Article

Transforming Local Knowledge(s) into European Recommendations: A Methodological Approach to Co-Creating Policy Briefs for Educational Inclusion

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Abstract: This article explores the process of developing policy briefs (PB) as strategic tools to translate knowledge stemming from the analysis of local educational practices into inclusive European policy recommendations. This paper highlights how educational practices from eleven partner institutions across Denmark, Norway, Poland, Portugal, and Spain informed recommendations to prevent early leaving from education and training (ELET) and to enhance youth's school engagement. Educational practices involved a collaborative dialogue among multi-stakeholders to establish a shared vision about educational inclusion, and the co-creation of educational practices supported by monitoring, evidence collection, and the identification of promising examples. These elements reflect the aim to embed educational inclusion in policy development, while underscoring the role of PBs as mechanisms of participatory knowledge transfer between countries and sectors, bringing together diverse voices from policymakers, educators, researchers, and young people. In doing so, the methodological approach to produce PB recognised local produced knowledge as a catalyst for informed decisions promoting quality education. The analysis of PB highlights elements of the identified educational practices addressing ELET challenges, such as (i) implementing co-creation methodologies in both educational contexts and political formulation; (ii) addressing student citizenship as central to meaningful learning; (iii) valuing cross-sector partnerships to address systemic challenges, and (iv) reinforce relational pedagogies that enhance student–teacher and student–student relationships.

Keywords: policy briefs; co-creation; local knowledge; promising practices; educational inclusion

1. Introduction

Despite decades of policy initiatives (De Witte and Cabus 2013; Ross and Leathwood 2013), early leaving from education and training (ELET) of young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, has been a persistent educational challenge in Europe with damaging consequences at the individual, meso-institutional and macro-systemic levels. In an era where reskilling and upskilling are increasingly crucial for thriving in a changing, digital and green world (Cedefop 2024; World Economic Forum 2023), the apparent disengagement of youth from current educational systems demands innovative macro and meso responses. This article examines how educational policy recommendations addressing school engagement are constructed through local-level analysis across European

regions, focusing on pathways for upscaling significant and promising practices into co-created policies that can contribute to more inclusive and equitable educational systems (Ball et al. 2012).

The gap between political aspirations to surpass school disengagement and educational outcomes remains stark, with significant disparities persisting across countries and socio-demographic groups, particularly affecting young adults aged 16–24 (OECD 2024a; European Commission 2023). At the meso-institutional level, simply expanding and diversifying formal learning opportunities seems insufficient for addressing the multifaceted aspects that affect educational disengagement and failure, leading to ELET. Neoliberal logic and systemic inequalities (e.g., school competition, standardised curricula, managerial control) are also at play and seem to continue to hinder the translation of successful local practices into broader policy frameworks (Coburn 2016; Mikelatou and Arvanitis 2023). Therefore, policymakers face a dual challenge: addressing systemic problems while acknowledging and recognising successful local practices and experiences already being implemented. The adaptation and integration of these practices into broader policy agendas pose significant constraints, particularly given the need for evidence to support evidence-based decision-making (Baekgaard et al. 2017; Oliver and Cairney 2019). Therefore, Policy Briefs (PB) emerge as valuable "knowledge transfer tools" designed to link the implementation gap and to inform stakeholders (Arnautu and Dagenais 2021; Dagenais and Ridde 2018). By combining analytical rigour with accessible communication, PB can translate empirical evidence into actionable recommendations (Cairney and Kwiatkowski 2017). However, their effectiveness hinges on their ability to capture and amplify diverse stakeholder voices, particularly those traditionally marginalised in public discussions. Drawing on the COSI.ed project (Erasmus+ KA3), implemented across five European countries, we highlight the process of constructing policy recommendations that result from the analysis of local educational practices that effectively support young people in conditions of vulnerability and educational professionals to deal with the situation of ELET.

Central to our methodological approach is the co-creation process, which engages teachers, practitioners, youth, leaders, policymakers, and researchers in developing and rethinking educational practices (Markowska-Manista et al. 2024). Falling into the umbrella of participatory approaches, co-creation in policy design and policymaking responds to the dual challenge of translating research findings into practice and ensuring that recommendations emerge from diverse, often neglected voices of educational stakeholders (Goulart and Falanga 2022), including young people and educational professionals (including teachers and researchers in education). As studies have shown, effective educational policies must support active student participation (Azevedo 2019; Elwood 2013) while upholding their right to active citizenship (Lundy and Cook-Sather 2016; Pereira et al. 2014).

Given these considerations, the article is structured in four main sections that trace how policy recommendations may derive from promising practices. It begins by situating the project within the broader European educational framework, focusing on its quality priorities. This is followed by a description of the project's background and a methodological section that outlines the key steps and procedures for developing policy briefs (PBs), emphasising the active engagement of diverse stakeholders. The next section presents selected educational practices that offer a foundation for the elaboration of policy recommendations on social inclusion that can be adapted across diverse contexts. The article argues that policy recommendations must be rooted in the implementation of local educational practices that amplify voices. By bridging the meso-institutional level and macro policy systems, this approach suggests that educational reforms should be based on promising evidence while remaining adaptable to different European contexts. The final section also highlights the limitations of the policy brief elaboration process, pointing to

open questions that could inspire future research. It also underscores that the engagement cycle is only complete when the voices from below—individual and meso-institutional levels—effectively reach decision-makers, whose political agency can redirect systemic change. This is the key role of the PB.

1.1. Towards a Quality Education Agenda: Links Between COSI.ed Project and European Priorities

The development of European educational policies echoes an evolving response to persistent challenges in educational inclusion and equity that have generated ELET, and the warning signs that anticipate it—school failure, absenteeism, and disruptive behaviours have been identified as major problems for individuals at the meso-institutional level. Major global and European organisations have increasingly aligned their visions around education's transformative potential in building fairer societies (UNESCO 2023). Simultaneously, they acknowledge, as mentioned, that traditional approaches, focused on increasing access, seem not to sufficiently address systemic inequalities. Such strategies may include the extension of compulsory schooling, diversifying educational pathways or increasing participation rates. According to the Eurydice report, (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2020, p. 71) despite the implementation of "justice-based strategies" based on increasing access to education, many of them "enjoyed modest success", mainly regarding reducing educational inequalities or increasing student well-being and support needs. This recognition has led to a fundamental shift in how educational quality and inclusion are conceptualised at the European and national levels, as advocated by UNESCO's Education 2030 Agenda (UNESCO 2020) or in the OECD's Future of Education and Skills 2030 project, among other initiatives. Hence, the educational question moved from the promotion of access—recognised as essential but not enough—to the promotion of success, which remains a mitigated promise of mass schooling (Ramirez and Boli 1987).

In this regard, the Council of the European Union's's (2023) strategic framework for 2021–2030 marks a significant evolution in European educational policy, moving beyond simple measures focused on academic achievement to embrace a more holistic understanding of educational success that includes the recognition of diversity, socio-emotional competences, well-being, mental health, among others. Building on the *2018 Recommendation on Promoting Common Values and Inclusive Education* (Council of the European Union 2018), this framework emphasises the emergence of attention to the critical role of supportive learning environments and innovative pedagogical approaches in preventing educational disengagement.

This has been further reinforced by the *European Commission's Vision for Achieving the European Education Area* by 2025 (European Commission 2020), which highlights the need for participatory approaches to address ELET. Interestingly, in a Europe increasingly driven by numbers and indicators, it is often micro-level, co-created, and participatory strategies that show the most positive results on young adults' learning processes. These approaches not only enhance young people's engagement with their own learning journeys but also challenge dominant notions of 'evidence' in education policy—suggesting that qualitative, experiential, and co-created knowledge should complement traditional data-driven indicators.

For instance, Cedefop et al.'s (2021) research on career guidance further emphasises the importance of developing flexible, context-sensitive approaches to supporting young people's educational engagement. This implies moving beyond approaches that attribute blame or deficits to individuals (Nada et al. 2020; Santos et al. 2020), instead considering the complex interplay of structural, institutional, and personal factors (Van Praag et al. 2018) or macro-systemic, meso-institutional, individual factors, to say it differently. Indeed, the societal consequences of ELET, which range from lower wages and increased welfare

dependency to burdens on the justice system and health disparities (Gitschthaler and Nairz-Wirth 2015), highlight the importance of looking at this as a systemic process in need for socially inclusive educational strategies at the local level.

This finding is also complemented by the urgency of developing preventative and compensatory approaches to ELET, as stressed by recent European statistics. The Education and Training Monitor 2023 (European Commission 2023) reveals persistent disparities in educational outcomes across member states despite overall progress toward the EU's target of reducing ELET rates below 9% by 2030. These disparities are also reinforced by emerging challenges identified in the Joint Employment Report 2024 (European Commission 2024), which highlights the growing disconnect between educational systems and young people's needs in a rapidly changing social and economic scenario, despite a slight decrease in EU youth unemployment rate (14.3%) in 2023.

It is within this challenging context that the COSI.ed project emerges as a strategic response. The project's geographic distribution across southern, eastern, and northern Europe was deliberately designed to pinpoint the diversity of educational challenges and institutional approaches within the EU, even without generalisation aims. As we can check in the Figure 1, the participating countries illustrate the range of ELET challenges in 2023: Poland (3.7%) and Portugal (8.0%) perform better than the EU average of 9.5%, while Denmark (10.4%), Norway (12.5%), and Spain (13.7%) face greater challenges (Eurostat 2024).
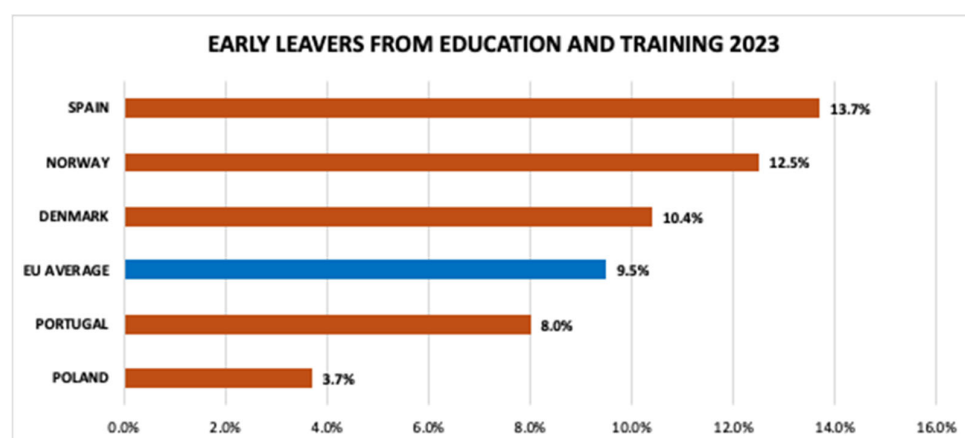

Figure 1. Rate of ELET across the five participating countries and the EU average in 2023. Source: Eurostat (2024).

This variation provides a unique opportunity to implement inclusive practices across diverse educational settings, acknowledging that their implementation approaches vary significantly based on institutional contexts and local/national agendas despite sharing common goals for educational inclusion, as documented in the Eurydice Report (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2020). Within this broader context, the COSI.ed project, thus, responds to a critical gap in current European educational policy: the need for adaptable approaches for preventing ELET that can work across diverse educational settings. By developing transferable practices and methodologies across different national contexts while maintaining alignment with broader European priorities, the project contributes to what UNESCO (2023) describes as the "new social contract for education", where educational systems actively adapt to meet the needs of all learners while promoting social inclusion and equity. This is aligned with recent policy emphasis on evidence-based approaches to educational innovation (OECD 2024b) by demonstrating how localised practices can contribute to broader educational frameworks, showcasing the potential of PB. The following section investigates the project's design, shedding light on how it implemented these principles across diverse contexts. It is worth mentioning, based on the project's

report (Bunting 2024), that the macro-systemic crisis generated by the COVID-19 epidemic impacted the projects' implementation phase owing to increased school dropouts, disengagement and the need for effective strategies to address them. The impact of isolation and lack of schooling was noticeable in schools and universities, with young people struggling both mentally and academically.

1.2. Setting the Context: COSI.ed Background

The COSI.ed project brought together eleven partners across five European countries to develop scalable methodological approaches to address ELET and youth transitions. The partnership included five universities and six organisations working directly with young learners in conditions of vulnerability, including a preparatory basic education and training institutions in Denmark, a vocational upper secondary school in Norway, a public primary school in Poland, a second chance school in Portugal, and two non-governmental organisations in Spain.

The project engaged a wide variety of participants (Bunting 2024), primarily young people/adults aged 13–35 (mainly 13–24) experiencing school disengagement or identified as being at risk of ELET due to various challenges, including socio-economic disadvantage, migration background, or learning difficulties. The participants were predominantly male. Researchers, teachers, other educational staff, organisation leaders, and policymakers were also integral participants, ensuring multiple perspectives informed the development of recommendations mainly through Collaborative Competence Groups (CCGs), as will be detailed in the following section on the PB design methodology. This diversity of actors provided rich ground for developing inclusive practices that could inform European-level policy recommendations, highlighting their potential transferability- with proper recontextualisation based on specific group and individual needs.

The COSI.ed framework was developed through a three-phase structure: an Exploratory Phase (January–June 2021), an Implementation Phase (September 2021–June 2022), and an Upscaling and Policy Brief Development Phase (September 2022–March 2023). At the heart of the project were three core methodological dimensions—Co-creation, Indirect Approach (IA), and Equality Literacy (EQL)—which shaped the reflection, development, and implementation of inclusive educational practices. These conceptual dimensions were not only instrumental throughout the project but also laid the groundwork for the elaboration of PB. Specifically, Co-creation emerged as a key methodology for creating sustainable social inclusion through collaborative knowledge-building within educational, practical, and research contexts. A balance between building on young people's own competencies, reflecting on their practices, and fostering a professional fellowship is the foundation of this approach. The Indirect Approach (IA) emerges as a conversational strategy to grasp young people's experiences and voices in education through trust-building and open dialogue. This method avoids introducing preconceived notions, instead encouraging participants to guide the dialogue, and the Equality Literacy (EQL) framework rooted in sociological constructs of structure and agency offers an analytical lens for understanding the bio–social–cultural factors that influence learning and development. It provides a life-course, systemic perspective on privilege and disadvantage in education, guiding interventions aimed at improving learning environments and promoting inclusion. It contributes to improving teacher–student relationships. These strategic educational and political pillars guided both the implementation of practices and the development of policy recommendations. Together, these dimensions create a communication platform that connects educational stakeholders and youth, fostering awareness and shared understanding of individual trajectories, challenges, and skills. Through these pedagogical processes, vulnerabilities within youth contexts are more effectively identified and ad-

dressed, while practitioners develop competencies for co-creating inclusive and supportive educational spaces.

In line with the implementation of practices, the formulation of policy recommendations followed a systematic co-creation methodology, recognising that education systems are nationally and locally specific while seeking common ground for European-level implementation. This development unfolded through exploratory and upscaling phases, each emphasising participatory engagement (Bunting 2024). Figure 2 illustrates the main phases and activities of the project intertwined with the methodological steps that contributed to the development of the PB.
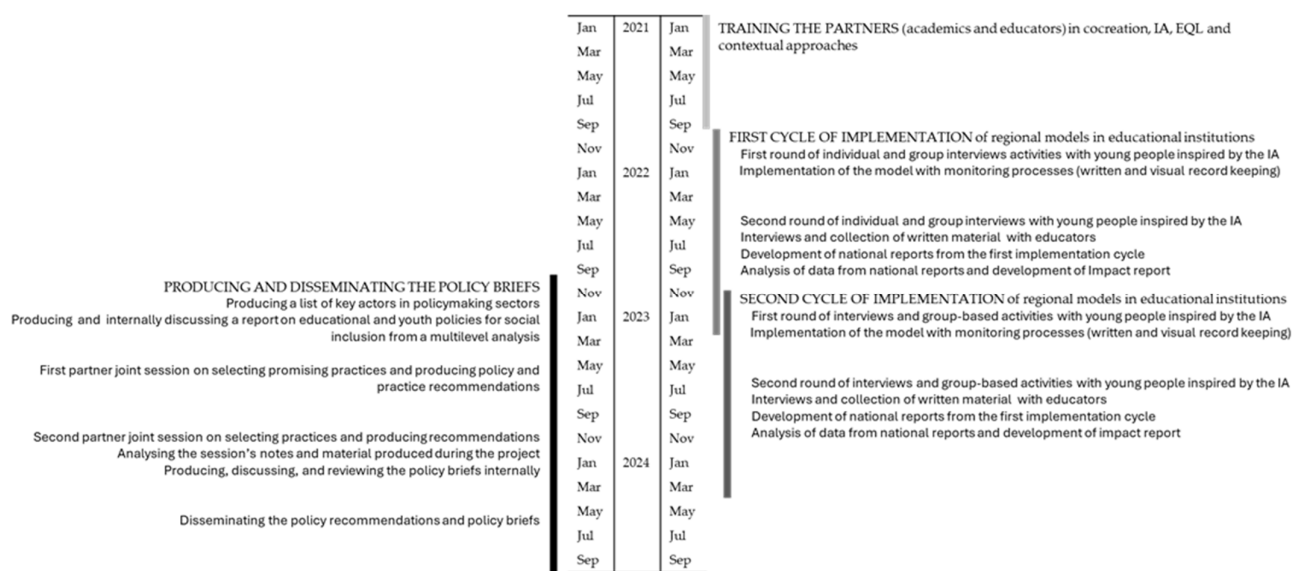

Figure 2. Methodological steps for developing the policy briefs related with the projects' main phases and activities.

The exploratory phase began with establishing a shared and collective understanding of educational quality through regular partner meetings and cross-national workshops. These collaborative spaces enabled partners to develop a common vision and deepen their comprehension of the project's core methodological tools—the co-creation, IA, EQL—while acknowledging the need for contextual adaptation (Mikkelsen et al. 2024). The second stage involved implementing, monitoring and evaluating practices in local contexts while maintaining continuous dialogue through team meetings and CCGs (Krane et al. 2025). This phase also included systematic data collection through interviews with practitioners and young people, providing evidence to refine methodologies and prepare for the scaling process.

After collecting and analysing data, the upscaling phase culminated in two distinct PB for reducing ELET that are the base to the discussion on the methodological approach of this paper: "Promoting Social Inclusion: Promising Educational Practices from COSI.ed" (Santos et al. 2024), which presented a shared framework for socially inclusive education, and "Transformative Power of Inclusive Education to Prevent Early Leaving from Education and Training" (Fonseca et al. 2024), which offered context-based recommendations grounded in project findings. In alignment with Arnautu and Dagenais (2021), these PB are positioned as powerful knowledge transfer tools, combining both unique and common elements across contexts. That is why we believe it is essential to thoroughly analyse and reflect on the methodological process of designing PB—grounded in theory, informed by practice, and shaped by the diverse voices of stakeholders.

2. Methodological Approach Supporting Policy Briefs Design

To establish a common understanding of existing education and youth policies in Europe related to social inclusion, a policy analysis (Veiga and Carvalho 2023) under the framework of the COSI.ed project facilitated a clearer and shared identification of priorities for policy change and informed policy recommendations that incorporated the upscaled educational co-creation practices—a crucial foundation for the development of the PB. This policy analysis was carried out collaboratively by academic and practitioner partners, who jointly identified key national and regional policy frameworks. This allowed the team to assess how regional policies aligned or diverged from European frameworks. This multi-level examination was instrumental in shaping informed and context-sensitive policy recommendations.

The elaboration of PB was informed by the two core phases/cycles of project implementation—exploratory and upscaling—as described in Section 1.2, and supported by a structured data set synthesised in Table 1. This included evidence gathered through the implementation of regional inclusive educational practices and systematic monitoring and evaluation procedures.

Table 1. Analysed material for producing the policy recommendations and taking into consideration the stakeholders' voices represented.

Analysed Material	Primary Information Sources and Collection	Stakeholders' Voices Represented
1 Report on: regional, national and European policies on education for social inclusion	Documentary thematic analysis of policy texts from European, national, and local organisations about social inclusion through inclusive education policies	Policy documents, such as recommendations, conventions, declarations, legislation, and reports published between 1990 and 2022
5 Regional reports on the practices' design and implementation (one per country)	Individual and Group Interviews with students and teachers/educators according to each national team Observation notes and records from educators and researchers	Young people Teachers and educational staff
2 Impact reports (one per country)	Content analysis of regional reports	Young people Teachers and educational staff Policy decision-makers Researchers
1 Report on the European model design	Cross-analysis of regional proposals	Researchers from COSI.ed team
National teams' discussion on local and regional promising practices	Audio-recorded and transcriptions of partners' sessions and notes from the 5 national teams' discussion	Researchers Teachers and educational staff from COSI.ed team
National teams' reviews	Content analysis of the proposed promising practices and policy recommendations at partner meetings and CCG meetings	2–3—Young people 1—Teachers and educational staff 1—Researchers 1—Decision makers 1—University students

The process began with an initial international workshop that brought together project members—academics and practitioners—to reflect on how to design policy recommendations at the local, regional, and national levels, based on practical experiences. Regional teams collected and analysed a variety of data sources: implementation records, impact

reports, and qualitative evidence from interviews, surveys, groups interviews, and practice diaries involving young people, teachers, education staff, and decision-makers. These reports enabled in-depth reflection on contextual adaptations, challenges, and successes across the diverse national settings.

A second international workshop supported the alignment of national teams' policy and practice recommendations within a shared framework. This step focused on identifying promising practices capable of strengthening relationships and fostering co-created educational environments. National teams shared and discussed their ideas in plenary sessions, fostering transnational learning and consensus-building. This moment was pivotal for mapping key thematic areas across teams, using both small and large group discussions. To guide the recommendation process, four thematic clusters of guiding questions were presented to national teams. These included reflection on whether to base recommendations on the COSI.ed dimensions (co-creation, IA, EQL); broader intervention domains (e.g., training, school leadership, research methodology); or more nuanced features such as dialogue, empathy, and storytelling. Teams also discussed the intended policy level of the recommendations (organisational, local, regional, national, European), and whether they should be experience-based, evidence-based, policy-informed, or theory-driven. These discussions helped define both the structure and content of the PB.

National teams initially worked in small groups to highlight two key practices essential to the success of educational trajectories in their own countries: (i) training/collaboration; (ii) the indirect approach; (iii) co-creation; and (iv) the CCG methodology. They were then asked to formulate 1–3 policy recommendations per selected practice. Following this moment, team members were reorganised into mixed international groups, each focusing on one of the four thematic areas (training, indirect approach, co-creation, CCGs). This enabled the cross-country validation and enrichment of the policy recommendations through dialogue and shared analysis. These discussions were recorded and transcribed.

The workshop's transcripts and notes were later triangulated with regional experiences, the European model design, and the previously mentioned policy analysis. Following the workshop, national teams completed structured templates to organise and synthesise the recommendations. These templates included: (i) national/regional policy overview; (ii) context and partners involved; (iii) description of the intervention; (iv) main results or changes observed; (v) promising practices contributing to social inclusion; (vi) recommendations to upscale effective practices. This process underwent thematic content analysis, which led to the drafting of the initial versions of the PB. Each brief was then refined through expert reviews, CCG-based discussions, and feedback from local and regional stakeholders.

A core dimension of the methodological approach supporting PB was considering the diversity of diverse voices across all sectors. Policymakers, teachers, university students, researchers, and young people were involved from the beginning and took part in monitoring, implementing, and reflecting on the co-creation practices. This ensured that the final outputs were not only grounded in empirical data but also resonated with diverse educational realities. Table 1 provides a detailed overview of the material analysed and the stakeholders whose perspectives were captured in shaping the final policy recommendations. Rather than simply presenting practices, this methodological process ensured that the recommendations were contextually grounded, co-produced, and informed by empirical evidence—thereby increasing their relevance and transferability. In the next section, concrete examples of educational practices that contributed to the development of these policy recommendations will be presented, offering a detailed view of how local practices informed strategic guidance for European education policy.

3. Results

3.1. Co-Creation at the Center of Democratic and Citizenship Practices

The implementation of co-creation methodology within educational settings is conceptualised as a symmetric knowledge-building process where all actors participate as equal partners in learning experiences, manifesting itself at multiple levels of educational practice and policy development. The idea is the possibility of establishing shared spaces of mutual recognition where students, teachers, researchers and school communities collaborate and learn to recognise each other (Bovill 2020; Bovill et al. 2016; Cook-Sather et al. 2014). The development of a "community of practices" (Markowska-Manista et al. 2024) proved to be a methodological approach particularly significant in addressing risk at ELET by reconceptualising traditional power dynamics within educational settings. Entering the analytical phase, we selected some pilot experiences implemented throughout all partners that seemed to be successful based on stakeholders' perspectives.

These included, for instance, the implementation of co-participated school assemblies, which were opened to the entire school staff and jointly organised by teachers and students, where decision-making was deliberately and democratically decided by the whole educational community. This experience aligns with the principles of co-creation due to its proven transformation in three key ways: (i) it enhanced young people's political agency through direct participation in school governance, surpassing the age status; (ii) it broke down professional status quo barriers that traditionally distance different stakeholders within the school context, and (iii) it fostered a deeper sense of belonging by creating transparent, democratic and inclusive platforms for dialogue among all.

Further practices were identified, such as the production of co-created diaries that were developed collaboratively between teachers and students, with the aim of supporting their academic progression by setting personalised learning objectives that align with their aspirations. These moments of empathy and participation generate mutual understanding, creating open and safe spaces for personal aspirations to transform into achievable expectations. Furthermore, this dimension also strengthened the collaborative relationship between educational settings, particularly between schools and academia. The established partnerships between academic institutions and local teachers proved crucial for strengthening professional development in both initial and continuing teacher education. This bi-directional knowledge transfer ensures that successful educational practices maintain a strong foundation in both theoretical understanding and practical experience. This approach to professional development directly informed macro-level recommendations, such as "Revise curricular and pedagogical frameworks for both initial and ongoing teacher development training by strengthening staff competencies" (Santos et al. 2024, p. 24). All these experiences fostered moments of learning, reciprocity, discussion, and mutual recognition, and hence, they embody good lessons about how to implement reflection and participation and improve democratic practices in schools by means of co-creation.

3.2. Practices of Proximity and Voice in Education: Building Safe Spaces Through Listening

Another methodological process implemented by all partners was the indirect approach, which was a strategy to grasp young people's experiences and trajectories by establishing a space of trust where everyone feels safe to express themselves. Drawing from ethnographic and biographical methods (Moshuus and Eide 2016), the indirect approach showed how creating safe spaces for authentic dialogue where different people are heard in their own terms could address core challenges in student engagement and permanence in school/educational institutions. The indirect approach is an explorative method through which the recognition of impactful and unknown realities is intended. Ideally, the intervention session should take the shape of storytelling, letting the young informant guide

the conversation (Frostholm and Walker 2021; Moshuus and Eide 2016). The conversation may revolve around the informant's spontaneous idea and the interviewer must refrain from introducing preconceived ideas, pre-understandings, or analytical categories. While obtaining answers to question the interviewer does not in fact ask (Frostholm and Walker 2021), the ability for building the conversation upon a happenstance is particularly valuable, that is, taking advantaged of unplanned moments during educational interactions in which students show willingness to provide deeper insights into their lived experiences, fostering the expression of their voices.

This supports educators practicing their ability for active listening to the ones that are frequently silenced in educational institutions owing to the large gap between their cultures and school culture. Moreover, by engaging in collective processes that foster the expression of their voices, young learners also have the opportunity to develop as citizens whose voices are heard and recognised and who are given the opportunity to make a difference. This includes their participation in the definition of knowledge and the ways in which this knowledge may be constructed and explored. Recognition of rights, together with participation in the definition of knowledge, shape educational citizenship (Macedo and Araújo 2014). This allows a linkage between the meso-institutional responsibility to ensure the realisation of pedagogic democratic rights of inclusion, participation and enhancement (Bernstein 2003) and the individual engagement in the expression and enactment of these rights to produce their own trajectories as citizenship construction actors who insert themselves in relations of recognition and inclusion and interdependence (Lister 2007). This approach incorporated multiple innovative communication practices. Practices such as *Photovoice* and *collage exercises* of students' educational trajectories were identified as successful due to their potential to surpass communication barriers, thereby enabling students to express their experiences openly through visual narratives. An approach to communicate with young people through diverse media that evoke ethical and aesthetics values, essential for good living and well-being.

In such practices, the idea of *happenstance* is applied to student–teacher relationships but can be upscaled to all educational interactions. It frames unexpected opportunities as openings to uncover rich, contextual information that bridges gaps between educators and students, cultivating mutual understanding and respect (Moshuus and Eide 2016). Central to this approach is the belief that showing genuine affection significantly enhances school engagement. Feeling seen and heard—knowing they are more than just a number—empowers students as unique citizens who have a stake in their lives and education (Bernstein 2003). If these practices were very valuable in supporting young people's understanding of their own educational trajectories, they also provided insights into design and approach the best possible inclusive strategies that directly informed macro-level recommendations to "Create safe and welcoming environments: Encourage natural and informal conversations, employing the indirect approach" (Santos et al. 2024, p. 14).

Therefore, we might consider that the practices founded on indirect approach were transformative in the following aspects: (i) they created safe spaces for authentic dialogues, challenging hierarchical relationships and fostering greater horizontality among teachers and learners; (ii) they enabled teachers to position themselves as learners, enhancing teacher–student relationships and confidence, and improving the educational practice; (iii) they provided concrete evidence that emotional support and relationship quality are crucial for ensuring social inclusion in schools and student engagement, again ensuring the link among the meso-institutional responsibility and individual–student responsibility.

This outcome provided the evidence we needed to support the recommendation at the individual level to "Enhance communication channels and affection between practitioners and young people through expanded activities and resources aimed at fostering dialogue"

(Santos et al. 2024). This reinforces research evidence that positive teacher–student relationships (Havik and Westergård 2019; Quin 2017; Roorda et al. 2011) and emotionally supportive school contexts (Vargas-Madriz et al. 2024) are strongly linked to higher levels of engagement, academic performance, attendance, and overall satisfaction, hence reducing the impacts of their opposites in ELET. The success of these practices seems to be helpful in strengthening training programmes and educational toolkits to improve curricular and pedagogical frameworks. The implementation of the indirect approach across partner countries revealed how structured trust-building practices could transform educational relationships and inform systemic policy change. One may say that the reinforcement of affection and support in education and the immersion in students' lived experience—taken as *the* starting point towards the development of new knowledge—are an essential lesson to be learned from these practices that have proven to be effective and can be thoroughly carried out within a diversity of educational contexts.

3.3. Practices for Improving Positive Teachers-Students Relationships

Importantly and in line with co-creation and proximity and voice, referred to above, the project implemented the EQL model (Stuart and Gravesen 2021) as the foundation for the work. Making use of this model implies the construction of an ambience of safety and trust among all participants so that young people feel free to open up and express their voices. EQL constitutes an analytical framework aimed at leading young people and educational professionals to understand the conditions that foster or obstruct learning and development inside and outside of the school.

The model was tried out across six diverse educational contexts, revealing how structured analysis of educational barriers and opportunities could inform systemic policy change. The work stands on a sociological framework. This grounding in structure–agency dynamics sees both the structure and the agent as mutable and affected by a complex set of macro-systemic and meso-institutional circumstances, where the individual (under these specific conditions) also has a stake. Such theoretical and political standing point provided a robust theoretical foundation for understanding the complex interplay between individual circumstances and institutional structures affecting student engagement and retention, absenteeism, truancy and so forth, which, as we know, have been identified as factors that contribute to ELET (Araújo et al. 2019; Macedo et al. 2018). The framework's implementation produced particularly compelling evidence through visual representations and explanatory narrative practices. *Drawing exercises*, implemented as analytical tools rather than mere artistic activities, enabled young people to map their educational trajectories and share their feelings, contexts, experiences, needs, and interests while providing practitioners with crucial insights into systemic barriers and allowing reasoning about potential forms of socio-educational intervention. Together with drawings, a particular case in Spain must be highlighted, the team implemented the *Sikkhona card method* with immigrant youth, which involves "group or individual conversations using images and open questions. This allowed young people to express their experiences and feelings objectively" (Fonseca et al. 2024, p. 20). Again, these alternative communication tools emerged as very useful to bridge cultural and institutional gaps.

These practices directly informed the process of elaborating inclusive macro-level recommendations to foster positive relationships (Santos et al. 2024) and "incorporate inclusive methodologies in curricula" (Fonseca et al. 2024) by specifically emphasising the need to create safe spaces to shelter the diverse forms of students' expression. Even if informed by therapeutic approaches, as therapeutically informed educational practices (Macedo 2022), these strategies are not intended to be therapeutic but rather to allow young

people to jump into themselves through processes of introspection and share their lived experiences through methods other than talking, the expressive arts in the current case.

Therefore, as is key to the production of the PB, EQL's effectiveness in developing *positive teacher–student relationships* manifested during the project through three key outcomes. First, it provided teachers/practitioners with analytical tools to understand how bio–social–cultural factors influence learning outcomes and gave them a deeper understanding of young people's inclusion/exclusion experiences. Second, it created structured opportunities for students to articulate their educational experiences without judgement. Third, it enabled the systematic identification of institutional barriers that might otherwise remain invisible, providing opportunities for the design of new educational strategies. These outcomes directly supported the institutional-level recommendation to "establish systems to track the implementation of inclusive practices and assess their impact" (Fonseca et al. 2024).

The framework's emphasis on understanding contextual factors led to significant shifts in how teachers/practitioners and policymakers could approach student disengagement. Rather than viewing early leaving as an individual failure, the EQL framework enabled the identification of systemic barriers and institutional practices that either promoted or inhibited educational engagement. This understanding informed the recommendation at the macro-systemic level to "strengthen cross-sector partnerships to tackle ELET through integrated policies" (Fonseca et al. 2024). This implies recognising that effective intervention requires a comprehensive understanding of students' social and educational contexts and a concerted action beyond school to support young people's trajectories. Perhaps most significantly, the EQL implementation demonstrated how theoretical understanding could translate into practical change within a thorough and intentional dialogue rooted in—and leading to—mutual learning. The development of individualised support programmes, based on systematic analysis of student experiences, provided evidence for the recommendation to encourage and recognise "students active engagement and representation" (Fonseca et al. 2024).

These experience-based implementations across diverse contexts illustrate how the EQL framework can inform policy development at multiple levels, from classroom practice to institutional reform and national policy. Moving from deficit-based interventions to support strategies that acknowledge educational barriers and the power of positive relationships and, more than all, recognise young people in education as citizens with a voice that can understand, interpret and participate in their realities and act as constructors of their own knowledge.

4. Knowledge Transfer: Essential Lessons for Quality Educational Policies

The perspectives gathered from these diverse experience-based co-creation, proximity and voice, and EQL practices allowed us to directly shape several key policy recommendations at diverse complementary dimensions of the meso-institutional level. We may say that the analysis of practices was implemented in participating institutions by each national team across the COSI.ed project proved to be successful and inspiring at three distinct dimensions of educational innovation: (i) for improving meso-institutional co-creation, opening to the surrounding community; (ii) to rethink pedagogical relationships; and (iii) to introduce greater diversity of methodological approaches. In a complementary fashion, each dimension produced specific insights that (in)directly informed subsequent policy recommendations.

The co-creation dimension at the meso level emerged as a transformative and democratic approach operating within educational institutions as a means of allowing members

from wider sectors of the broader educational community to influence school governance and life. This implies that schools are willing to collaborate closely with stakeholders beyond the schools' walls. This dimension also revealed how educational institutions can be reimagined by supporting student participation and voice and providing room for the effective expression, participation, and exercise of their citizenship. Moreover, the interface between schools and academia through collaborative training sessions was also useful in showing the importance of considering that educational practices must be grounded in both research/theory and lived/practical experience in a process through which both groups learn. Therefore, the analysis of these practices provided insights that shaped policy recommendations emphasising the need for (i) formal structures to support informal relationship-building and amplifying students' voice and citizenship as the enactment of their educational rights; (ii) the importance of cross-sector collaboration for professional development, (iii) the value of integrating diverse stakeholder perspectives into educational governance to redistribute decision-making power across the educational community.

At the pedagogical dimension, the analysis of practices developed within the project highlighted how relationship-centred approaches (Markowska-Manista et al. 2024) and symmetric-knowledge construction processes—where all actors participate as equal partners (even if with different roles)—can foster student engagement through personalised and affective approaches. In this regard, the promotion of positive relationships and a sense of belonging remain essential to achieving active engagement and ensuring quality education.

Finally, the methodological dimension revealed how diverse communication tools, particularly audiovisual tools (from photovoice exercises to collages and drawings) and autobiographical narratives, provided alternative pathways for students' expression and engagement, as well as for teacher–student bonds. The success of these approaches in fostering meaningful educational relationships directly influenced recommendations to improve in-service training for educators, including hands-on experiences with co-creation methodologies.

5. Final Thoughts

The methodological approach supporting the development of PB ensured that the resulting recommendations emerged from both theoretical frameworks and practical implementation, grounded in evidence while incorporating diverse stakeholder perspectives on educational quality and inclusion. Collaboration, thus, facilitated the transfer of the developed educational model and project outcomes to different educational and social contexts at local, national, and international levels (Krane et al. 2025).

As shown, the practices disseminated in the PB are related to three of the key concepts underpinning the COSI.ed project: Co-creation, IA, and EQL. Actually, this article examined how the process of co-creation experience-based policy recommendations on social inclusion emerges from the analysis of diverse local educational practices across multiple European contexts. Drawing on insights from eleven partner institutions in Denmark, Norway, Poland, Portugal, and Spain, it highlights how practices grounded in co-creation, IA, and EQL were systematised to inform European policy development addressing challenges such as ELET. The findings illustrate that educational transformation is oriented towards the following:

(i) Co-creation as a foundation for participatory methodologies that foster active engagement among stakeholders;

(ii) Student citizenship as a pivotal component of educational experiences that are both meaningful and empowering;

(iii) Collaborative partnerships that enable cross-sectoral coalitions to address systemic issues in education; and

(iv) Relational pedagogies that build trust, empathy, and stronger student–teacher relationships.

These elements collectively underscore the critical role of co-participation and recognition in cultivating transformative and democratic learning environments. By embed-ding these strategies into PBs—as strategic tools designed to translate local knowledge in-to inclusive policy recommendations—this work exemplified how participatory methodologies and experience-based practices can inform systemic change. PBs thus serve as me-diating mechanisms for knowledge transfer, bridging diverse voices and enabling in-formed decision-making across educational and political sectors.

Despite the relevance of the findings presented and the methodological approach supporting PB, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this article concerning the diversity of context and the specificities of national policies. While the analysis of local educational practices enables the identification of common trends regarding the influence of supranational organisations, their effective implementation depends on the unique po-litical, cultural, and institutional dynamics within each country. Therefore, translating the PB into national contexts requires a critical and sensitive adaptation to local realities, considering the particularities of educational systems and legislative frameworks, for in-stance. Political, cultural, and institutional specificities inevitably shape how such rec-commendations are received and implemented. This limitation does not diminish the value of PB as tools for mediation but rather reinforces the need to view them as flexible starting points for context-aware policy dialogue.

Additionally, the process revealed challenges in fully realising youth voices. It seems that some communicational and relational hierarchies still need to be overcome. On the one hand, the consultation of young people is stood on a research agenda proposed by the projects' concerns. This means that their participation, which surely opened the room for the expression of contextual and individual problems and expectations, was still limited to the walkways traced by adults under the European, national, and local concerns that informed the project. A step further needs to be taken in future projects in which eliciting young people's voices implies the full commitment of young people in defining what is relevant for them, how they want to explore it, and what topics they want to see introduced in the political agenda. This calls for intentional strategies to include less dominant perspectives, potentially through non-verbal, creative, or artistic methodologies that accommodate diverse modes of expression. Strategies need to be found to elicit the voices of the less powerful ones. This may include wider recourse to non-verbal ways of expression, such as the arts, so that a diversity of individuals can act within the project according to their 'best' capacities. If the way is made by walking, one may say that the project took many essential steps with very positive results. A lot is still to be done.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

ELET	Early Leaving from Education and Training
CCG	Collaborative Competence Groups
EQL	Equality Literacy
IA	Indirect Approach

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