



Detecting Areas of Improvement in Secondary Education: Listening to Management Teams and Teachers

Detectando áreas de melhoria no Ensino Médio: ouvindo as equipes diretivas e os professores

Detectando áreas de mejora en la Educación Secundaria: escuchando a los equipos directivos y a los profesores

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Abstract

The general aim of this research study is to detect needs and possible areas of improvement in the Basque education system. To this end, this paper describes and compares the discourses of different informants, using a qualitative methodology based on a census sample of secondary schools and students in the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country (ACBC). Although our research is located in a specific geographical and cultural context, the detailed contextualisation of the study may shed light on an international level and may be transferable to other contexts that come close to the characteristics described in this article. Thus, a total of 18 secondary schools from the ACBC were selected in accordance with their effectiveness level, calculated on the basis of the results obtained in the Diagnostic Assessments (DAs) across five years. Likewise, professionals involved in the study (18 inspectors, 18 management teams, and 50 educational agents) identified certain priority areas, such as teaching-learning methods, promoting diversity, fostering an evaluative culture and leadership, resource provision, stability of the teaching staff, relationships with families, and optimisation of constructive conflict resolution. This research can help to carry out other research on other education systems based on the dimensions analysed in this article, as they have been found to be a priority for educational agents.

Keywords

educational efficiency;
educational improvement;
educational quality;
educational evaluation

Palavras-chave

eficiência da educação;
melhoria da educação;
educação de qualidade;
avaliação da educação

Resumo

O objetivo geral deste estudo de pesquisa é detectar as necessidades e possíveis áreas de melhoria no sistema educativo basco. Para tal, propõe-se descrever e comparar os discursos de diferentes informantes, através de uma metodologia qualitativa que se baseia numa amostra de censo de escolas secundárias e estudantes pertencentes à Comunidade Autónoma do País Basco (CAPB). Embora nossa pesquisa esteja situada em um contexto geográfico e cultural específico, a contextualização detalhada do estudo pode lançar luz em nível internacional e ser transferível para outros contextos que se aproximem das características descritas neste artigo. Assim, foram selecionados um total de 18 centros de ensino secundário do CAPB, de acordo com o seu nível de eficácia, calculado com base nos resultados obtidos nas Avaliações Diagnósticas (ADs) ao longo de cinco anos. Da mesma forma, os profissionais envolvidos neste estudo (18 inspetores, 18 equipes diretivas e 50 agentes educativos) identificaram algumas áreas prioritárias, como métodos de ensino-aprendizagem, promoção da diversidade, acesso de uma cultura de avaliação e liderança, disponibilização de recursos, estabilidade do corpo docente, relacionamento com as famílias e otimização da resolução construtiva de conflitos. Esta pesquisa pode auxiliar na realização de outros estudos sobre outros sistemas educacionais com base nas dimensões analisadas neste artigo, uma vez que foram identificadas como prioritárias para os agentes educacionais.

Resumen

El objetivo general de este estudio de investigación es detectar las necesidades y posibles áreas de mejora en el sistema educativo vasco. Con este fin, se plantea describir y comparar los discursos de diferentes informantes, a través de una metodología cualitativa que parte de una muestra de censo de escuelas secundarias y de estudiantes pertenecientes a la Comunidad Autónoma del País Vasco (CAPV). Aunque nuestra investigación se ubica en un contexto geográfico y cultural específico, la detallada contextualización del estudio puede arrojar luz a nivel internacional y ser transferible a otros contextos que se asemejen a las características descritas en este artículo. Por lo tanto, se seleccionaron un total de 18 centros de educación secundaria de la CAPV, de acuerdo con su nivel de efectividad, calculado en función de los resultados obtenidos en las Evaluaciones Diagnósticas (EDs) durante cinco años. Asimismo, los profesionales involucrados en este estudio (18 inspectores, 18 equipos directivos y 50 agentes educativos) identificaron algunas áreas prioritarias, como los métodos de enseñanza-aprendizaje, fomento de la diversidad, impulso de una cultura evaluativa y liderazgo, dotación de recursos, estabilidad del personal docente, relaciones con familias y optimización de la resolución constructiva de conflictos. Esta investigación puede ayudar a llevar a cabo otros estudios sobre otros sistemas educativos basándose en las dimensiones analizadas en este artículo, ya que se ha determinado que son prioritarias para los agentes educativos.

Palabras clave

eficiencia de la educación;
mejora de la educación;
educación de calidad;
evaluación de la educación

Introduction

The school effectiveness and improvement movement has attempted to provide insight into how students' learning outcomes interact with institutional, school, and classroom contexts (Chapman, et al., 2016; Reynolds, et al., 2014). Many different explanatory frameworks have been proposed that take the following levels of analysis into consideration: student characteristics (Kyriakides, et al., 2018); the classroom and the school (Creemers, 1994; Kyriakides, et al., 2015); school district and education system (Creemers & Kyriakides, 2008; Murillo, 2007); approaches that integrate perspectives based on change and improvement (Kyriakides, et al., 2010); and studies on school ineffectiveness (Hernández-Castilla, et al., 2013). Therefore, we understand effectiveness as the ability of schools to improve student outcomes, taking into account the contexts in which they work (Murillo, 2005, 2011; Reynolds, et al., 2014; Scheerens, 2016).

This movement, which is known internationally as *Educational Effectiveness and Improvement*, has been further strengthened by the emergence of different institutions or organisational structures such as the *American Educational Research Association* (AERA), the *European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction* (EARLI), the *British Educational Research Association* (BERA), and, in Spain, the *Centro de Investigación y Documentación Educativa* (Center for Educational Research and Documentation) (CIDE).

Some of the most-used resources, which have become key sources of information regarding school and environmental factors, as well as the outcomes of the educational process, are large-scale international assessments such as the TIMSS, TALIS, IALS, PIRLS, and PISA surveys (Fuentes, 2009). These assessments enable policy-makers to orient education policy towards improving student performance. Indeed, the existence of the resulting databases (particularly PISA) has prompted a large and varied body of research (Cordero, et al., 2013) based on predictive analyses and causal inference, as well as many comparative studies focusing on different countries, ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic levels, and educational stages (OECD, 2004; Strand, 2010).

One seminal study in this field is that carried out by Barber and Mourshed (2008), which explores why certain education systems or certain educational reforms are successful, while others are not. The authors conclude that it is vital to develop teachers' capacities and to provide them with ongoing training and support in order to guarantee teaching practices that are effective for all students. Moreover, other similar studies carried out in this field include those by Creemers (1994, 2002); Kyriakides, et al. (2009); Nye, et al. (2004); Opdenakker and Van Damme (2000); Slater, et al. (2012); Stronge, et al. (2011); and Van Petegem, et al. (2008).

For his part, Murillo (2011) argues for the development of a school effectiveness improvement model adapted to the specificities of each particular context, and states that both teaching, and management staff should be providing with ideas for designing and applying school improvement plans. These ideas refer to aspects such as establishing shared goals, fostering professional leadership, ensuring the professional development of teachers, and highlighting the importance of school climate, among others. For their part, Peniche, et al. (2020) describe the factors that affect secondary school teacher performance, and Figueroa (2017) concludes that some of the factors most closely linked to school effectiveness and improvement are teamwork, school management, positive expectations by both management and faculty, a greater mastery of the subject matter being taught, the use of diverse methodological strategies and, finally, a positive relational climate. Other examples of studies focusing on this topic including those carried out by Aristimuño, et al. (2007), Cornejo and Redondo (2007), Duarte, et al. (2011), Fernández (2004), Guzmán and Padilla (2017), Padilla, et al. (2018), and Reimers (2003).

Additionally, in Spain, Organic Law of 29th December (LOMLOE, 2020) stipulates those educational administrations may establish evaluations for diagnostic purposes aimed at school improvement. At local level, specifically in the Basque education system, the so-called Diagnostic Evaluation (DE) is being developed. This is an evaluation process aimed at improving schools, which, in the case of the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country (ACBC), has been applied in the year 4 of primary (year 5 in the UK) and year 2 of secondary (year 9 in the UK) since the 2008-2009 school year. The DAs measure three specific competencies: language competency in Spanish, language competency in Basque and mathematical competency. Moreover, depending on the year, they may also measure other competencies such as foreign language competency, competency in scientific culture, technology and health, and social and citizenship skills. Following the assessment, schools receive confidential reports that provide an overview of both their specific situation and that of the education system in general, with the aim of helping them define areas of possible improvement.

Also, as part of its *Plan Heziberri 2020*, the Basque Government (2016) has published a Plan for Improving Education in the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country, which aims to ensure the optimal development of basic competencies among all students in a normalised and inclusive setting. The areas of improvement envisaged in the plan are as follows: training of the educational community, inclusive education and attention to diversity, bilingualism in the framework of a multilingual education, teaching materials and information and communication technology, assessment and research, as well as a greater degree of autonomy for public schools.

The education system in the ACBC comprises three different types of school: public, private, and semi-private. As their name suggests, semi-private schools are halfway between public and private schools, and although they are privately administered, they are principally funded by the Basque Regional Government. According to enrolment data for the 2020-2021 (Basque Government Department of Education, 2020a, 2020b) academic year, of the 332 secondary schools in the region, 132 (39.75%) are public and serve 40,842 students (46.72% of the total student body). Semi-private and private schools account for the remaining 200 secondary schools in the region (60.24%), and together serve 46,568 students (53.27% of the student body).

Based on the results obtained in external assessments, the Basque Institute for Research and Evaluation in Education (ISEI-IVEI, 2016) has concluded that the main strengths of the Basque education system are its equality, low rate of retake students, low rate of early school dropout, attention to specific educational needs, the systematisation of external assessment, and the development of improvement plans by schools. On the other side, as regards weaknesses, ISEI-IVEI highlights the low number of students with high performance rates, the need to improve school-family collaboration, the lack of teacher assessment, the absence of career opportunities for teachers, low teacher status in society, low level of school autonomy, and low performance rates in science.

Hence, this framework provided the starting point for the present study, which aims to reflect the opinion of educational stakeholders regarding the general functioning of the school system in the ACBC. Although the Diagnostic Assessments and their respective improvement plans, as well as various research initiatives, have already identified both strengths and weaknesses in the Basque education system, this work reinforces these investigations as there are few studies in the Basque Country that collect the voices of a diversity of agents with different professional positions in the educational context. Therefore, the main objective of this work consists of detecting possible lines of improvement based on the perceptions gathered from a diversity of professionals (teachers, management staff, and inspectors) from Secondary Education schools in the ACBC selected on the basis of efficiency criteria (Lizasoain-Hernández, 2020).

Method

This research was mainly based on a qualitative methodology. Just as in quantitative research, quality criteria are expressed through reliability and validity, in qualitative research they are expressed through concepts such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba, 1989). In the following, we indicate the extent to which these criteria are addressed in this research.

Credibility is used in order to ensure that the results are in line with reality, data collection was triangulated using a variety of sources (inspectors, management staff, and teachers) and tools (semi-structured interviews and focus groups) to reinforce the description of the phenomenon studied. Also, *Transferability* refers to the possibility that the information obtained can provide knowledge in other contexts. The results obtained have been returned to the schools in the form of a report. In addition, several seminars (e.g., summer courses of the University of the Basque Country) have been held for various educational services and agents (Training and Educational Innovation Support Centres, school leadership teams, etc.).

Additionally, *Dependency*, in terms of data consistency, possible instability of data has been addressed through contextual description of the schools, thorough descriptions of informants during data collection, and clear establishment of the researcher's role throughout the study process. Finally, *Confirmability*, in reference to providing information aimed at objectivity and neutrality, the data obtained was returned to each reporting school, and a confirmation process was conducted through an inter-judge agreement in the task of categorising the data.

Participants

This research analyses, through a qualitative methodology, the proposals for improvement expressed by the different professionals at schools in the ACBC. It is based on a census sample of secondary schools and students belonging to the ACBC on the basis of the Diagnostic Evaluation (DE) applied in 2015 in 326 secondary schools (20,221 students). In the first phase, the pertinent statistical analyses were carried out and the schools were ranked according to effectiveness criteria (Lizasoain-Hernández, 2020). In a second phase, 18 schools gave the permission to carry out the qualitative data collection. Therefore, the characteristics of these schools are given in Table 1 below.

Table 1.
Characteristics of the schools.

		N	%
Funding model	Public schools	6	27,78
	Semi-private schools	12	66,67
Language model	A (Spanish)	2	11,11
	B (Basque and Spanish)	6	33,33
	D (Basque)	7	38,89
	Mixed model	3	16,67

		N	%
Socioeconomic and cultural index of the school	Low	7	38,89
	Medium	6	33,33
	High	5	27,78
Size of the school	Small	5	27,78
	Medium	7	38,89
	Large	6	33,33
% Immigrant students	Low	5	27,78
	Medium	8	44,44
	High	5	27,78
% Retake students	Low	6	33,33
	Medium	6	33,33
	High	6	33,33

Source: Created by the authors, (2022).

Instrument and Data Collection Procedure

The data for this study were collected from 18 individualised semi-structured interviews with 18 professionals from the Basque Government's Education Inspection Service, 18 semi-structured group interviews with school management teams in which 50 educational agents participated, and four discussion groups in which 32 professionals from the teaching staff took part.

The interviews and discussion groups were based on the categorical framework drawn up from the results and conclusions of the 2012-2014 research (Lizasoain et al., 2015). This categorical framework is composed of these eight variables: Training and innovation projects, teaching methods, attention to diversity, assessment, leadership, school organisation and management, school climate, and families. The eight dimensions have been collected as a basis for focusing on possible lines of improvement.

Prior to the study, the procedures required by the Ethics in Research Commission of the University of the Basque Country (CEID) were completed in order to ensure compliance with the ethical requirements established in Spanish law.

In order to respect participants' anonymity, the following coding system was used to identify the different informants:

1. Informant: Inspector¹/Management team/Teacher.
2. School reference code: a numerical coding system was used (e.g., 30580).

¹ In relation to inspectors, no school reference code or information regarding effectiveness level is provided.

Data Analysis

This study is part of a wider research project which analyses a wide range of aspects about schools efficacy. This document focuses only on the data corresponding to aspects concerning the lines of improvement proposed by the schools. All interviews and focus groups were transcribed and entered into NVivo 10 (see Annex 1) according to the type of informant (inspectors, management staff, and teachers) and node.

With the aim of meeting the objectives of the study, the analysis followed a deductive-inductive process (Massot Lafon et al., 2016; Ruiz Olabuénaga, 2012) to create a matrix of categories that describe the lines of improvement suggested by the agents interviewed. The deductive process is based on the categorical framework used in the fieldwork. Regarding the inductive process, new categories were created based on the comments made by the participants on different aspects linked to the objectives of this research. Therefore, the contents were organised through the creation of a matrix of categories and sub-categories pertinent to the study (see Annex 1). The categorisation and analysis of these data were accompanied by an inter-judge analysis with a high degree of agreement ($K=.89$).

Table 2.

Matrix of categories in relation to areas of improvement.

Category framework of reference	Emerging sub-categories	References (%)
Training and innovation projects	Teaching-learning methods	14.68
	Promotion of student autonomy (inter-stage interaction)	1.83
Teaching methods	Principal aim being competency development, not just achieving good grades	4.59
	Individual monitoring of students (by teachers and tutors)	1.83
	Prioritising of core subjects	3.67
	Educational innovation, which includes ICT, multiple intelligences, emotional intelligence, foreign languages, and peer-learning	2.75
	Fostering diversity	7.34
Attention to diversity	Reducing school segregation	1.83
	Ensuring the integration of immigrant students and their families	3.67
	Offering positive role models for success	1.83

Category framework of reference	Emerging sub-categories	References (%)
Assessment	Evaluative culture	11.01
	Process/product	5.50
	Key role of the pedagogic commission	1.83
	The importance of context	3.67
Leadership	Fostering leadership	13.76
	Strategies for promoting stable management teams (reducing paperwork, sharing responsibilities, specific training, incentives, etc.)	7.34
	Better communication with the external institutional system	4.59
	Planning processes of change (minimising risk)	1.83
School organisation and management	Resource provision	15,60
	Human resources	4.59
	Based on need rather than on type of school	2.75
	Decreasing the teacher-student ratio	4.59
	Remodelling of physical spaces and time distribution	3.67
	Support of external staff	1.83
	Teaching stability	30,28
	Teacher selection, stability, and training	0,92
	Incentives	3.67
	Specialist training	6,42
	OA-Orientation, supervision, and accompaniment	7.34
	Voluntary adherence to the school's vision and mission	4,59
	Respect for personal time	3,67
	Recognition of the social value of teaching	3.67
School climate	Optimising constructive conflict resolution	4.59
	Activation of positive conflict resolution measures (dialogue hubs, positive conflict management, shared responsibility, appreciating the work done by others, etc.)	4.59
Families	Relationship with families	8.26
	Construction of positive relationships with families (complicity and cooperation)	4.59
	Opening up the school to families	3.67

Source: Created by the authors, (2022).

Results

The results are presented below based on the emerging categories described in the previous Table 2.

Teaching-learning Methods

Informants from schools said it was important to encourage activities that foster student autonomy, including interactions between different ages and school years, as a means of enriching learning.

It's a big building and we don't engage in activities alongside students from different stages. I think it would be enriching. It really has an impact on students and strengthens relationships, and it helps teachers too. Some excellent ideas often come out combining different age groups, areas, and stages. The mix you create is very enriching. (Teacher_30580)

Also, schools highlighted the need to optimise teaching and learning methods. They suggested prioritising core subjects such as languages and mathematics, both in everyday methods and in measures designed to cater to diversity.

There is increasing support from the tutor and classroom teacher, in terms of language, for example. You have to teach in Basque, but what if you have a student who has just arrived from Valladolid? Well, you know full well that their family speaks Spanish at home, so you have to work to expand that student's vocabulary. In class, you have to make an effort to help and support them. (Management team_30162)

Schools highlighted the importance of investing more time and energy in ensuring a better quality of individual attention and student monitoring by both teachers and tutors.

There are teachers at this school who, even if it's not their student, know whether they leave class to go to the toilet or are outside in the corridor; they know what to say and what not to say to them. (Teacher_35068)

In relation to teaching method, schools highlighted that, as part of the compulsory education system, secondary schools should prioritise the development of basic competencies. Nevertheless, there seems to be a certain tendency among parents to value numerical grades more highly in secondary than in primary. This may be due to the fact that, for many years, students' grades were more important than the evolution of their learning. If teachers do not internalise this idea of learning (as a process aimed mainly at acquiring basic competencies), then it is unlikely they will convey this

attitude to families. Conversely, if teachers perceive the opinions held by families in a negative manner, this will constitute an obstacle for engaging in processes of mutual collaboration. In this sense, informants highlighted the need to incentivise collaboration between teachers and families in order to open up channels for promoting a greater recognition of secondary school teachers' professional merit.

We work in a strictly competency-based environment, and the publishing house we work with is EDB. (...) This philosophy, which is applied to the diagnostic tests, is a positive one. Families sometimes don't fully understand it, and their reaction is often 'yes, but what about the marks you give them?' But they are different things; sometimes they don't understand that. They only understand marks. This means we have to spend a lot of time explaining and managing this issue. (Management team_26180)

Likewise, schools made proposals for educational innovation, including the activation of strategies linked principally to areas such as ICT, as well as others associated with multiple intelligences, emotional intelligence, foreign language learning, and peer learning.

Yes, we're working on the project now. In Catalonia they already apply it in secondary school classrooms. They don't call it *EntusiasMat*, but rather *OnMat*. It's not exactly the same methodology. This is based on multiple intelligences. And we've also been attending training courses on emotional issues, because we think this may be an area we should work on. We've started with preschool and are now looking to continue in primary and secondary. (Management team_28644)

Fostering Diversity

Schools mentioned fostering cultural diversity in the classroom and efforts to ensure the integration of immigrant students and their families, as examples of positive action.

We haven't had any more problems. (...) indeed, the inspector told us that some people wanted to label us a ghetto school due to the high percentage of immigrant students we had, so we asked them to come and visit us. The inspector wrote a report arguing that a ghetto, I mean, the term ghetto, refers to a series of characteristics that are simply not present in our school. It's true we have a lot of students from immigrant families; I think at that time it was about thirty percent of the total student body. But they are completely integrated and part of a community; so, it's by no means a ghetto. (Management team_31240)

Schools with high and low extreme scores stressed the need for public education policies to make the necessary effort to reduce school segregation in the ACBC. They particularly emphasised the importance of schools offering students positive role models for success from cultures or subcultures with which they are familiar in order to expose them to alternative life experiences and professional career pathways.

T2: We would like there to be more diversity.

(...)

T1: This is a ghetto. And ghettos simply don't work. (Teacher_26224)

(...) nowadays we get all types [of students] and we don't have role models. Well, just the role models they give us (...) We were making headway with innovation, but this new situation is different; we have to find a way of establishing cooperative groups, for example, one way or another. (Teacher_30580)

Evaluative Culture

Schools talked about the need to develop an evaluative culture. In this sense, evaluation strategies should help encourage formative reflection throughout the entire community, while at the same time being sensitive enough to include different forms of pedagogic action. Therefore, both the process and the result should be assessed. In this way, processes of change should be considered moments of instability and should be included in evaluations.

When you get given the [ISEI-IVEI] report, they say 'look and see what your weak points are and try to establish areas for improvement...'. I would like them to take a little more notice of the improvement areas we identify. Because I teach maths, and when you get together with other colleagues at conferences or seminars, you realise we're all saying the same thing, right? It may seem inconsequential, but they always set the maths tests second. First, they set Spanish or Basque or whatever, and then the kids have to do the maths test second. And they complain about that. (Teacher_35068)

Moreover, schools highlighted the need to improve evaluation policies. One school with increasing residuals stated that it aimed to review its own evaluation system. Informants explained that they wanted to move away from the DAs as the principal benchmark and instead, place more emphasis on the results obtained by students in the school itself. To this end, they said they planned to give the pedagogic commission a more prominent role and to ensure better coordination between this body and the management team.

First, we aim to define and strengthen the role played by the pedagogic commission. In *Bachillerato* (equivalent to A levels in the UK) and vocational training, the department head will meet frequently with the management team, allowing the pedagogic commission to play a more prominent role; second, we will complement the results of the Diagnostic Assessment with the marks the student earns at school. (Inspector 29480)

Schools said that in order for the results of the DAs to be relevant, they should take context into account, considering not just the residual but also its evolution over time. DAs should be more attuned to real teaching and should enable the planning of an adapted teaching response with the aim of increasing their credibility, practical value and usefulness, as well as fostering a greater appreciation of the work done in the classroom.

We attach greater importance to written and oral communication competencies, and I sometimes ask myself, what's going on? How come we're still at the lowest level? There's something not right; not right at all. (...) these kids have so much more potential than is reflected in the Diagnostic Assessments. (Management team_26180)

Fostering Leadership

Schools stressed the importance of fostering the leadership of stable management teams. It is vital to value and incentivise the work of the management team. The tendency not to want to engage in management tasks should be recognised and dealt with, and those who do carry out these tasks should be valued. In this sense, it is important to implement different strategies aimed at reducing paperwork, ensuring a fairer distribution of responsibilities, fostering specific training, providing incentives, increasing teaching tasks, and ensuring those engaging in these tasks are liberated from other duties.

We're starting, but in truth... we get bogged down in paperwork. We get bogged down in paperwork and in problems. (Management team_28644)

I sometimes think there simply aren't enough hours in the day. I wish we had a magic wand that would enable us to rearrange time. It's just that we are so engaged and want to do so much that we often come up against the time barrier, either due to the number of students or the sheer volume of paperwork, as you said. (Teacher_35068)

Furthermore, one school talked about the need for better communications with the external institutional education system and less red tape.

This was one of the things we complained about above. For example, in the Diagnostic Assessment, we don't understand why we do the tests in March but don't get the results until November that same year. It's absurd! (Management team_28644)

As regards informants' perceptions of the results obtained by their school, some schools said that it was important to minimise risk in processes of change, or at least to do so as far as possible. They also said that foreseeable risks should be dealt with by better planning things and paying greater attention to the consequences of the changes being implemented.

We saw this last year, and the year before. There was concern (for the changes introduced) about the examiners and problems with the IT system, because many USBs failed. This year again, we've seen (in our case at least, I don't know about anyone else) a fairly serious lack of control over the situation. (Management team_26180)

Resource Provision

In general, schools expressed the need for more human resources (both professionals and volunteers) in order to deal effectively with diversity. Semi-private schools in particular argued in favour of resource provision based on real needs rather than on the type of school.

We're the ones who stand to benefit from a solution, right? So, let's see what other resources we can gain access to. (Management team_32120)

Yes, we discussed this. I think we need more resources. I teach PE and the law says that in order to take the kids out of the school grounds I have to have someone else with me. But when it comes to assigning resources, we only get one PE teacher. (Teacher_26224)

Schools emphasised the need to lower student-teacher ratios, which they believe are currently too high, in order to enable them to give students more individualised attention.

In my opinion, the number of students in some classes, I mean the teacher-student ratios we have, prevent you from getting involved and getting close to all your students. (Teacher_35068)

Schools highlighted the need to rethink and adapt physical spaces and time management to 21st-century society and methods that require unconventional spaces.

You simply can't do it (manage your time effectively). The only thing you can control is when you leave, or, for example, in this meeting, we could have obligatory breaks. But tomorrow, I'm going to a

*Berritzegune*² meeting and I can manage my time better there. (Management team_26224)

Schools expressed a very positive opinion of the support provided by external staff (social service professionals, community associations, and family and community volunteers who participate in the teaching-learning process in the classroom and at the school).

It really boosts the work they are doing. We also have the *Osatuz*³ service, which consists of a psychologist who comes to help deal with two specific cases. (Management team_26224)

Teaching Stability and Teacher Training

Educational improvement in schools is linked to processes inherent to their functioning, such as selection, stability, and training processes for teachers and management staff. Informants from these schools highlighted the need to foster the stability of the teaching staff by ensuring greater recognition and identifying which professional incentives are most likely to improve teacher retention. They also talked about the need for specialist teacher training in order to guarantee continuity.

I think new members of staff should undergo a training period. (...). And there needs to be greater continuity, staff should be selected by the management team, who should build trust with those who work here; I think this is fundamental. (...) people need to want to be here. (Teacher_26224)

When a new teacher joins the school, they need to go through an orientation, training, supervision, and mentoring process. This is vital to ensuring that their professional practice is in line with the characteristics of both the school and its students.

I'm not just talking about getting to know the students. I'm talking about being tutored by another teacher so they can learn how the school works, how to act in the event of an incident or when you have a problem with a student, and how you are expected to treat students. (Teacher_26224)

Other measures were proposed too, such as the 100% voluntary commitment of teachers to the school project.

It's really about giving those of us who are responsible for the project a free hand. (Teacher_26224)

2 Basque name for the Pedagogic Innovation Centre.

3 Basque name that means 'completing'.

Informants from schools also mentioned the need to promote dynamics that enhance the stability of the teaching staff. For example, caring for teachers and respecting their personal time, since demanding continued dedication outside working hours may lead to burnout.

We have organised things so that there is more than one teacher in the classroom, but of course, this relies on the goodwill of the teaching staff. (Management team_26092)

Schools with high extreme residuals also stress the importance of training teachers, especially recent arrivals, by involving them in projects designed to stimulate and motivate teachers.

T1: I really appreciated it. It was a long time ago, though! Eloy, the teacher in charge of students with special needs, would pop in several times, often with the flimsiest of excuses. He'd stand at the back and listen, then give me feedback: 'Well, I think you should do this or that; or you explained it like this, but I think they'd understand you better if you explained it this way'; stuff like that.

T5: I have been working as a teacher for six years and I've never had anyone give me feedback; not in six years. (Teachers_35068)

Schools with decreasing residuals emphasised the need to pay attention to foster and promote the social value of pedagogy in general, and teaching in particular, in order to facilitate the personal and professional growth of those working in this field, and to improve teaching functions in schools. Educators should be role models for students, as well as respected, valued and appreciated figures in society.

Optimising Constructive Conflict Resolution

Schools emphasises the importance of implementing positive conflict resolution measures. It is important to foster strategies designed to promote a good working climate at schools. The following optimisation mechanisms should be generated (among others): dialogue hubs, positive conflict management, shared responsibility, engagement, and appreciation of everyone's work.

We at the bottom are all very friendly. You go into class and say, 'hi, how are you?'. You see what they are doing. And there have been times at which I couldn't help myself, and I said 'hey, why don't we try ...?'. She may be doing something in class, trying to do an activity, and I say, 'why don't you try doing it this other way?', [and she says:] 'Right; yes, I hadn't thought of that'. And I think this helps build trust between colleagues, and I think that is important. (Management team_35068)

Relationship with Families

Schools mentioned the need to involve families. Informants discussed about building positive relationships with families through strategies that foster their complicity and cooperation. To this end, it is important to develop actions and activities designed to open up schools more to families.

We invest a lot of time in accompanying students and working with their families. So, you could say we provide a personal service. We often spend over an hour with families when they come. (Management team_30162)

You have to make an effort to integrate families, to help them get to know and understand our customs. Sometimes they don't even speak the language. There's a service that helps us with this, and it's great, by the way. (Teacher_35068)

Discussion and conclusions

The main objective of this work consisted of analysing the possible aspects of improvement that could be activated in secondary schools in the Basque Country, in such a way that it could serve as a point of reflection for the activation of improvements in the different educational systems. For this purpose, the diversity of voices of the different educational agents has been gathered around the main needs they encounter in their day-to-day work. These educational agents are the teaching staff, the management team, and the educational inspector staff. In this way, it has been possible to infer those aspects of improvement that respond to the needs expressed.

One of the key areas of improvement mentioned refers to the need to rethink schools' evaluative culture. Assessment strategies should contribute to encouraging formative reflection among all members of the school community. Consequently, as Reyzábal (2012) argues, both the process and the result should be taken into consideration. As this author points out, the evaluation of the process is more important in competency assessment than in other cases, since the aim is to reinforce achievements and correct dysfunctions in order to ensure that all students develop basic competencies, albeit to differing degrees.

In this sense, the results also point to the importance of external evaluations (Diagnostic Assessments) not becoming the principal benchmark for evaluating students' competencies. External evaluations are generic and fail to faithfully reflect specificities. They tell you nothing about the idiosyncrasies, individual characteristics, conflict resolution model, areas of improvement or specific goals of each community and school, and

therefore do very little to foster processes of change (Hernández de la Torre & Murillo Estepa, 2017). In order to improve their credibility and value, the Diagnostic Assessments should strive to provide a more accurate reflection of the actual teaching that goes on in a school and should help the school community plan an educational response that is better adapted to the work carried out in the classroom. Therefore, it is necessary to give the pedagogic commission a more prominent role and to ensure better coordination between this body and the management team.

Another area of improvement is linked to the need for more material and human resources. The results of our study point to the importance of rethinking and adapting physical spaces and time organisation, as well as reducing teacher-student ratios in the classroom. This would enable teachers to respond better to the diversity of students in their class and the different problems they may have. Also, it would decrease their feeling, being overburdened and helping avoid burnout (Prieto Ursúa & Bermejo Toro, 2006).

An additional area of improvement identified is the need to allocate resources based on real needs rather than on type of school. In their study, Azorín and Mujis (2018) demonstrated the importance of establishing collaborative networks involving different schools, as well as placing a pool of resources at the disposal of different stakeholders in order to guarantee equity, reduce existing gaps between schools, and ensure all parties equal access to the same materials and proposals.

Moreover, our result highlights the need for schools to try and forge closer ties with their local community. The support provided by external staff (social service professionals, community associations and family, and community volunteers who participate in the teaching-learning process in the classroom and at the school) is something that is valued very highly (Azorín & Mujis, 2018).

Likewise, it is important to foster the stability of the teaching staff by ensuring greater recognition and identifying which kinds of professional incentives are most likely to improve teacher retention. Informants mentioned the need to foster dynamics that promote the stability of the teaching staff. For instance, taking care of teachers and respecting their personal time, since demanding continued dedication outside working hours may lead to burnout (Intxausti-Intxausti, et al., 2022; Prieto Ursúa & Bermejo Toro, 2006).

Another aspect worth emphasised is the need for teacher training, especially in relation to new members of the teaching staff, in order to guarantee continuity (Azkarate, et al., 2019; Azpillaga, et al., 2021; Darling-Hammond, et al. 2013; Lizasoain, et al., 2016). Whenever a new teacher joins the staff, it is vital to foster peer support networks designed to

aid knowledge exchange through a process of formative accompaniment that includes orientation, advice, supervision, and feedback (Azorín & Mujis, 2018; Bolívar-Botía, 2004), with the aim of ensuring that they adapt to the characteristics of both the school and the students in their everyday professional activities.

Additionally, the results highlight the importance of paying attention to, fostering, and promoting the social value of pedagogy in general, and teaching in particular, in order to facilitate the personal and professional growth of those working in this field, and to improve teaching functions in schools. Educators should be role models for students, as well as respected, valued and appreciated figures in society. As Sánchez Lull, et al. (2015) point out, teachers' self-realisation does not just depend "on a process in which relations between the school, families and community progress in a consistent manner, but also on a real improvement in how teachers are seen by society, and what kind of training they receive" (p. 255).

The majority of the management teams participating in the study expressed a certain degree of dissatisfaction regarding the functions assigned to the school management body. They stated the need to reduce paperwork, foster better communications with the external institutional system and promote a fairer distribution of responsibilities, coupled with releases and incentives. The idea is to foster distributed leadership with values that include collaboration and mutual care, with the aim of promoting a sense of institutional affiliation (Intxausti, et al., 2016; López Yáñez, et al., 2011; Ordoñez-Sierra et al., 2020).

Furthermore, our results highlight the need for processes of change in schools to be more carefully planned and for those involved to have a greater awareness of their consequences and possible resistance from teachers. As Hernández de la Torre and Murillo Estepa (2017) argue, if the aim is to promote processes of improvement and innovation, then change must be generated from within the schools themselves. It is necessary to gain teachers' agreement and approval through a process of joint reflection on their own practice; something which will inevitably have an impact on the organisational structure.

Another area of improvement identified was to develop strategies for optimising teaching-learning methods (Bartau-Rojas, et al., 2017). It is important to encourage activities that foster student autonomy, including interactions between different age groups and school years as a means of enriching learning. As Escarbajal-Frutos, et al. (2015) point out, one avenue of improvement would be to implement teaching-learning methods involving collaborative and cooperative processes. These authors also highlight the importance of investing more time in and paying more attention to student monitoring processes by both tutors and teachers. Similarly, as Azorín and Mujis (2018) argue, teachers should try and tune in to the individual needs of each student.

Some of the principal innovation strategies identified were those linked to areas such as ICT (Bartau Rojas, et al., 2017), multiple intelligences, emotional intelligence, foreign language learning, and peer learning.

An additional aspect of school improvement is related to the provision of resources for dealing with diversity. The results point to the need to activate public education policies designed to reduce school segregation in the ACBC. School segregation, defined as the phenomenon by which students are unevenly concentrated in certain schools in accordance with their characteristics or conditions (Murillo et al., 2018) is a factor that prevents all students from receiving an equal and high-quality education. Consequently, fostering cultural diversity in the classroom and efforts to ensure the integration of immigrant students and their families are seen as examples of positive action. As Azorín and Mujis (2018) state, society is calling for dialogue between cultures, and is urging communities to initiate processes of exchange designed to help us find our shared humanity. Therefore, it is important for schools to offer students positive role models for success from other cultures or more minority sub-cultures.

Likewise, the results highlight the need for positive conflict resolution measures. It is important to develop strategies designed to promote a good working climate at schools, and to generate mechanisms for optimising them, such as dialogue hubs, positive conflict management, shared responsibility, engagement, and appreciation of everyone's work, among others. As Etxeberria et al. (2017) remark, this implies fostering positive interactions that promote teamwork, the democratic participation of different community stakeholders (students, teachers, and families), reduced conflict, an appreciation of differences between students and the creation of an environment in which teachers feel protected and recognised.

Finally, the study points out the need to incentivise collaboration between teachers and families in order to open up channels for promoting a greater recognition of secondary school teachers' professional merit. The aim is to build positive relationships with families through strategies designed to foster their complicity and cooperation (Bartau et al., 2019).

Although our research is located in a specific geographical and cultural context, the detailed contextualisation of the study may shed light on an international level and may be transferable to other contexts that come close to the characteristics described in this article. This research can help to carry out other research on other education systems based on the dimensions analysed in this article, as they have been found to be a priority for educational agents.

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Annex 1

Hierarchical map of the matrix of categories

