



**Widespread  
School**

# **WIDESPREAD EDUCATION: Analysis at Policy Level**

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# Widespread Education: Analysis at Policy Level

**Widespread School** is an educational project funded by Erasmus+ under the European Union and coordinated by the Municipality of Reggio Emilia, Italy. The main goal and purpose of the project is to improve the quality of primary and lower secondary education inspired by the “Scuola Diffusa” experience and the Education Outside the Classroom (EOC) approach in 4 European countries (Italy, Finland, Croatia and Spain).

In particular, it has been suggested an approach (i.e. Widespread Education) to acknowledge the cooperation of schools and the territory for contextualizing students learning in and out of school.

*“Widespread Education is a pedagogical approach that engages primary and secondary schools developing curricular objectives in cooperation with other organizations and actors outside the school across time on contextualized, real, and authentic issues and questions that matters to students and communities by co-researching, co-designing, and co-teaching, bridging formal, non-formal and/or informal agents and connecting learning experiences in and out of school.”*

This is the definition developed by the “Widespread School” Erasmus + research group based on a collection of practices, a literature review and common reflections. Given the positive effects these approaches have on learning and general wellbeing, the group investigated the material, cultural and social conditions that have supported the emergency of these types of experiences in the participating territories. Under “material conditions” we consider the time, infrastructure and sustainability of the educational project. By “cultural conditions” we refer to the shared purpose and view, the ecosystem engagement, the shared knowledge and organization changes needed to support the program. Finally, “social conditions” are the social capital, trust and interdependence-collaborative culture necessary for this kind of projects<sup>1</sup>.

In that context, the purpose of this report is to understand the **roles, points of views and involvement of decision and policy makers** of the educational area involved in the “Widespread School” project. To reach this aim, interviews and focus groups were implemented in each region/country (Finland, Croatia, Spain, Italy). In particular, Table 1 describes the characteristics of the 18 participants.

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<sup>1</sup> Iglesias, E., Landi, L., Jornet, A., Damiani, P., & Esteban-Guitart, M. (2025). School leadership dimensions that Foster the development of learning ecosystems. The cases of the “Scuola Diffusa” (Reggio Emilia, Italy) and “Interseccions” (Catalonia, Spain). *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*.  
<https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/jpcc-05-2024-0066/full/html>

**Table 1.** Participants to the interviews or focus groups

	Participant	Position	Country
1	Àdam Bertran	Councilor of Education of the Municipality of Girona from 2019 to 2023	Catalonia/Spain
2	Laura Serrats	Director of CARME AUGUET school since 2016	Catalonia/Spain
3	Ànnia Pons	Director of OALEMG (local music education organism) since 2019	Catalonia/Spain
4	Pili Buil	Head of educational services section of the Municipality of Girona since 2016	Catalonia/Spain
5	Ingrid Guardiola	Director of BÒLIT (Contemporary Art Center of Girona) from 2021 to 2025	Catalonia/Spain
6	Eugenio Paterlini	Responsible U.O.C. Territorial Educational Services and Right to education, Oficina Educativa Service of Reggio Emilia Municipality	Reggio Emilia/Italy
7	Paola Campo	Principal of IC Don Borghi (comprehensive institute)	Reggio Emilia/Italy
8	Silvia Ovi	Principal of IC Lepido (comprehensive institute)	Reggio Emilia/Italy
9	Giulia Martinelli	Owner of the farm Agricola Canali	Reggio Emilia/Italy
10	Paolo Bernardi	Local executive for the Ministry of Education for the Reggio Emilia office	Reggio Emilia/Italy
11	Hanna Sarakorpi	School principal, Saunalahti School	Espoo, Finland
12	Riina Plosila	Pedagogical expert, City of Espoo	Espoo, Finland
13	Asko Lippo	Head of Service Unit, City of Espoo	Espoo, Finland
14	Liisa Kauppinen	Vice principal, Saunalahti School	Espoo, Finland
15	Ante Barać	Director of a primary school (Osnovna škola Petra Preradovića)	Zadar /Croatia
16	Davor Barić	Director of a primary school (Osnovna škola Zadarski otoci)	Zadar /Croatia
17	Tihana Magaš	Head of Department for Education at City of Zadar	Zadar /Croatia
18	Stefani Mikulec Perković	Head of Department for EU funds at City of Zadar	Zadar /Croatia

All partners received guidelines to structure and carry out focus groups and interviews, based on the following questions:

- Considering stakeholders' experiences and own initiatives, what are the main advantages/strengths of Widespread Education?
- What are the main obstacles/limitations and challenges?

- What are the main favourable conditions for the co-design and implementation of Widespread Education initiatives?
- What are the main roles and kind of leadership required according to participants' points of view?

Moreover, all partners received guidelines to describe and analyse the content of different interviews and focus groups, in order to have a common basis and structure. Common themes and categories were provided, making up a grid for all partners to follow.

## What are the main advantages/strengths of Widespread Education based on stakeholders' experiences and initiatives?

Strengths	Access to learning opportunities
	Cultural rights
	Sharing meanings
	Length and width
	Professional growth
	Civic competences

The **universalization of access to culture** is highlighted, i.e. universal access to educational opportunities that are in settings different from standard institutions, such as educational centres. Both educational centres and external institutions – such as the city council – highlighted that opening different sites to students allows also people who would not have access to the resources to use it. **Bringing culture closer to the city and the people**. Art and culture expand beyond the spaces where they are usually encapsulated. Citizens become aware of the wider cultural opportunities of the territory, enabling new cultural habits and securing cultural rights. The common work around common educational goals, the building of a network is also a countermeasure to the progressive loss of resources available for schools in the territory.

It is also noted that it allows **language sharing**, for example what does segregation mean? What does equity mean? When project can last for a prolonged amount of time their **duration** is also highlighted as a positive aspect.

It is the basic thing because the cycles in the educational institution are very clear, (yet through this project) you leave this temporality and that is very important. For us having annual cycles, this has limits. Having a three-year span allows us to propose a community project (Ingrid, director of an Art Center, Catalonia/Spain).

Teachers witness students' personal research, free exploration and the increase in motivation that comes from them. Given that children's average attention span has significantly decreased, it is crucial to apply teaching methods that engage students and encourage active participation. This model emphasizes the importance of experiential learning.

Widespread Education is the opportunity to give new stimulus to brains, new experiences to all senses. Moving around teaches students more than just sitting in a classroom. We give students the possibility to participate actively and learn in different ways. (Riina Plosila, Pedagogical expert, City of Espoo, Finland)

Citizenship education goals along with the development of lifelong learning competencies are key aspects for students that can be supported by Widespread Education (WE). WE helps develop transversal competencies through places' specificities, not only increasing their motivation for studying, but also their competency for learning to learn, to structure a lifelong project and their citizenship skills. One of the main benefits of this collaboration between formal and informal educational stakeholders is the enrichment of the learning process through diverse teaching methods and learning resources.

In social sciences, museum visits can serve as an introduction to historical analysis, while in language studies, students could explore linguistic norms by analysing the speech patterns of media professionals. Such an approach fosters deeper understanding and encourages critical thinking. (Davor Barić, Director of a primary school, Osnovna škola ZadarSKI otoci, Zadar/Croatia)

It is a community-based relationship that creates a socio-educational ecosystem that can support personal and professional growth at different levels. It connects different educational stakeholders. In that regard, WE has the potential to give value to all actors. The common design, monitoring and evaluation of activities carried out in normal school hours, but outside of the classrooms, promotes professional growth of all actors involved. It is based on sharing the same goals on the same group of

students and observe the same activities, providing opportunities to learn one from the other. For instance, in the case of Reggio Emilia, the hosting institutions' workers who participate in the designing and running of the week, the Officina Educativa educators of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia who coordinate the activities, the other educators who support the daily running of the experience, the school who opens to the territory. **Schools learn new and active approaches.** Educators learn new teaching methodologies from teachers and now understand schools and their needs better. Hosting sites also gain understanding of their potential by observing how students interact with and in the environment.

This is a true transformation, it makes school, more hands on, less transmissive (Cristina Ovi, principal of IC Lepido, Reggio Emilia, Italy).

## What are the main obstacles/limitations and challenges?

Challenges	Bureaucracy
	Demanding
	Ridigity
	Economical constrains
	Mobility
	Time
	Individualism
	Lack of common language

A basic difficulty is that initiatives are very specific and require artists or other non-teacher educators to come into the school, which generates some **bureaucratic difficulties**. It implies contracting. The administrative procedure is one of the most visible obstacles. The process to hire artists, for example, is complex in terms of bureaucracy. The process of bidding, establishment of the agreements, the requisites and requirements sometimes are not coherent with the initiatives. For example, it does not permit to choose the specific artist needed for the activity, but the bid has to be open to everybody.

There is a lack of structured collaboration between schools and external partners. Most activities depend on the initiative of individual teachers, highlighting the need to formalize a trilateral partnership between the city, schools and cultural-educational institutions to ensure the long-term sustainability of such projects.

School partnerships with external organizations have proven particularly effective during projects such as STEM Week, where the City of Zadar, schools, associations and individuals jointly organized various educational activities. However, such initiatives are still not systematically regulated and largely depend on the enthusiasm of individuals (Tihana Magaš, Head of Department for Education at City of Zadar, Croatia)

Another type of bureaucratic difficulty is the safety legislation. Principals are responsible for safety; parents are increasingly concerned and the legislation is hard to respect fully while carrying out educational activities out of school grounds. The legislation seems to aim and nullify risks, but this in an Education Outside the Classroom educational setting is very hard to do. Principals, who do not fully respect the law, risk very high sanctions.

Another obstacle is that teachers sometimes see WE as something that increases their workload. Obviously it does require time and sometimes it is complex to make the project coexist with other projects of the centre and with the daily school activities. Yet the potential for their students and the positive atmosphere they experience during WE should out trump the costs.

A potential challenge for a WE intervention is the lack of **stability** of the staff involved. If staff is temporary throughout school, problems for these wide programs that involve the whole community is even greater, because newcomers lack the vision and experience to carry out the project.

Linked at these obstacles described above, it is the necessity of some organisational changes especially regarding contracts and biddings. These changes and increasing **economic resources** are key to improve the financing, the contractual conditions as well as expand the project at other centres and realities. For instance, these initiatives would need to contemplate incorporating **resources for mobility**. Teachers should have a more flexible schedule so that they can devote more hours to such initiatives. They need **hours** for coordination, design and implementation to be recognized/funded through the project. On the other hand, policy makers can organize solutions for these problems. For example, they can facilitate the entry of the equipment, of staff, at the educational centre. Another challenge concerning resources involves students who may exhibit increased activity levels and impulsive behaviour.



Organizing field-based learning for students with special needs requires additional adjustments and support from educational assistants.

The Croatian education system often lacks sufficient resources for innovative teaching methods, and limited funding restricts the widespread adoption of experiential learning. (Stefani Mikulec Perković, Head of Department for EU funds at City of Zadar, Croatia)

In terms of organization, changing teachers' schedule is very difficult, due to systemic **rigidities**. External actors wonder to what degree this rigidity is due to lack of understanding and interest in finding solutions. Yet principals often report this organizational issue as the single most demanding part of WE. Besides the complexity, the internal organization implies that some teachers never get to see WE settings, while others might go but not engage because they do not see the point on getting involved for a couple of hours, or on different subject matters. All actors must change to accommodate WE and this can be done only if they have strong motivation. Officina Educativa of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia has changed its internal organization to make WE possible. The same has been true for hosting sites, that have adapted their work schedule, the use of spaces, the need to build and unbuilt WE settings to accommodate other activities.

Campo – principal of a comprehensive institute from Reggio Emilia – identifies the reasons for the limited agency of school in building autonomous connections with outside agents in the lack of common language and dialogue between schools and external agents, thus Officina Educativa of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia mediation is always needed. Maybe, common training could help build common language and tools, thus supporting direct relationships, providing some space for autonomous actions, also with the idea that the municipality cannot offer this service to everybody and schools must start to build their own programs. Ovi – principal of another comprehensive institute of Reggio Emilia – sees less internal organizational issues, that in her school could be more easily overcome due to the high motivation of some of the staff.

To overcome this limit, schools should be able to insert WE into their normal curricular activities, creating strong connections, integration between inside and outside. (Ovi, principal of IC Lepido, Reggio Emilia/Italy).

A key background conditions that can hinder these types of experiences is the growing **individualism** that is diminishing appreciation of common good. The fight among local

vested interests destroys the network and cooperation, because instead of working for a common goal everybody is pulling in different directions.

## What are the main favourable conditions for the co-design and implementation of Widespread Education initiatives?

Conditions	Financial resources
	Time
	Co-design
	Trust
	Co-responsability and active involvement
	Coordination
	Open-mindedness
	Stability

All participants refer to the importance of increasing **economic resources**: this is true, for examples, in the case of Catalonia/Spain where a joint grant has been requested from the Generalitat de Catalunya. Also the need to get a shared framework to articulate the action and provide it a long term. It is also important to be based on existing needs and to fully involve all the agents.

Also, having sites around the school that can be easily reached (no need for transportation) and can be experienced free of charge, helps. (Liisa Kauppinen, Vice principal, Saunalahti School Espoo, Finland).

The school must be **permeable** and understand the reality of families, students and the neighbourhood, for example take into account how we will move to make the exhibition, etc. Understand the reality of the school and identify a significant topic in the context, the topic of water in the case of the NEXES project conducted in Catalonia/Spain where a real planning space among teachers, artists and city council technicians was provided.

In our case it was a mediation project, a creation project, contemporary visual arts are not so much dedicated to creating products but projects, a way of explaining the world that we have in our hands through art (Ingrid, director of a Art Center, Catalonia/Spain).

The human factor in the sense of creating relationships based on mutual trust. **Trust**, built through years of common work and co-design of educational activities that have created and developed common goals and a common language. It is a complex system built on people and relationships. To achieve common language, goals and trust need time to talk, meet, co-design and organize. It is on this understanding and trust that adults can build a meaningful educational experience for students.

“They have sat down with the teachers and in a pooling is very enriching because there is the pedagogical part and the artistic part, also the public administration part, this goes through space and time shared to be able to co-design, which is included” (Laura, director of a School, Catalonia/Spain)

The **commitment** of agents is considered a key factor to fully involve all the different agents of the socio-educational ecosystem. There is a need of coordination and collaboration among teachers, school principals and educational specialists.

In practice, field-based learning initiatives are usually driven by teachers, while principals, due to administrative responsibilities, less frequently take the lead in such activities. However, schools do provide necessary support, fostering a positive atmosphere and improving cooperation within the staff. (Ante Barać, Director of a primary school, Osnovna škola Petra Preradovića)

This **socio-political willingness to cooperate on educational issues** can be promoted by the existence of a municipal structured service, such as Oficina Educativa (OE), not just to provide financial resources but to become an educational partner for school and promote innovation. Even better when this strategic partnership can be defined through some form of official educational agreement between schools and the municipality.

One essential condition is that the centre and the educational team create and feel like getting involved in the project and want to put themselves in it (Pili, Head of Educational Services, Catalonia/Spain)

In order to be transformative for the schools and the community the initiative must be long lasting, some consider **3 years** as the minimum length, otherwise it is something sporadic. With project of one year there is no time to make the link or to generate an impact. Another necessary condition is a systemic and democratic leadership that creates sense of community, an idea and practice of “working team”. In particular, the need of involving the families is mentioned.

It is crucial to mobilise families around the project. We need the involvement of the families due to its importance. Some families are really involved and facilitate the implementation of the project, however others do not participate (Ànnia, Director of Music Center Service, Catalonia/Spain).

All interviewees consider the ability to compromise and accept changes in working schedules and organization by hosting sites, schools and the educational services as indispensable for the project and as signals of a territory that is open to innovation.

In that regard, according to teachers, **WE requires adapting skills, anticipation, trust to themselves and to the group, good group management skills, assessment skills and co-operation.** For instance, to increase teachers’ participation the WE initiative in Croatia envisions appointing school coordinators who will assemble teams of five to six teachers and educational specialists. This ensures systematic activity planning, alignment with the curriculum and inclusivity for all students.

## What are the main roles and kind of leadership required according to participants' points of view?

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Leadership    Learning from different expertise

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Democratic-distributed

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Mutual recognition

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Mutual trust

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Co-construction

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Shared and mutually defined aims

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Clear roles and expertise

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The organizational framework is based on clearly defined objectives and general timelines for activities. The different yet coherent purposes are highlighted and crucial. The school aims to offer rich and quality educational experiences, highlighting the **participation of experts** who bring new ideas and quality to the school: this means to enrich the school staff by incorporating other expertise from the community such as an expert on science who works in a museum. **Visualizing the school in the city** is also a value of WE projects. City councils highlight the value WE has in allowing the school to stand out, position itself in the city, beyond the bad reputation it may have if the school is segregated by the economical and/or cultural profile of its students and families. Singularization in a positive sense. The art centre BÒLIT from Girona highlights the possibility of **making community projects** and especially highlights the value of **co-design** beyond ethnography, paternalism or social assistance. You can **learn from each other**. One of the objectives of the Spanish project NEXES – Pili stands out – is the generation of more **significant learning, more contextualized**, for more transversal and creative situations. Promote knowledge of art and science based on real, close, palpable, **experiential situations**.

To me, what really matters is the understanding of a city that educate. I mean, that all the different actors, services and agents can potentially educate. However, this needs clarification. Clarification on the role of the municipality, the role of the school, and so on. All social, educational and community agents have a role and voice. The importance is to share a purpose, a vision and a project, and to acknowledge the expertise and roles of different agents involved. (Àdam, Councillor of Education, Catalonia/Spain).

Teachers, principals, school coordinators and external collaborators play a crucial role in project implementation. Teachers are the primary drivers of initiatives, while school coordinators ensure systematic preparation and curriculum alignment. Principals provide administrative support and facilitate the execution of activities within the school system.

In relation to leadership, the director of Carme Auguet school from Girona highlights the role of **landing the project at the centre**, a logistical role of specifying procedures, times, spaces and ideas.

It has been very “ecosystemic”, in a very organic way, by the different agents and the different people, it has been given in a very fluid way (Ingrid, director of an Art Center, Catalonia/Spain).

The different agents highlight the **fluidity of the project and the organization**. The process of scheduling, for example, has been done a lot together. It is stressed that this does not happen in all projects, examples are given where this coordination has not been given. It seems that the participants indicate the fact of believing the project as an explanatory value of its success in relation to its coordination. The **complicity among the different agents** is therefore valued. City Councils carry out the economic management, budget, justification, etc. When schools have not been involved in educational projects those projects have not worked because they lacked the curriculum and pedagogical conditions that could have made them relevant in terms of learning objectives. There must be **trust**, an interlocution between the centre and school staff, also with the collaboration of the city council. In this sense, it is a challenge when the people in-charge change because it is necessary to reconnect, negotiate, appropriate the project again. In short, a **shared, plural, permeable, democratic and empathetic leadership stands out**, in the sense that these are institutions that are different and that must be exchanged, must be yielded in the internal dynamics and logics.

The educational ecosystem embodies the idea that an intentional exchange among people triggers personal development if one is open to the idea that change, and learning is possible.” (Paterlini, Responsible U.O.C. Territorial Educational Services and Right to education, Officina Educativa Service of Reggio Emilia Municipality, Italy).

A **stable team** allows for rapid transformation of the proposal to meet students’ specific needs. Another key component for hosting sites is the respect and valorisation of what space and staff have to offer.

## To conclude ...

WE interventions have the potential to be beneficial for teachers, students, educators and all stakeholders involved, although in different ways. Teachers, educators and stakeholders learn from each other and can experience professional development. Students are motivated by the active and stimulating environment and have a chance to enhance their transversal competences.

The focus groups and interviews with stakeholders and policymakers have provided us with a deeper understanding of enabling factors and challenges to the EOtC practices that exist in the partners’ territory. Enabling factors for a successful program include: economic resources, open-mindedness by participants, cooperation and codesign, mutual trust and recognition, but also shared and mutually defined aims. A democratic and distributed leadership by school institution and actors involved (i.e., municipality) contributes to the creation and implementation of the educational projects.

To sum up, this report has practical implications for understanding the strengths and advantages of WE projects (i.e., access to learning opportunities distributed among the territory), some main limitations and challenges (i.e., the bureaucracy), the main favourable conditions for the development of these initiatives (i.e., financial resources or co-responsibility and active involvement) and, finally, the main roles and kind of leadership required based on mutual recognition and trust, co-construction, and clear roles and expertise.