



CoP Manual

A practical guide to strengthen inclusive school development through a Community of Practice

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CoP Manual: A practical guide to strengthen inclusive school development through a Community of Practice

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Project “I CO-COPE: Inclusion through interprofessional COllaboration in a Community Of Practice in Education”

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Overview

Introduction	4
What is a Community of Practice?	5
Why are Communities of Practice important for inclusive school development?	6
How to prepare and implement a Community of Practice in your school?	7
Preparation phase.....	7
CoP meeting 1: Shared goal 🌱	10
CoP meeting 2: Action plan 🌱	12
CoP meeting 3: Results and reflection 🍎	14
Recommendations for the moderator	16
Concluding remarks	18
Resources.....	19
CoP in the pilot schools.....	20

Introduction

With the Erasmus+ project I CO-COPE, we support inclusive school development by connecting teachers, professionals and students in a Community of Practice (CoP) that promotes interprofessional collaboration, well-being, and learning for all. During the project, the partners aimed to:



strengthen schools' capacity for inclusion

Address the challenges of teaching students with diverse abilities and backgrounds.



foster interprofessional collaboration through a Community of Practice (CoP)

Generate knowledge on how collaboration among teachers, students, and other professionals can contribute to more inclusive schools.



advance inclusive school development

Explore how schools can develop inclusive practices within and across the four partner countries.



engage students and prevent school dropout

Promote students' agency, encourage active participation in democratic life, and help prevent early school leaving and educational failure.

This manual is intended for all those who want to start a Community of Practice to support inclusive school development. In this manual, you'll find a short introduction to the Community of Practice approach, an explanation of why CoPs support inclusive school development, and practical guidelines for preparing and implementing a CoP in your own school context. We build further in this manual on the insights we have gained by piloting the CoP approach in 8 schools across the 4 partner countries, i.e. Portugal, Austria, Slovakia, and Belgium. At the end of this manual, you can find an overview of the CoP process in the pilot schools.

*"It's really amazing to see that just a few people have **changed** our entire school so much in one year."* - Student Slovak pilot school

If you want to learn more about the project, its key findings and the online training modules, visit our [website](#) and listen to our [podcast](#)!

What is a Community of Practice?

A Community of Practice (CoP) is a group of people who share a common interest or passion and learn together by exchanging ideas, experiences, and strategies. Learning in a CoP happens through collaboration and real-life practice, not just through theory. It's a flexible approach that helps members grow by working together over time.

"A Community of Practice helps educators learn and grow together by sharing experiences, reflecting critically, and co-creating solutions for change."

According to Wenger (1998; 2015), a CoP is based on three key elements:

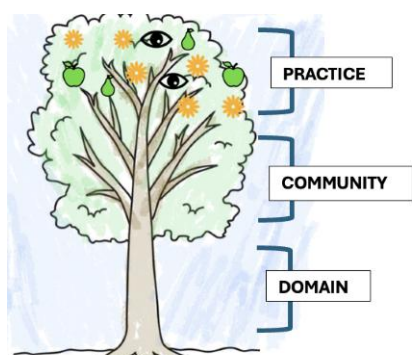
- Domain: A shared focus or topic that connects members.
- Community: Relationships that enable members to learn from each other.
- Practice: Deepening knowledge and skills through shared resources and experiences.

CoPs can open new perspectives, especially when members are ready to:

- Find solutions in complex situations where there is no single right answer.
- Engage with others, including those who think differently.
- Co-construct knowledge with colleagues, parents, and students.
- Act with a focus on change, aiming to improve practice.



In short: CoPs create a space to learn together, reflect critically, and innovate.



To visualise the core elements of a CoP, you can use the metaphor of a tree with the trunk representing the domain, the branches representing the community and the fruits representing the results of the practices.



If you want to learn more about the theoretical background of Communities of Practice in educational contexts, [click here](#).

Why are Communities of Practice important for inclusive school development?

- **Everyone has a voice:** CoPs create space for dialogue where teachers, students, and other stakeholders share their perspectives and learn from each other.
- **Bottom-up innovation:** Instead of solutions being imposed from above, CoPs encourage collaboration of all members, including students, on equal footing. Ideas to promote inclusion are developed and tested by the people who will use them.
- **Room for experimentation:** CoPs provide a safe space for curiosity, questions, and trust. By sharing practical, context-specific knowledge, members find practical solutions that support inclusive education.

When members feel their experience and needs are valued, their confidence and ability to apply inclusive practices grow.



Image created using Microsoft Copilot

*“So, to start a CoP you just need to find a group of people with a **similar problem** and together develop approaches to it, sharing knowledge and looking for **solutions** to it. It is a very effective methodology because it helps to see **other perspectives and resources** are more easily found.” - Teacher Portuguese pilot school*

How to prepare and implement a Community of Practice in your school?

Preparation phase

1. The CoP Team

If you want to implement a Community of Practice as a way to strengthen **interprofessional collaboration** in your school, it is important to think carefully about who you will invite to join the CoP team.

- Go for a **diverse** group of members, where different perspectives are represented: students, class teachers, special needs teachers, social workers, principal and school board members,...
- The **topic or focus** of your CoP can also help make a selection of members. For example, in a Portuguese school, they worked around the topic of how to include migrant and newcomer students at school, so also the families, a social worker and cultural moderator were involved.
- Make sure that the members of the CoP reflect the diversity of your school. For example, in one Belgian school, they included students from both practice-oriented and more theoretical programs, because the profile of students is often different, and the school wanted to include all perspectives.
- Based on our experience, we advise you to work with a group between 6 to 8 members.

What does *interprofessional collaboration* mean?

Collaboration between members of different professional groups

e.g. teachers, speech therapists, social workers, teaching and learning assistants, but also students and parents ...



Do you want to learn more, [click here.](#)

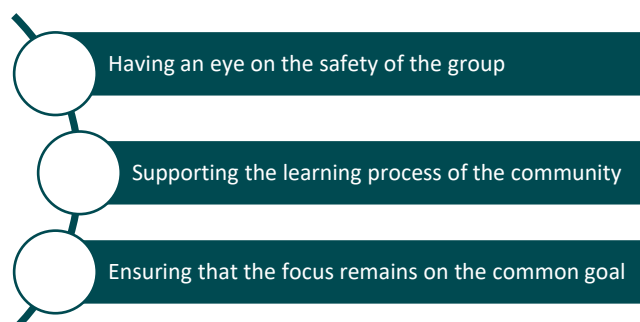
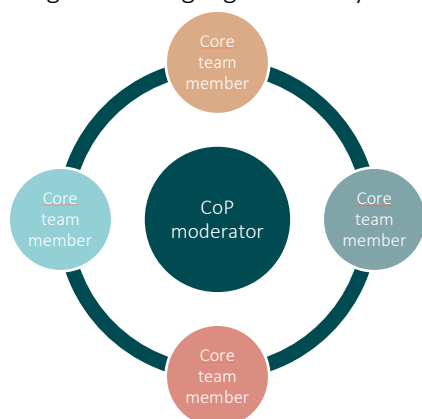
*"I think it's really cool that **teachers, students, and assistants** are actually working **together**. We're learning together, on the same level."* - Student Austrian pilot school

2. Role of the moderator

For a Community of Practice to function effectively, one member takes on the responsibility of supervising the process. In the I CO-COPE project, we called this role the role of a 'moderator'.

What does the **role of a moderator** entail?

The image below highlights the key roles of a moderator.



It can be quite challenging to be a moderator, especially if you are not used to take up this kind of role. Therefore, we suggest establishing a core team, i.e. an inner circle of people who support the moderator in preparing the CoP meetings, reflecting afterwards, and facilitating the meetings. It can also be helpful to take on the role of moderator in pairs, with two people sharing the responsibility. For example, in a Belgian school, a class teacher took up the role as a moderator. She was supported in her role by a member of the school board. They prepared the meetings together. It was helpful that someone from the school board was involved, in this way the work of the CoP could also impact the school policy level.

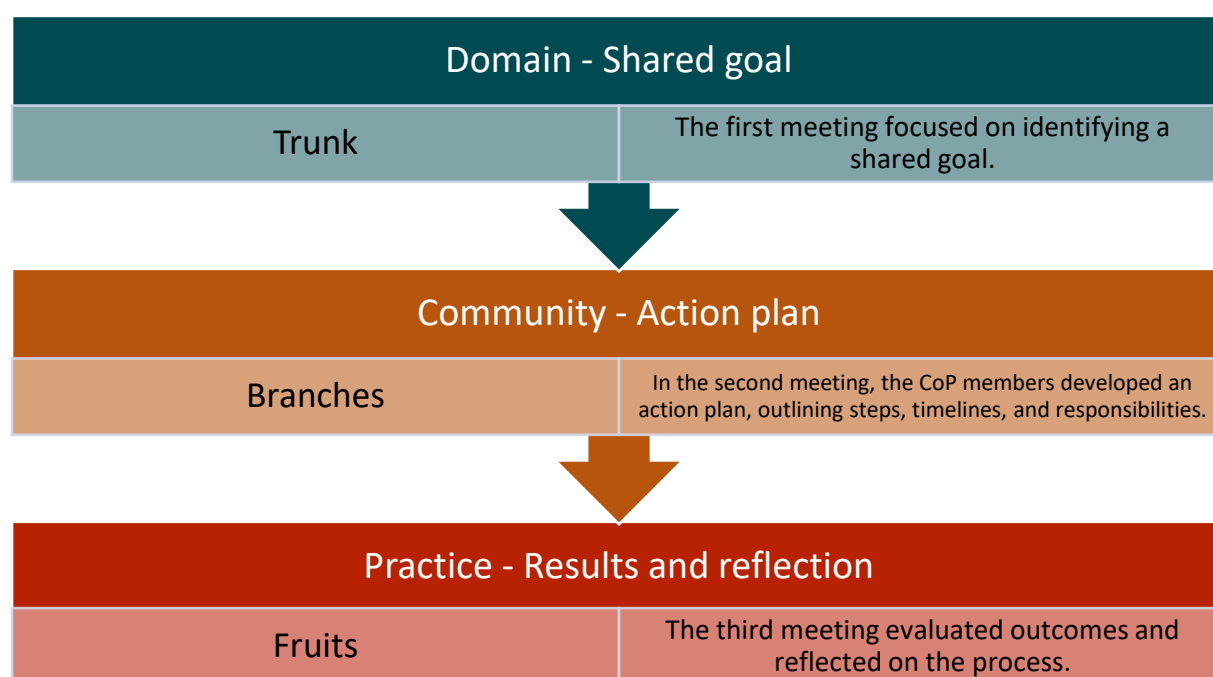


3. Planning of the CoP meetings

Once you have brought the right people on board, you can start to **plan** the CoP meetings. The CoP is defined by regular interactions that can be performed in plenary meetings (i.e., with all CoP members), subgroup meetings, conversations or by other ways of communication and exchange. We have learned in the I CO-COPE project that at least **three plenary meetings** facilitate the achievement of concrete results when considering a time frame of 6 months. In the following, we will support you in how to prepare these meetings.

Within the I CO-COPE project, three CoP meetings of **1,5 to 2 hours** were held in each pilot school, following Wenger's elements: Domain, Community, Practice.

- 1** Domain – Shared goal (trunk) 🌳 : The first meeting focused on identifying a shared goal.
- 2** Community – Action plan (branches) 🌿 : In the second meeting, the CoP members developed an action plan, outlining steps, timelines, and responsibilities.
- 3** Practice – Results and reflection (fruits) 🍎 : The third meeting evaluated outcomes and reflected on the process.





On our [website](#), you can find a more detailed description of these three meetings.

Of course, you can add more meetings in between if you feel more time is needed. For example, it is possible that you will need two meetings to identify a shared and concrete goal together. Or you want to implement various actions, and you will have more than one meeting to plan and discuss these actions.

From our experience in the pilot schools, we have learned that it is not always so evident to plan and make enough time for the CoP meetings. The participating schools had to be flexible in dealing with the different agendas of the various members. For example, it was important to share the agenda items in advance and to clearly indicate which items everyone had to be present for. Another example is scheduling the meeting immediately after the lunch break. This created more time to work together.

In the overview below, you will find for every CoP meeting:

- Goals
- Phases with activating methods (including links to supporting documents and tools on the project website)
- Evaluation

You can use the methods as building blocks, which give you the flexibility to organize the meeting according to your own needs and preferences.

4. Preparing the first meeting

To prepare the first meeting, you can download the IDOARRT template on our [website](#) and add your ideas in response to the guiding questions:

- *Intention – What is the intention, or purpose, of the meeting?*
- *Desired Outcome(s) – What specific outcomes should be achieved by the end of the meeting?*
- *Agenda – What activities will the group go through, in what order, to move toward the desired outcome?*
- *Roles – What roles or responsibilities need to be in place for the meeting to run smoothly? Who is facilitating, and who is participating? Who is documenting, and who is keeping track of the time? What do you expect of the participants?*
- *Rules – What guidelines will be in place during the meeting? These could relate to agreed group norms. They could also relate to the use of other apps, or practical rules related to learning space. Let the participants add rules to ensure that they have ownership of them.*
- *Time – What is the expected time for the meeting, including breaks, and at what time will the meeting end?*

Once these preparatory activities are in place, you are ready to invite all CoP members to the meeting.

CoP meeting 1: Shared goal

Goals	- Establishing a safe learning environment - Formulating clear goals
Phases	1. Check-in A check-in gives everyone the space to say something: about themselves, the agenda, the meeting. It can help deepen the relationship between members. It can provide insight into matters that are important to the group, any emotions and energy. On the website, you can find different options for check-in activities, but feel free to create your own!
	2. Introduction In the introduction phase, you give the members more insight into the reason(s) why this CoP has been formed. It can also be a good idea to check which expectations the CoP members have. A good question here is: “when will this Community of Practice be successful for you?”. You could work with an online tool, for example, Mentimeter or Padlet, or let the members write down their expectations. In this phase, it is also essential to take time to reflect on the different needs of each CoP member so that all members feel safe to express their voice and learn collaboratively. You can make customized ‘safety rules’ for the group. Here are some guiding questions you could use: What do we need to... - Create safe and inclusive opportunities to form and express voices? - Facilitate free expression of voices in the medium of choice? - Act on the voices? - Listen responsibly to the voices? Write down important points of attention.
	3. We build our own tree... In this phase, you make time to think together with all CoP members about the goals for your Community of Practice. It is helpful to use the visualisation of a tree to discuss their shared goal. A Community of Practice can only produce successful outputs (delicious and diverse fruits) when the trunk is solid. After you gave a short introduction on what a CoP is about, you can reflect on the domain of your CoP: - What topics and issues do we really care about? - What are the challenges we want to address? - How is this domain connected to the school’s inclusion strategy? For brainstorming about the shared goal(s) of the CoP, you can use the poster template of the I CO-COPE Tree. In the last meeting, the poster can be used again to evaluate the whole CoP process. In some of the pilot schools, the CoP members started already from a certain challenge for the school, and used this phase to make the goals more concrete. In other schools,

	the domain was not set before the first meeting, and the first meeting was used to decide on a shared goal. Use the following guiding questions to make the goal(s) more concrete. You can either work in smaller sub-groups or with the whole group: - What specific goal do you have in mind? Is this just a goal for you? Are there students, parents, colleagues or others who may want the same thing? - What would be the gain from achieving this goal? How would this translate into practice when the goal is achieved? - What do you see yourself, the students, parents, colleagues or others doing? What will have changed? - When will you be satisfied? Make sure you write down the main conclusions. You can use the tree poster or any other format that helps you keeping track of the decisions and conclusions the CoP members agreed on.
	4. Practical aspects At the end of the meeting, make sure that you set dates for the following CoP meetings. What has to be done before the next meeting, who does what? You can also think about the communication for the whole school about your project. How are we going to communicate about this project within the school? Who will play a role in this? It could be interesting to use the poster of the tree to share the goals of your CoP with the whole school.
	5. Check-out We advise you to always make time at the end of the meeting for a (short) check-out. At the check-out, ask everyone how he or she is leaving the meeting and what still needs to be said or agreed on. There are different options for a check-out, pick one that suits the needs of yourself and the CoP team.
Evaluation	Write down the main reflections you have after this CoP meeting. This will help you to prepare the next meeting. Some guiding questions to help you: ○ Are the goals met for CoP 1? Yes/no? How do you know? What did you see/hear? ○ Were the members equal partners? ○ Did everyone get the chance to speak? ○ Were the members listening to each other? Did they let each other finish speaking? ○ What shared goal was chosen? ○ Did everyone agree with the chosen goal? ○ What were the feelings of the members at the end of the CoP?

CoP meeting 2: Action plan

Goals	• Developing a plan of action • Making concrete commitments
Phases	1. Check-in For the second meeting, we also advise you to start with a check-in. It can be helpful to get to know each other better. It is also possible that in the second meeting new CoP members are present. On the website, you can find different options for check-in activities, but feel free to create your own!
	2. From our shared goal(s) to first steps Think back to the first CoP meeting and to the conclusion you came to. What could be the first steps to reach the goals you agreed on? You can brainstorm on this by using the 'design studio' working form: • If this is what we want to achieve, what could be a first step in that direction? • If we could get started right away, what would we like to do? What do we see ourselves doing right now? What can we tackle immediately? • Who or what do we need to actually do it? Another approach starts from an appreciative view, focusing on what is already been done. You can brainstorm 'from dream to reality'. Considering our goal: • What do we dream of? • What are we already doing? • What do we need for this? • What do we dare to do more? To help formulate clear and concrete goals, you can use the tool 'Plan smart'. If you think you don't have enough time to formulate SMART goals, you can prepare this in advance, or skip this phase and immediately go to the following phase, plan of action.
	3. Action plan In the next step, you can make a plan: what do we want to do already? You can use the working document 'Action plan in 3 steps' to create your own action plan. Keep in mind what needs to be done for the next meeting. Who does what? Make sure that the action plan leads to concrete commitments. In this phase, you can check if everyone's tasks are clear, you can summarize the TO DO's.
	4. Check-out We advise you to make time also at the end of the second meeting for a (short) check-out: do you feel the energy after deciding on concrete actions, does everyone believe our action plan can work? There are different options for a check-out, pick one that suits the needs of yourself and the CoP team.

Evaluation

Write down the main reflections you have after this CoP meeting. This will help you to prepare the next meeting.

Some guiding questions to help you.

Were the goals for CoP 2 met?

Goal 1: Developing a plan of action

- Is the action plan outlined clearly? If not, what is missing?
- How are the actions structured and formulated?

Goal 2: Making concrete commitments

- Are the responsibilities and roles of every CoP member clear?
- Which challenges did you face? Were there surprising successes?

CoP meeting 3: Results and reflection

Goals	• Celebrating successes • Sustaining the CoP
Phases	1. Check-in For a last meeting with you CoP, it can be nice to include a check-in focused on celebrating successes. This does not necessarily have to focus solely on the process of this CoP team. For example, complete the next sentence: - Today we can already ... - Today I can ... If the meeting is at the end of the school year, it can be nice to ask for the summer plans of the members, for example by asking: • This holiday I want to make time to... • By the end of this summer I will feel... • This summer I hope....
	2. Evaluating the actions In this meeting the CoP members take a look back at the action plan: where are they now, what worked well, what did not work well...? We propose two options for the evaluation: - Look at your action plan and evaluate the results by using the 'Keep – Drop - Change' evaluation tool - Evaluate your actions with the tool 'Create a storyline' Summarize and make conclusions: ✓ What do we want to keep? ✓ What do we want to redirect? ✓ What can we leave out?
	3. Sustaining the CoP In order to make the results and outputs of your CoP sustainable, think about what you want to share with your school team and other partners. For this phase, you can again use the poster of the I-CO-COPE tree. You probably have used this template in the first meeting. It is nice to see how you have built your own tree with hopefully delicious fruits together!
	4. Practical aspects In this phase, you can make more concrete commitments about how to communicate about the CoP process with the whole school team and other partners. Some concrete examples are teachers and assistants drafting messages for parents or students drafting messages for peers, highlighting key results. What is needed for this? Who will do what? If you want to celebrate successes after this meeting, you can share practical information on that.

	5. Check-out If the third CoP meeting is your last meeting, you can end with a short evaluation of how the CoP members experienced being part of a CoP team, what they have learned from it, if they would like to be part of a CoP team in the future, if they would do things differently,...
Evaluation	Write down the main reflections you have after this CoP meeting. Some guiding questions to help you. Are the goals met for CoP 3? ○ How are we going to share the outputs and results of our CoP with the school team and other partners? ○ What are next steps, what do we still want to do, continue, adapt, ... ?

Recommendations for the moderator

Based on our experiences in the pilot schools, we can give some tips and tricks to support you in your role as a moderator.

1. Preparation and mindset

- ✓ **Understand the purpose of the CoP:** Ensure that all members, including students and staff, are clear on the chosen domain and its goals. Use simple, concrete examples to clarify abstract terms.
- ✓ **Communicate added value:** Help your school to embrace students' agency by highlighting concrete benefits and success stories.
- ✓ **Shared responsibility:** Emphasize that a CoP is a collective effort. Roles should be distributed and not fall solely on the moderator. Everyone brings something valuable to the table.
- ✓ **Member composition:** Strive for balanced representation. Equal participation does not always mean equal numbers; consider hierarchical dynamics and ensure students and staff have meaningful roles.
- ✓ **Involve the school policy level:** To make the results of your CoP sustainable, think about how you can involve the school policy level. Maybe you can prepare the meetings together with the school head or someone from the school board. In some partner schools, the school principal was also a member of the CoP. This can be very supportive, but be aware of potential hierarchical dynamics.

2. Meeting structure methods

- ✓ **Check-ins and ice-breakers:** Start with informal activities to create a welcoming atmosphere.
- ✓ **Check-outs:** Conclude with a method to celebrate progress
- ✓ **Subgroup meetings:** Sometimes necessary to allow quieter voices to be heard and to work on specific tasks.
- ✓ **To-do list at the end of meetings:** Ensure actions are clearly defined with assigned roles.
- ✓ **Communication between CoP meeting:** Use digital platforms, group chats, or shared digital spaces to maintain momentum between meetings.

Suggested working methods:

- ✓ Depending on the goals, the needs and the context of your CoP team, you can vary in different working methods, such as small group discussions, circle discussion, papers, blackboards, visualizations.
- ✓ You can present existing work to inspire ideas.
- ✓ Encourage students to lead parts of the activity, e.g., moderator or timekeeper roles.

3. Moderator and co-moderator roles

Moderator responsibilities:

- ✓ Listen to all voices while guiding decision-making processes.
- ✓ Narrow topics to small, concrete, and achievable goals.

- ✓ Develop [coaching skills](#) to guide a collaborative process.

Co-moderator responsibilities:

- ✓ Repeat key statements to ensure understanding.
- ✓ Refocus the group when discussions drift from the main topic.

Tips for balancing pressure:

- ✓ Responsibilities should be shared, don't overload the role of a moderator.
- ✓ Celebrate small successes to maintain motivation and engagement.

4. Encouraging participation and student agency

- ✓ Students may need initial examples before contributing ideas.
- ✓ Explicitly assign roles to students and support staff early in the meeting to empower participation.
- ✓ Avoid teacher dominance: pick up student ideas, rephrase them concretely, and provide clear examples.
- ✓ Use respectful interaction guidelines to ensure a safe and inclusive environment.

5. Time management and flexibility

5. Be flexible in starting and scheduling meetings.
6. Use timers to keep activities on track.
7. Be flexible with meeting duration according to content needs.

6. Identification of goals

- ✓ Ensure topics are **urgent, realistic, and relevant** to the school's pedagogical project.
- ✓ Set minimum goals and criteria to determine when an action has successfully met its objectives.

7. Dissemination of success

- ✓ Communicate achievements within the school community:
- ✓ Sharing successes reinforces motivation and demonstrates the impact of the CoP.

Concluding remarks

Creating an inclusive school is never the result of one project, one tool, or one person. It grows from the everyday commitment of people who dare to listen, to question, and to learn together. A Community of Practice offers exactly that space: a place where ideas and challenges can be explored safely, where diverse perspectives are valued, and where students, teachers, support staff, and other stakeholders stand side by side as partners in change.

By starting your own Community of Practice, you are taking a meaningful step toward strengthening inclusive school development. Each CoP, no matter how small, contributes to a culture in which every voice is heard and where inclusion becomes a shared responsibility. When you give students an active role within your Community of Practice, you empower them to shape the school they belong to. You show them that their experiences have value, that their perspectives matter, and that real change happens when everyone has a place at the table.

We hope this manual supports you in taking the first steps. Use it as a guide, adapt it to your context, and let your CoP grow in its own unique way. Inclusion is a journey, and every conversation, every shared insight, and every action taken together helps move the school community forward.

*"In a CoP, the school stops being a set of isolated sectors and becomes one connected community. Teachers, families, and students share information, goals, and decisions. And you can see it — **more motivation, more participation, more engagement**. Because that's the second thing a CoP brings: **renewal**. It helps teachers rediscover curiosity — and helps **students feel seen and heard**." – Moderator Portuguese pilot school*

*"And that's not something you always experience as a teacher – sitting somewhere and having the **students** also sitting there, fully engaged, thinking along, and really wanting to do more and more – in the best sense. There was just an incredible amount of **motivation**, and I think that's what really got things moving." – Moderator Austrian pilot school*

*"Mostly by **involving the students**, I think. It's about the teaching team or school management making decisions, but also really including the students in that process. We do have a student council, and they already do a lot, but there is never truly a connection between students and teachers when it comes to meeting together and discussing ideas. I would really recommend it, because for us it was a very positive experience. The students were incredibly open and came up with very good ideas, because it was about them as well. They came up with things we, as adults, might not immediately think of. I truly found that to be an **added value**." – Moderator Belgian pilot school*

*"When students and teachers really meet — as equals — ideas come from both sides. And that's **what moves education forward**." – Teacher Slovak pilot school*

Resources

Silveira-Maia, M., Neto, C., Sanches-Ferreira, M., Alves, S., Durães, H., Breyer, C., Vandenbussche, E., Boonen, H., Zacharová, Z., Ferková, Š., Schukoff, P., Unterreiner, S., & Teijssen, E. (2025). *Mapping CoP for inclusion: a Knowledge Base*. Porto: Instituto Politécnico do Porto. <https://doi.org/10.26537/e.ipp.136>

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[Project website](#) | CO-COPE



CoP in the pilot schools

If you are looking for inspiration and concrete examples of a CoP in different school contexts, you can find profiles of the 8 pilot schools as good practice example son our [project website](#).

