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Improvement in secondary school performance and successful educational actions

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Introduction: Scientific literature has presented solid evidence on the positive impact of Successful Educational Actions (SEAs) in improving students' academic performance and social inclusion. However, there is limited research examining their long-term or longitudinal effects.

Methods: This study addresses that gap by analyzing the academic and social impact of SEAs at IES San Juan Bosco Lorca, a high school recognized as a Learning Community since 2018. For this purpose, university entrance exam results of the school were analyzed.

Results: The main finding of this study is a sustained academic improvement associated with the implementation of specific Successful Educational Actions (SEAs) such as Interactive Groups and Dialogic Gatherings, with school averages eventually surpassing the regional average.

Discussion: However, as the results are based on a single school context, future research is needed to examine the effects of SEAs in more diverse educational settings in order to determine the broader applicability and transferability of these improvements.

KEYWORDS

academic performance, secondary education, social impact, social inclusion, successful educational actions

1 Introduction

Educational success is closely linked to social advancement and expanded life opportunities. Access to quality education is a fundamental right of all children contemplated in SDG 4 (United Nations, 2015). Providing access to educational environments that foster learning and social cohesion is relevant for children's future integration into society and their ability to thrive with greater social opportunities. All children have the right to quality education, as this right is essential not only for learning but also for giving children better chances in life and helping them to become active members of society. However, many students face serious difficulties that affect

their learning, which include underachievement, limited literacy skills, and unsafe school environments.

One of the key challenges for students, especially those from low-income families, is the lack of opportunities to develop the language and literacy skills they need to succeed in school (Lawrence et al., 2010; Snow and Uccelli, 2009). These students often have fewer experiences with rich, academic language at home and in their communities (Snow et al., 1989; Uccelli et al., 2015). Without these skills, it is harder for them to understand texts, write clearly, or take part in learning activities. This situation makes access to education and participation in the classroom difficult.

Regarding PISA, the decline in the scores reported in 2023 compared to earlier years led to widespread reactions in both traditional and social media, with some headlines stating that the poor PISA results in Catalonia were due to immigration or low-income (López, 2023). Many scholars agree that poverty is not only about money (Grusky et al., 2006), but also about not having access to basic things like quality education, which is a complex problem with many causes (Nolan and Whelan, 2010). Because of this, schools must play a key role in giving all children access to quality learning while schools are safe places to do so. In addition to low academic performance, there is growing concern about school violence, bullying, and gender violence. These problems affect children of all ages and harm both their well-being and their learning. For this reason, schools need to ensure not only good education but also safe environments where children feel protected and supported.

Several studies have drawn attention to the risks of applying educational practices that are not grounded in scientific research (Dekker et al., 2012), as well as the consequences of excluding those directly affected from the design of interventions meant to address these challenges (Torrás-Gómez et al., 2021). In recent years, there has been a growing emphasis on creating knowledge through collaborative and inclusive processes (Villarejo-Carballido et al., 2024). In this context, fostering strong partnerships between schools and the scientific community has become increasingly important (European Commission, 2022). Evidence shows that when schools implement evidence-based educational actions with proven social impact and involve all members of the learning community in open and egalitarian dialogue, they achieve better academic and social outcomes.

In this sense, only a few actions have proven to work in both areas over time. In this sense, Successful Educational Actions (SEAs) have shown positive results in both learning and school relationships in many different school settings (Flecha, 2015). These actions are based on the theory of Dialogic Learning (Flecha, 2000) and the theory of the Dialogic Society (Flecha, 2022), which promotes learning through dialogue, respect, and shared understanding.

The INCLUD-ED project (“INCLUD-ED. Strategies for Inclusion and Social Cohesion in Europe from Education”, 2006–2011) identified the SEAs that improve educational results in schools facing serious challenges as well as in schools with fewer difficulties. These actions include practices such as Dialogic Literary Gatherings (DLGs) (Ruiz-Eugenio et al., 2023), Interactive Groups (IGs) (Díez-Palomar and Olivé, 2015), family and community involvement in learning (Elboj-Saso et al., 2022).

In DLGs, students read adapted versions of classic books that are appropriate for their age. They choose a paragraph from the reading and explain why they selected it. Then, they discuss it with their classmates. The goal is not to find one correct meaning, but to talk about the book in connection with its own ideas and experiences. All students’ opinions are respected, no matter their academic level or background, if they explain their ideas with reasons (Mirceva and Larena, 2010). The more diverse the group is, the richer the discussion is (Ruiz-Eugenio et al., 2023).

Interactive Groups (IGs) are small classroom groups where students with different skills and backgrounds work together. Each group has an adult volunteer who helps the students talk to each other and work together on tasks prepared by the teacher (Valls and Kyriakides, 2013). Students complete several tasks in one session, and they move from group to group. This method supports cooperation, inclusion, and faster learning for everyone (Díez-Palomar and Olivé, 2015).

Family participation in school life also makes a difference. The INCLUD-ED study showed that when families are involved in making decisions, evaluating school activities, and participating in learning activities, students improve more (Flecha, 2015). Examples include family reading clubs, digital literacy activities, and shared learning between parents and children. These actions help connect learning at school, at home, and in the community.

Therefore, SEAs have proven to contribute importantly to the advancement of learning and coexistence by addressing inequalities and fostering socially just and inclusive educational practices. Their successful application demonstrates the effectiveness of dialogic, evidence-based educational interventions to build cohesive and empowering learning communities (Flecha and Soler, 2013).

Our aim is to analyze whether these actions are producing improvements in academic performance in the analyzed context and to understand how these impacts are being achieved. It is important to clarify that this is not a quantitative or statistically representative study, nor do we seek to generalize the results. The positive effects of these Successful Educational Actions (SEAs) have already been demonstrated in diverse school settings through previous research. The objective of this study is to explore whether similar improvements are observed in new contexts when these actions are implemented effectively, and to examine the specific ways in which such outcomes are generated.

Our goal is to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on educational practices that have shown transformative potential. By analyzing the implementation and outcomes of SEAs in these schools, we aim to deepen our understanding of the mechanisms that make these actions successful, and to learn more about how they can continue improving the lives and learning opportunities of children around the world.

2 Materials and methods

This study is grounded in the Dialogic Society theory (Flecha, 2022) and employs the Communicative Methodology (Puigvert, 2012), which emphasizes co-creation of knowledge and social

impact. In this approach, both the design and implementation of the research actively involve participants through egalitarian dialogue (Soler-Gallart and Flecha, 2022). Communicative Methodology has proven effective in various contexts and its two core features are social impact and co-creation of knowledge between researchers and participants (Flecha and Soler, 2014).

The application of the Communicative Methodology in this study is part of a long-term collaborative relationship between the researchers and the IES San Juan Bosco community. The co-creation of knowledge was achieved through a sustained process of egalitarian dialogue, involving regular meetings with the school's management team, teachers, and sometimes students, and family volunteers. While the broader research project includes qualitative interactions, this specific study prioritizes the analysis of external assessment outcomes (EBAU) and documentary records as a strategic choice to provide evidence of social and academic impact. This approach ensures that the quantitative data is not merely extracted but co-analyzed within a communicative framework oriented toward social transformation. This long-term longitudinal dialogue allowed for a shared interpretation of the school's challenges and the mutual identification of the need for an external validation of the SEAs' impact through standardized EBAU data.

The scientific knowledge behind these SEA has been under investigation for over 30 years, beginning with their development at the Adult School of La Verneda in 1978 and their identification as SEA in the INCLUD-ED project ("INCLUD-ED. Strategies for Inclusion and Social Cohesion in Europe from Education", 2006–2011). The knowledge accumulated over the years, together with the practice experience gained, has been a key factor in understanding the dynamics of the schools involved.

2.1 Context of the center

The study includes the participation of IES San Juan Bosco, a public secondary education center located in the San Antonio neighborhood, on the outskirts of Lorca, in the region of Murcia (Spain). The school offers a wide range of educational stages, including Compulsory Secondary Education (High School, corresponding to 7th to 10th grade), Baccalaureate, Basic Vocational Training, Intermediate and Advanced Vocational Training.

Since being officially recognized as a Learning Community in 2018, IES San Juan Bosco has progressively implemented several SEAs across different educational stages: interactive groups, dialogic gatherings, tutored library, family training, community participation, dialogic model for conflict prevention and resolution, dialogic pedagogical training and teacher training.

This study explores how SEAs transformed the High School at different levels, with a particular focus on how their systematic and rigorous implementation contributes to educational success in school settings.

According to the most recent available data, corresponding to the 2022–2023 academic year, the high school had a total enrollment of 1,492 students. Of these, 716 students were enrolled in the four years of Compulsory Secondary Education

(ESO)—equivalent to 7th to 10th grade in the U.S. system. An additional 66 students were enrolled in the two years of Bachillerato (11th and 12th grade), and 710 students were attending vocational training programs.

2.2 Procedure and materials

The following data were collected from EBAU results of students completing their second year of Bachillerato. EBAU stands for *Evaluación de Bachillerato para el Acceso a la Universidad* which translates into "Baccalaureate Evaluation for University Access". Specifically, EBAU results from IES San Juan Bosco between 2018 and 2024 were analyzed. The EBAU is Spain's standardized university entrance examination, which assesses both core and elective subjects and contributes to students' final university admission scores.

Reported scores from these assessments were collected for all participating students and served two purposes: first, to establish baseline academic performance; and second, to explore potential correlations between students' engagement in SEAs and their standardized test outcomes. Additionally, the research team performed a documentary analysis of institutional records and classroom plans, which illuminated how the SEAs were formally integrated into the school's curriculum and pedagogical strategies. By triangulating documentary evidence, the study achieved a comprehensive understanding of how teacher characteristics interact with Successful Educational Actions to produce positive educational and social impacts.

3 Results

The findings reveal improvements in key dimensions of the educational experience at this high school. Specifically, results indicate a sustained increase in academic achievement observed in correlation with the period following the implementation of the Successful Educational Actions (SEAs).

3.1 University entrance exam results from 2018 to 2024

As illustrated in the figure (Figure 1), the results refer to the EBAU university entrance examinations administered to high school students. The orange line represents the regional average across comparable high schools, while the blue line indicates the average results for this specific high school.

Since the implementation of Successful Educational Actions (SEAs) in 2018, both the regional and high school averages have shown an upward trend (see Table 1). In 2018, the school's average score was 6.381 compared to the regional average of 6.518. By 2021, the school's average increased to 7.039, approaching the regional average of 7.152. In 2024, the

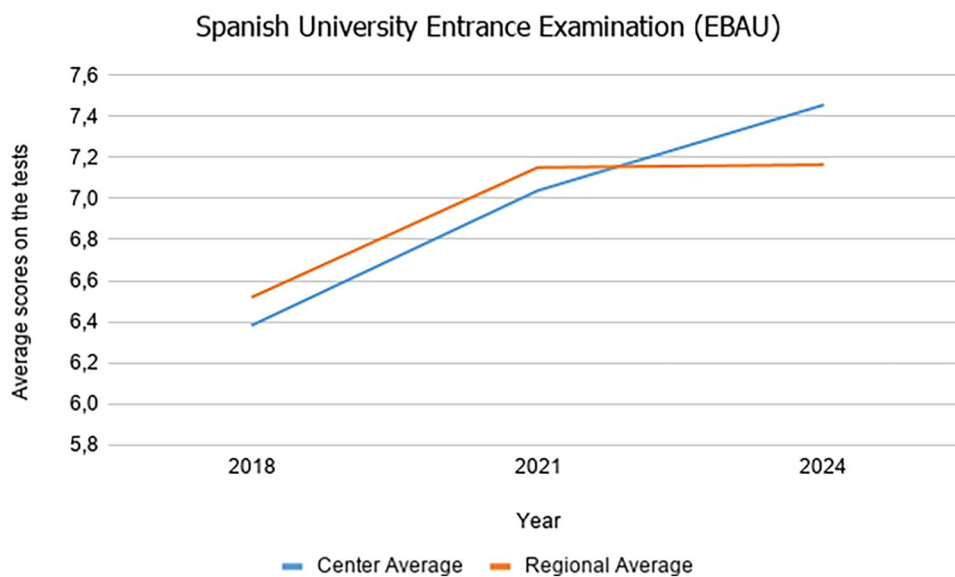


FIGURE 1
EBAU results – school and regional averages in 2018, 2021, and 2024.

TABLE 1 EBAU results – school and regional averages between 2018 and 2024.

Year	Center average	Regional average
2018	6,381	6,518
2019	6,467	6,592
2020	6,911	6,841
2021	7,039	7,152
2022	6,541	6,789
2023	6,94	6,938
2024	7,457	7,165

school's average further rose to 7.457, surpassing the regional average of 7.165. This pattern suggests a sustained positive trajectory in academic performance observed alongside the implementation of SEAs.

In parallel with the improvement in academic outcomes, student enrollment at the school has increased by approximately 52% (Figure 2). This expansion coincided also with a notable increase in student diversity; specifically, the proportion of students with Special Educational Needs rose from 3.7% in 2018 to 6.4% in 2024, while those with other learning difficulties grew from 13.7% to 15.5% over the same period. These learning difficulties refer to conditions such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, dysorthography, and dysgraphia.

The data indicate that the upward trend in academic performance was not hindered by the school's expansion. On the contrary, a positive correlation is observed between the period of greatest increase in student diversity (specifically the doubling of SEN students) and the achievement of the highest EBAU scores, suggesting that the pedagogical model implemented effectively manages classroom complexity.

The teaching staff perceives and expresses that this sustained success, even amidst the center's increased complexity, is closely associated with the implementation of SEAs and the subsequent improvement in academic results. By triangulating institutional records and the community's experience, the findings suggest a positive correlation between the center's transformation and these improved dimensions of the educational experience.

4 Discussion

The results of this research are consistent with previous evidence suggesting that the implementation of evidence-based educational interventions such as Successful Educational Actions (SEAs) is associated with improvements in academic outcomes. The experience of implementing Successful Educational Actions (SEAs) at IES San Juan Bosco suggests that targeted strategies can lead to academic gains (Flecha, 2015; Roca et al., 2024). In this specific case, a sustained upward trend in standardized test results such as EBAU, was observed in relation to the center's transformation into a Learning Community in 2018.

The results obtained show that learning outcomes may be enhanced through SEAs based on scientific evidence (). Actions such as interactive groups, dialogic gatherings, and family training are linked not only to improvements in instrumental learning but also to increased student engagement and participation (Iñiguez-Berrozpe et al., 2021; Valls et al., 2022).

A relevant observation in this study is the co-occurrence of increased student diversity and improved academic achievement. The findings suggest that academic gains coincided with the school's rise in the proportion of students with Special Educational Needs (from 3.7% to 6.4%) and other learning difficulties. This interaction suggests that the

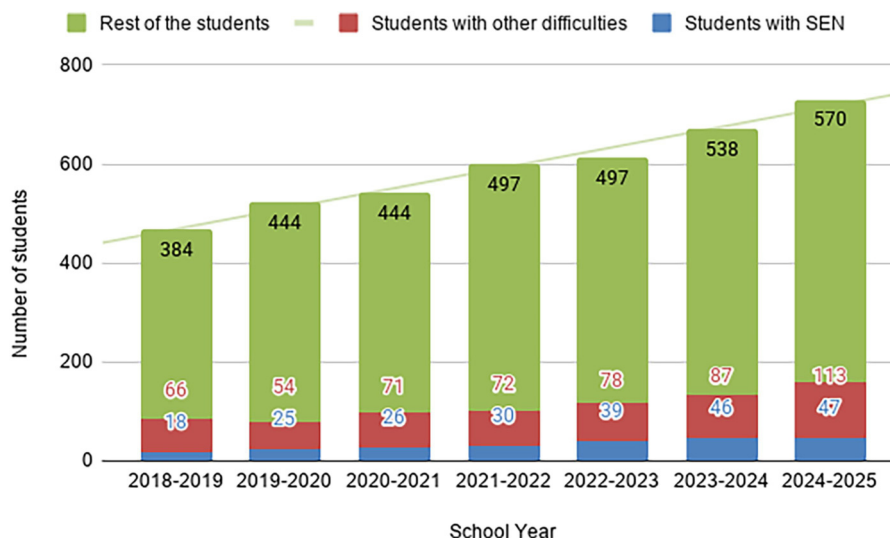


FIGURE 2
Increase in student enrollment between 2016 and 2024.

implemented SEAs are associated with a capacity to leverage diversity as an educational asset. Specifically, the literature on Dialogic Literary Gatherings (DLGs) highlights that diverse groups provide a richer dialogic environment (Lopez de Aguilera, 2021), which is associated with more profound interactions and was observed alongside increased possibilities for transformation (Ruiz-Eugenio et al., 2023). Similarly, Interactive Groups (IGs) are designed to bring together students with different backgrounds to foster an environment where inclusion and learning occur simultaneously (Rodríguez-Oramas et al., 2021).

This view is also supported by the teaching staff, who see a link between the school's growth and the sustained improvement of its performance since the school was transformed into a Learning Community. The case of IES San Juan Bosco illustrates a positive correlation between SEAs and measurable improvements in academic performance. In particular, there has been an improvement in standardized test results such as the EBAU, with the school's average surpassing the regional average since they became a Learning Community in 2018.

Therefore, these results align with previous findings that learning environments promoting dialogic learning and community participation are linked to sustained improvements in academic outcomes (Flecha and Soler, 2013). While this study does not establish a direct causal relationship, the evidence indicates that SEAs represent a transferable and effective approach in diverse social contexts, including highly vulnerable environments.

4.1 Limitations and future research

Despite the positive results, this study has limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the findings are based on a

single school context, which limits the statistical generalizability of the results. As this is not a quantitative or statistically representative study, it does not seek to establish a direct causal link.

To determine the broader applicability and transferability of these improvements, future research should consider multi-site designs that examine the effects of SEAs across more diverse and varied educational settings.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary Material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the Bioethics Committee of the University of Barcelona with approval number 332.25. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation was not required from the participants or the participants' legal guardians/next of kin in accordance with the national legislation and institutional requirements.

Author contributions

AB-F: Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – review & editing. PC: Data curation, Formal analysis, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. ER-C:

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The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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