamental to forming a stable group and facilitating real participation from all group members. Training should emphasize and discuss how to perform an equity-based approach focusing on co-creation between heterogeneous group members. Facilitators need preparation for handling a role that deviates from the usual pathways as part of the tasks they perform on a daily basis. This might include breaking some existing behaviour patterns, and presenting a more egalitarian approach that some facilitators may find difficult. Experiences from this study could be valuable and should be incorporated into facilitator training and supervision.

Conclusions

In this article, we have described and reflected upon the process of organizing and running a CCG in an international project for a three-year period. This is the first study to explore CCGs in an international context, and it shows that CCGs can be conducted in and adapted to different national contexts. The study shows that the flexibility of the composition of CCGs makes it relevant as a tool in research and development projects where co-creation between different stakeholders is anticipated to move beyond the academic realm and generate a wider impact. CCGs can be adapted to an array of disciplines and topics by simply including members from relevant stakeholder groups. The study shows that there are challenges related to power imbalance. Running

and conducting CCGs requires facilitators who address the power imbalance by using an equity-based approach and prompting all members to participate. Though collaborative research with stakeholders is not new, this study shows how it is possible to implement CCG as a systematic approach to develop an arena for intergenerational co-creation of knowledge between stakeholders of different ages and positions in research.

Recommendations

CCGs should be considered as a tool for co-creation to develop the educational system and in collaborative research within a broad range of disciplines. By involving all stakeholders, including young people, these groups can contribute to co-creation, new solutions, and the continuous development of the educational system while ensuring the inclusion of different perspectives in the research process.

The CCG facilitators should be offered training and support focusing on practical tasks and how to handle power imbalances within CCGs.

Further research should explore CCG members' experiences of participating in such groups, and how CCGs are used in various disciplines and cross-national contexts.

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