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PROJECT CHARTER DOCUMENT

Project: Collaborative and Reflective Environments (CaRE) in Schools

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CaRE Charter Document

Introduction

To be able to best facilitate the development of collaborative and reflective environments in schools it is essential to first have a clear understanding of what this means. To this end, this Charter document has been designed to outline the CaRE mission, vision, and values. It includes a theoretically robust description, with a solid foundation in research, of the essential characteristics of a CaRE school. The theory used to underpin this is drawn from research in Learning Organisations (LOs), Communities of Practice (CoPs) and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) This charter therefore underpins our development of a robust, but flexible set of guidelines for schools with an interest in CaRE practices, which are pragmatic and adaptable. The CaRE charter is a “living” document and is reflective of our overall aims and values. Throughout the project, the research-based work will be complemented by what the project partners view as their own best practice.

Rationale for the CaRE project

Teaching can be a very solitary profession. It is widespread practice for teachers to work alone with their students, without engaging in many collaborative practices with their colleagues. While the necessity to prepare young people for full participation in a rapidly changing society has been noted by educational policy makers at an international level (Shear & Novais, 2009), leading to increased emphasis being placed on the development of students’ key skills and competences (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009), this is not often reflected in approaches to teacher professional development (PD) and the corresponding development of their own ‘key skills’. There is a significant body of research that points to the need for ‘21st Century’ methods of teaching and learning that are innovative, competence-based, and student-centred (Dede, 2010; Voogt & Pelgrum, 2005; Voogt & Roblin, 2012), but mainstream institutions have been slow to change their approach (Fullan, Langworthy, & Barber, 2014). Despite moves to change the curricular focus, a traditional model of schooling is still prevalent (Claxton, 2013; Fullan et al., 2014). The success of any educational reform depends primarily on the teachers who are going to put it into practice (Spillane, 1999); enacting educational change often demands major adjustments in teachers’ thinking and practices (Orafi & Borg, 2009). The consequence of this is that, while teachers are the agents of change in the reform process, they can also be inflexible and can resist and oppose the change unless they understand and agree with the reasoning behind the reform, its implications for their classroom practice, and the consequences for their students (Kärkkäinen, 2012). Through this project, we aim to support and enhance the development of collaborative and reflective environments (CaRE) in schools. We will mirror the development of key skills and competences that are generally advocated for students, within the whole-school environment by encouraging teachers to work increasingly collaboratively, and by providing structures in which sharing, communicating, and critically reflecting on practice become the norm. Through collaboration with our partners across Europe, we aim to establish a set of guidelines to support teachers to come together to communicate and share good practice and creative approaches, and to critically evaluate and reflect

Introduction to the CaRE Charter

The purpose of this charter document is twofold, with both inward and outward-facing value. At its core will be an outline of the CaRE mission, vision, and values, including a theoretically robust description, with a solid foundation in research, of the essential characteristics of a CaRE school. In this way, it will provide a rationale for practitioners and school leaders to initiate change in the staffroom – and by extension, classroom – culture. It will provide context-flexible mechanisms that can be put in place to develop teacher buy-in and understanding of the value of a collaborative and reflective learning environment throughout the school.

The charter will therefore provide:

1. A shared understanding of a CaRE school to ensure that stakeholders in the project will know what to expect, and what is to be expected of them. This should be a source of confidence as it will ensure that all partners understand the purpose of the project and their role in it. This will be beneficial by:
 - a. Providing clarity: time taken at the beginning of the project to clarify the mission, vision, and goals, will avoid confusion at a later stage.
 - b. Helping to identify the project value for stakeholders.
 - c. Inspiring confidence, by giving the participants assurance that they are working towards a well-defined, common, but personalised and flexible goal.
2. A tool for dissemination, to be distributed to those outside the immediate project partners as an introduction to the concept of a CaRE school. A starting point from which to transform the staffroom culture and teacher practices in relation to key skills and how it might influence structured continuous professional learning (CPL) in an informal and/or formal way in a school environment.

The development of the charter has been underpinned by a Theory of Change (Laing & Todd, 2015) process, which is replicable in any context. Through this process, the partners collaborated to define a shared mission and vision for the project, as well as personalising these concepts to their own contexts and starting points.

Mission and Vision

Mission

Our original draft mission and vision statements were shared with all partners for discussion and development, in an online workshop in April 2021. We used discussion and brainstorming techniques to collaboratively develop and refine our vision for the project, arriving at the current statements in May 2021. These formal mission and vision statements were then “translated” into more accessible language to ensure that partners from all countries would be able to fully understand the meaning behind the statements and be better able to share the goals of the project with the wider school communities.

Mission Statements

Formal Mission Statement (What we want to develop; output):

To develop a transnational network of schools in which our framework for collaboration and reflection is integrated and supportive of an environment in which Continuous Professional Learning (CPL) is the norm within and between the institutions.

Simplified Mission Statement (What We Are Doing?):

Create a team of teachers (a community of practice)

1. Inside our schools, and
2. Between our schools So that we learn to think in new ways about developing as professionals together through collaboration and reflection.

Vision Statements

Vision Statement (Our hopes for the future; outcome): To create a pragmatic and flexible structure that can be adapted by educational institutions to support their development and integration of CaRE practices.

Simplified Vision Statement (The Big Dream): Try out practical ideas together and pass them on to other educators in the future.

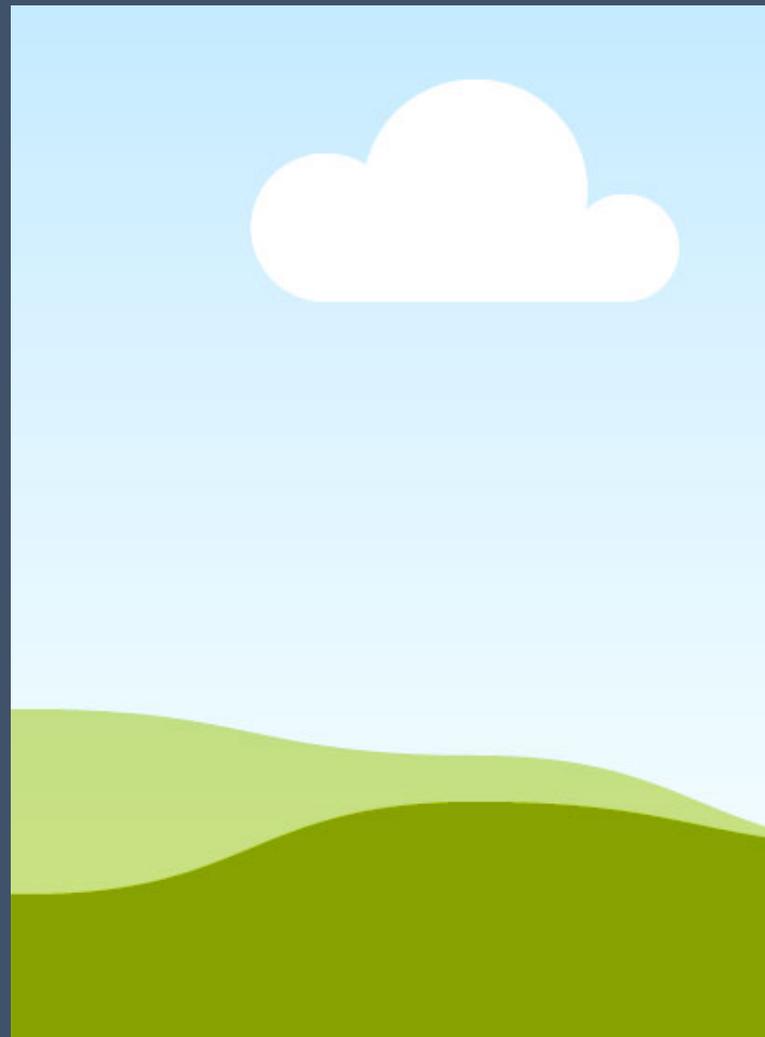
A CaRE School

To create structures to support the vision and mission of the CaRE project, it was necessary to explore and clarify the essential characteristics of a CaRE school. Based on our own collaboration, reflection, and research, this is our shared understanding of a CaRE school:

A Collaborative and Reflective Environment (CaRE) in schools embodies a culture of community, collaboration, and reflection at all levels in the school. This is reflected through a:

- Universal understanding of the value and importance of collaboration, communication innovation and reflection, and how they should be realised in the staffroom and, by extension, the classroom.

- Recognition of the importance of Continuous Professional Learning that is integrated, embedded and the norm, providing opportunities to share ideas, knowledge, and reflections in an environment in which mistakes and successes are both valued.
- Recognition of the value of teacher and student voice and ongoing dialogue, leading to self-efficacy, autonomy, and good relationships.



The Theory Behind CaRE

To establish a theoretically robust framework for the CaRE Charter several theoretical frameworks have been considered. Peter Senge's conception of a learning organisation (Senge, 2006), in which a group of people are continually enhancing their capabilities to create and develop, has been very influential. The concept of school "re-culturing" (Fullan, 2015) where teachers come to challenge and change their beliefs and practices thereby changing the culture of classrooms and schools has also influenced the development of this charter. These theoretical bases underpin the concept of Professional Learning Communities (PLC) in education. However, PLCs tend to be reform initiatives driven from the top down. In our CaRE project, we acknowledge that not all institutions have full leadership buy-in, and for that reason we also need to consider the Community of Practice (CoP) structure, as a possibility to seed change. Through this document, we aim to draw on these structures and theories to identify what aspects of each of them have meaning in the context of a CaRE school as outlined in our Mission, Vision and Values.

To this end, the following questions will be considered:

- What is a Learning Organisation? How does this overlap with our vision of a CaRE school?
- What is a PLC?
- What is a CoP?
- What aspects of each are applicable in the context of CaRE? Might this depend on the context of the school?

Relevance of a Learning Organisation using CoPs and PLCs for CaRE

Kofman and Senge (1993) suggest that the only safe place for conditions of creativity and personal transformation to grow and express themselves, is within a learning community. Community is central to a learning organisation; it is only through engaging with a community that is it possible to create synergies of meaning and belonging, which can lead to behaviours that are more risk-taking and challenging (Kofman & Senge, 1993). For an organisation this is significant because "without communities of people genuinely committed, there is no real chance of going forward" (Fielding, 2001, p. 16).

Defining a Learning Organisation

Senge (2006) defines a learning organisation (LO) as a group of people working together collectively to enhance their capacities to create results about which they really care. He defines the five characteristics of an LO as follows (Fielding, 2001; Senge, 1990):

- **System thinking:** the capacity for putting all the pieces together and seeing them as a whole;
- **Personal mastery:** the capacity to clarify what is most important to us within an organisation;
- **Mental models:** the capacity to reflect on internal pictures of the world to understand how they shape our actions;
- **Shared vision:** the sense of commitment within a group, based on what people would really like to create or develop;
- **Team learning:** the capacity for conversation.

To effectively transform a school into a collaborative and reflective environment, the characteristics of a learning organisation – systems thinking, mental models, personal mastery, shared vision, and team learning – must be present.

In line with that goal, an emphasis on developing collaborative practices is a core element to achieve positive outcomes in creating and developing a learning organisation. Both CoPs and PLCs offer frameworks of engagement that achieve an embedded collaborative approach and offer schools a choice of developing best practices from a “top down” or “bottom up” style of teacher and school engagement. The next section will explore the characteristics of each of these approaches.

Characteristics of Communities of Practice and Professional Learning Communities

Since the early 1990s, considerable focus has been placed on developing school systems that enhance student achievement and encourage school leaders to build and sustain capacity for change in their schools (Blankenship & Ruona, 2007). To achieve this, Drago-Severson & Pinto (2006) contend that schools must find ways for teachers to improve effectiveness by establishing ways to collaborate, form relationships and share knowledge. Two concepts in particular- professional learning communities (PLCs) and communities of practice (CoPs) – have received considerable attention from school leaders in this regard (Blankenship & Ruona, 2007). Page | 6 With a view to developing a theoretical underpinning for the CaRE project, this section of the charter will review and compare these concepts, providing an overview of their historical development from the initial stages through to current conceptions of best practice.

By comparing the concepts of PLC and CoP this review should provide a better understanding of the differences between the models, thus enabling more informed decisions about which of the various aspects should be considered for CaRE and in which contexts.

Communities of Practice (CoPs)

Although the term Community of Practice (CoP) is relatively new, the phenomenon is age old; this is a concept that provides a perspective on knowing and learning together. It has become attractive within organisations as a framework in which to support collaboration as a potential means to improve performance (Wenger, 1999).

Lave & Wenger (1991) describe three characteristics that are essential to the formation of an effective COP:

- **Domain:** The CoP has a particular identity defined by a shared domain or area of interest.
- **Community:** members of the CoP engage in joint activities, help each other, and share information.
- **Practice:** members of a CoP are practitioners, and it is this focus on developing practice that differentiates a CoP from an interest group or club.

Increasingly, individuals and organisations are recognising the benefits of CoPs as informal learning organisations that provide opportunities for information exchange and collaboration. The original conceptualisation of CoP focused on the interactions between novices and experts and creating newcomer identity (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Subsequently, Wenger (1999) explored the capacity for personal growth within a CoP, and the direction of an individual's participation. In 2002, Wenger examined the potential of using CoPs as a managerial tool to improve an organisation's competitiveness (Li et al., 2009).

In their literature review and synthesis of Communities of Practice, Lai, Pratt, Anderson, & Stigter (2006) compiled a list of nine characteristics of effective CoPs in school settings.

1. Within a Community of Practice, professional learning takes place in **authentic and real situations**. Professional learning should happen therefore, between teachers and be motivated by teachers.
2. CoPs should facilitate **teacher reflection** – members are encouraged to be involved in individual and collective reflection.
3. CoPs should facilitate and **support change in instructional practice** and/or strategies.
4. CoPs can **support change of beliefs and attitudes** towards teaching – teachers should engage in collaborative tasks that give them opportunities to examine their values and beliefs about teaching.
5. CoPs should facilitate **knowledge creation and sharing** best practice.
6. CoPs can result in a **change in the role** of teachers, supporting them to become co-learners.
7. CoPs facilitate **identity** building.
8. Participation in CoPs should **reduce teacher isolation**.
9. Participation in a CoP should result in teachers feeling satisfied that they are engaging in **effective professional development**.

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

While CoPs tend to develop where there is a group of people with a shared interest (that is, from the ground up), it has been noted by some that a more top-down approach, led by school management, may be necessary to effect change at a whole-school level (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Page | 7 Thomas, 2006). A Professional Learning Community (PLC) is a top-down approach to fostering collaborative learning among colleagues. It is frequently used in a school environment as a way of organising teachers into working groups of practice-based professional learning. Such Professional Learning Communities can be effective by harnessing the power of the overall school infrastructure, culture, and structure to empower individuals, groups, school systems, and whole school communities to get involved and build capacity for sustainable improvement (King & Newmann, 2001; Mitchell, 2001). PLCs thus have their roots not only in establishing and promoting teacher relationships, but also in building capacity in schools and to build sustainable change by learning together (Richard DuFour & Eaker, 2009; Hord, 1997; Senge, 1990).

More recently, there has been a focus on using PLCs to enhance and facilitate educational reform at all levels and to provide a positive environment that encourages professional development, collaboration, and innovation among teachers (Brown, Horn, & King, 2018). According to Brown et al. (2018), an effective PLC focuses on learning not teaching, is created for a specific purpose, and shines a light not only on student outcomes but also on teacher outcomes (Brown et al., 2018). An important distinction between collaboration in PLCs compared with other cooperative teams is how PLCs are created for a specific purpose (Hoaglund, Birkenfeld, & Box, 2014). In PLCs teachers benefit by a collaborative approach to continuous professional development unavailable in individual CPD courses (Ning, Lee, & Lee, 2015). PLCs also focus on developing spaces for teachers to not only define what students will learn but also how to address what they are not learning (Hoaglund et al., 2014). Through their focus on teacher, as well as student outcomes, Ning et al. (2015) believe that PLCs can bring about noteworthy changes in teaching practices and cultures.

PLCs have, over recent times, been used to enhance and facilitate educational reform at all levels and to provide a positive environment that encourages professional development, collaboration, and innovation among teachers (Brown et al., 2018). Over recent years several major contributors including DuFour and Schmoker (2004; 2001) have been pioneers in redefining education reform and reshaping educational services by implementing PLC practices in schools.

According to DuFour & Reeves (2016), to establish an effective PLC within an educational environment, members must follow five core tenets:

- work together in teams;
- establish a curriculum;
- create assessments;
- recognise student needs;
- create additional student supports.

Contrasting CoPs and PLCs

There is no universal definition of PLCs or CoPs but various shades of interpretation of both. According to Stoll et al. (2006) however, there is a consensus that a PLC would include a minimum of a group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way (Stoll et al., 2006). However, many authors would also consider these essential components of a CoP (Li et al., 2009; Schlager & Fusco, 2003; Wenger, 1999). The primary difference in approach, as in Table 1, relates to membership and leadership.

Table 1: Comparing aspects of CoPs and PLCs

	CoP	PLC
THEORY	Situated Cognition, Social Learning theory or Knowledge management	Learning organisation theory
MEMBERSHIP	Voluntary	Foregone conclusion
LEADERSHIP	Informal	Principal led
ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE	Shared vision	Shared vision

Within PLCs, more emphasis is placed on the critical roles that leadership and school culture play in a “top down,” management-led approach. A PLC supports a whole school approach and focuses on unity of purpose across all the teaching staff. The CoP literature, on the other hand, emphasises a more “bottom up” approach whereby people with a common interest work together make joint decisions. A community of practice is a social environment and knowledge formation is usually concentrated within the community. This importance of the social aspect of learning in the formation of new knowledge does not place as much emphasis on the role of leaders external to the community or culture. A PLC will on the other hand requires a more explicit leadership role.

What does this mean for CaRE

Within the CaRE project, we understand the importance of recognising that different schools have different starting points and management structures etc. However, we believe that a CaRE school can be established regardless of this. For this reason, it is important to have a good understanding of how the various models of Learning Organisations might be capitalised upon, depending on the existing structures within any school or institution.

Through the CaRE project, we will explore how teachers and schools can support and enhance the development of collaborative and reflective environments in schools, and to develop resources for reflection at a whole-school level. One aim of the project is to establish a set of guidelines for teachers to collaborate, share good practice, discover creative approaches, and to critically evaluate and reflect together. This will involve an education design research approach to develop a set of guidelines for practitioners and management who would like to support such practices in their school (Plomp, 2013).

As identified by Ender, Kinney, Penrod, Bauder, and Simmons (2007), there are five common elements required for achieving systemic change. These include

1. Conducting a system review to identify key weaknesses of and to devise specific strategies to correct each one of them.
2. Creating a detailed road map to the desired goal or endpoint.
3. Building capacity within the staff to achieve this goal
4. Change by doing, rather than by theorising
5. Ensuring sustainability.

Within the CaRE project, each of these will be achieved in the following ways.

1. **System review:** An initial analysis of current practices of teachers and other practitioners in the project partner schools will establish a baseline to measure progress over the course of the project. The data collected will inform decision making within the school and build internal and external accountability among project partners.
2. **Detailed road map:** An overarching Theory of Change (ToC) methodology will be employed. This is an innovative and holistic method that can be used to assess the progress of the project in terms of meeting its overarching goals, individual activity aims, and to guide the project participants in evaluating their own progress. Within the ToC framework, qualitative and quantitative indicators will be employed to monitor the progress, quality and achievements of the project and its activities. Each School CoP will outline three strategic ToC steppingstones.
 - i. **Starting point:** Where are we now?
 - ii. **Endpoint:** What will teacher collaboration and reflection look like when CaRE is embedded in our school?
 - iii. **Steppingstones:** What are the steps/actions you will need take along the way to achieve their goals and expectations?

A range of supporting tools to support and enhance teacher engagement will be created and delivered through the project, which will support other institutions in establishing their own CaRE schools.

These include:

- Introductory Handbook.
- CaRE in Schools Handbook.
- CaRE Clusters Handbook
- CaRE Online Handbook
- Consolidated CaRE Handbook
- Teacher as a Researcher Module
- Teacher as Peer Mentor Module

3. **Capacity building.** The first project workshop will identify specific weaknesses and strategies to deal with the issues in collaboration with the partner administrators, to lead that strategy. The strategy team will have a shared vision and an ownership of the project. The aim will be devising a shift in mindset from individuals to a collective outlook with a focused thinking on “our school,” and not “my classroom.” The identified specific weaknesses exists either because people do not know how to change or that they do not think it can be changed. The definition of capacity building is to first change the person and then work on building change within the system.

4. **Change by doing.** The seven project partners, (36 teachers and 3 educators) will participate in six professional learning (CPL) workshops to engage in a competence-based approach to education over a period of 24 months. The goal of the Erasmus+ project is to develop outputs to support and facilitate collaborative and reflective practices in schools. The research, however, will be exploring collaborative processes and identifying the impact at school and teacher level and aims to develop design heuristics that have a wider application in education. Each workshop is designed to incorporate the key skills of collaboration, communication, creativity, critical thinking, and self-direction. Each partner school has formed a team of six teachers participating in a community of practice. There are six European secondary schools (Austria, Czech Republic, Spain, Poland, Ireland x 2) involved in the project and associate research. During each of the workshops interactive and reflective activities will promote and encourage teacher collaborative engagement in a community of practice. The hope is that this immersive and experiential approach will support the participants to build and embed teacher professional learning opportunities into everyday school life.

An iterative process of development over a series of workshops will support the partners to establish and develop a collective understanding of what it means to engage in collaborative and reflective practices, within and between schools, as part of a teacher community of practice. These activities will be key in the development of a collective understanding of what it means to be a CaRE school. The workshop structure will follow the Bridge21 approach to teacher professional learning, which is experiential and competence-based in nature (Bray, Byrne, & Tangney, 2020; Girvan, Conneely, & Tangney, 2016). Each school, from their starting point at the beginning of the project, will identify existing school cultures and settings and consider if and how a learning organisation can grow from within. In this way, the CaRE project has a strong focus on teachers as active practitioners and agents of change.

Table 2: CaRE workshop framing the research

What is a CaRE school?	What might it look like? What are its characteristics?
How can we achieve this?	What are the features/attributes of CoP/PLC? What steps do we need to take to establish a CoP/PLC? (on multiple levels, following the project aims: school level, clusters, online)
What are the activities or medium through which CoP/PLC develops?	Main project activities, structures, outputs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team teaching, • Teachmeets • Peer observation • 21C/key skills development • Teacher as researcher • Teacher as CaRE coach • Other relevant outputs
Measuring progress and success	Review and reflect

5. **Sustainability.** Finally, the development of sustainable practices is vital to successful outcomes. Change will not become embedded unless it can be easily maintained. Throughout the project, the partners will promote and develop relationships, building and strengthening professional learning communities within and between their institutions. The importance of positive pressure for change will be stressed and embedded in all aspects of teacher participation. In addition, the project outputs will build and support an atmosphere of “leaders developing leaders” to sustain project activities in the schools and classrooms into the future. All project outputs will be designed to encourage a process of embedding good practices in both the classroom and the staffroom.

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