2022

I2 project: our Vision Document

I2 Identity & Innovation

Erasmus+ project "Identity and Innovation" (I²)
n. 2020-BE02-KA227-SCH-083082



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Context

The I2 Identity & Innovation (2021-2022) was a project co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union, including…

I2 Identity & Innovation focused on understanding the relationships between school heritage, community identity and innovation in education, taking into account the digital transformation of the heritage and educational sectors.

One of the goals was to identify a vision for heritage learning in schools that contributes to a future-oriented innovation in education. Achieving this goal was supported by a number of round tables for knowledge exchange and capacity building. This would enable us to make the school identity visible and,at the same time enforce its roots.

In this document, and based on a tentative definition derived from academic literature, we will first reflect on the many dimensions of school heritage and their importance, also taking into account the discussion and different points of views that informed our I2 project, and we continue with exploring the relevant issues on the one hand and the potential and how to tap this on the other. We conclude with a list of actions and attention points that can be used by school management to develop a sound strategy on their heritage.

Vision statement

School heritage is a broad concept including tangible and intangible heritage such as buildings, objects and archival heritage, traditions, memories and a sense of belonging and participation which form an integral part of the school identity and of the community the school is linked with. Also, there are many visions of heritage in regard to school: it is what a school has preserved from the past, but also what schools build and create now, and eventually what they want to transmit to the future.

This complex heritage holds an untapped potential in terms of supporting the community building processes inside the school and within the broader community outside. Such potential can be unlocked by an innovative and sustainable approach that embeds school heritage in educational programmes.

In the research conducted in our project, the conclusion that was derived is that school heritage, enhanced in educational programmes and with digital tools, can be a community building instrument for schools, and a way to make sustainable relations with the school environment, pupils and families, local community, local organizations, cultural heritage actors and other stakeholders.

School heritage, innovation, sustainability

School heritage includes various elements: the past and present of the students' community, the historic events the school and its population saw, and the traditions that are established; the cultural content being made by students and by schools' staff; and the lived experience, past and present, of pupils, parents, teachers, staff and the rest of the community. On these premises, such heritage proves to be particularly attractive and meaningful to every individual since school experience, especially in modern societies characterized by widespread and generalized schooling (Viñao Frago 2005) – is a personal experience which constitutes a fundamental part of the personality of everyone as well as a common experience capable of bringing together different generations and communities of different cultural backgrounds.

School heritage supports community building in our changing society, not focusing on a conservative idea of local identity but instead participating in a future-oriented and democratic process of creating a fluid community identity, also taking into account the emotional connections of current and former students and their families, and the different cultures that form the community. Finally, school heritage supports the inculturation process by linking people on the two levels: different countries they come from and different generations they belong to.

From these considerations, it comes to mind that schools are an ideal place to anchor heritage experiences, as they are central meeting places for communities, touching on the lives of all families. They are *par excellence* embedded in the local communities, and reflect the knowledge, culture and values that societies want to transmit to future generations. They could rightly be considered heritage laboratories. Schools reflect heritage, transmit heritage, own heritage but also are part of heritage themselves. While their premises are often highly recognizable and impactful tangible heritage monuments, that often are considered landmarks in cities and towns, they also emanate intangible heritage practices and are receptive for and testimonial to societal change.

They are a shared experience and common to many generations (Vinao Frago).

A definition of school heritage?

Since the 1990s, a new historiographical debate on school heritage has emerged from generalist historians, social historians and educational historians. Especially the landmark essays by the French historians Julia (1994) and Chervel (1998) introduced the new concept of *school culture*, which paved the way to new research studies in school life and school heritage as tangible and intangible aspects of the school culture and of the educational experience of individuals and communities as well (Depaepe, Simon 1995; Escolano 2005; Lawn, Grosvenor 2005; Vidal, Paulillo, ; Da Silva, Meda, De Souza, 2021; Torres 2022).

It is difficult, however, to discern a precise and comprehensive definition of what we can consider "school heritage". The difficulty lies in the fact that such heritage encompasses a wide and heterogeneous range of objects and materials of tangible nature (from building to furniture, from teaching tools to pupils' equipment) and intangible as well (school oral sources as well as school practices, habits, traditions etc.). In addition, field studies continue to identify more and more new categories of school traces and assets that are object of innovative research: one example are the concepts of *public/collective school memory*, which – after

being brought into focus during a 2015 conference in Seville (Yanes-Cabrera, Meda, Viñao 2018) – have recently been the focus of a national research project led by the University of Macerata[1].

Despite the evident complexity of the matter dealt with, a tentative definition took shape during the I2 project, which can be summarized as follows:

> *School heritage is the ensemble of objects, buildings, places, the ecological environment and the embedding of a school and its tangible and intangible (educational practices and habits) and tangible aspects in stories, traces and testimonials of the students, staff, parents and other stakeholders who lived their (school) lives on those premises and who at some point in time were part of the school's community. This broader framework and community should be considered both in place (the school and its surroundings) as in time (in the past, the present and the future).*

Caring about school heritage

The school heritage is widely spread around us and plays, as mentioned, an important role in the formation of the identity of individuals, of local and national communities and of entire generations alike. Despite this, for a long time school materials have been considered objects of little value or of little interest and only the aforementioned mentioned "material turn" in the historiography has turned the spotlight on this heritage. Following such historiographical paradigm shift, a new attention has grown around this heritage on the part of historic schools, school administrators, teachers, finally the curators of school materials preserved in museum and non-museum collections. Therefore, we are witnessing a paradox in school heritage: despite its high potential for education and identity building is starting to be recognized, nevertheless this heritage is still at risk, and needs to be taken care of. School heritage is endangered heritage because it is not recognized e.g. by a laws, except for the Regulation issued by the Department of Education, Culture and Sports of the Autonomous Community of Cantabria in 2014, which recognizes schools' obligation to preserve and promote school heritage (Brunelli, Vitale 2023). Nevertheless, more and more local and school communities today recognize school heritage and school past as their heritage and as such they identify with it, so giving concrete life to precisely those "heritage communities" which in 2005 the Faro Convention of the Council of Europe identified as:

> *People who value specific aspects of cultural heritage which they wish, within the framework of public action, to sustain and transmit to future generation (Art. 2).*

[1] The national research, and ministry-funded, project *School memories between Social Perception and Collective Representation (Italy, 1861-2001)* was focused on exploring tangible and intangible traces of collective school memory defined as any representation of the world of schooling, and its various actors, which has been proposed in the context of official events and public commemorations and reflecting a precise policy of memory i.e. a public use of the school past aimed at gaining consensus and strengthening the feeling of belonging to a particular community. Results of the project has been a series of databases collecting such traces (from celebratory coins to obituaries, from educators' statues to schools' dedication plates, and so on). The databases are now accessible on the web portal: https://www.memoriascolastica.it/.

Main challenges for school heritage

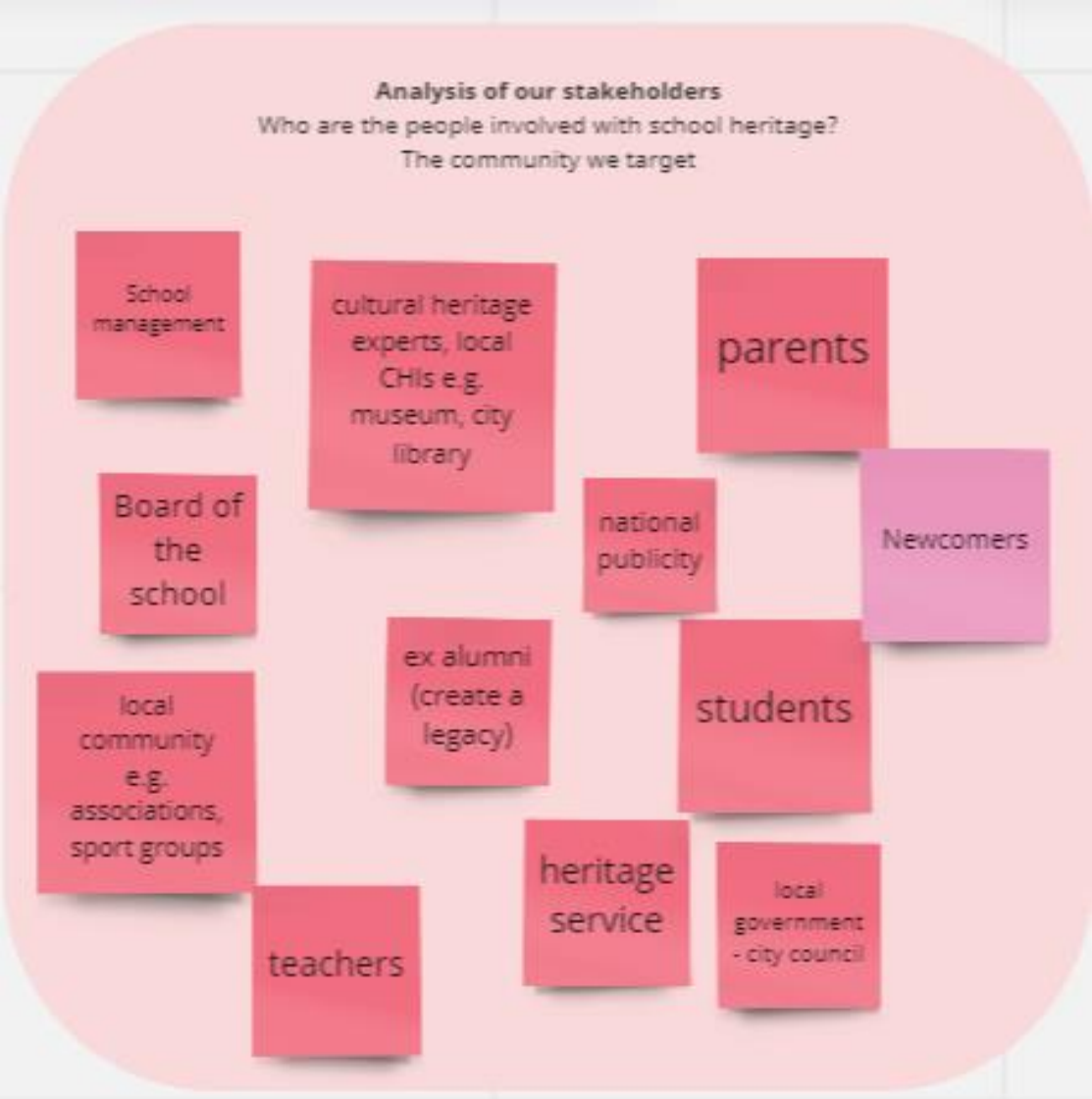
Today, school heritage faces a number of important challenges with different levels of urgency. These relate mainly to real estate, ecological environment, changing communities, archive maintenance. There is also a variety of stakeholders involved in understanding, preserving and reusing school heritage.

It might be surprising to mention real estate first. However, one should not underestimate the impact of school location and its function as a reference and meeting point in a community or city. Often, this is symbolised by a traditional and recognizable school building. This heritage however is under serious pressure due to the often poor energetic properties of these vintage buildings, the heating and maintenance costs and their often poor accessibility. In short, many of these premises are not sustainable and suitable to today's standards, and updating them in compliance to modern regulations proves inhibitively costly. There is a real danger these buildings will be torn down for new ones. And, of course, not everything needs to be kept at all costs: but this does mean that a clear set of heritage management criteria needs to be defined, to assess the importance of certain buildings and school sites and their preservation priority.

And this of course links to the second major issue, the ecological embedding and sustainability footprint of educational institutions. These school premises do not stand alone: they have a longstanding connection with their surrounding natural and urban environment. And while the ecological footprint of the building might offer quite some headaches, the relation to this natural environment can offer new opportunities. Therefore, school architects should take these links/connections into consideration. The interlacing of human and natural heritage is certainly a dimension worth considering, also in the educational project and activities of the school.

This brings us to the third important dimension, which is the bond to the local communities: nowadays this relationship is under pressure due to major societal changes, both intergenerational as well as through migration. Many schools developed a cultural identity based on common values which might have changed profoundly. This can be a religious context, as many schools have their roots in religious movements, but it is also more broadly indebted to the general culture and values of the time of their inception. As schools were key places to transmit societal values, these have become part of the traditional identities of many of these institutions. Adjusting and reinventing these values in light of changed cultural contexts and new generations is probably the most pressing challenge in school heritage.

Lastly, there is a more technical aspect of heritage work, which is the establishment and maintenance of a school archive. Not many schools actually have the capacity to do so beyond the strict legal requirements of keeping records of the school governance. However, it is also important to safeguard the memory of those whose lives connected to the school, of the school events and activities, of their teachers and students, of the parents and families. School sport competitions, school theatre and student poetry contests come to mind, but there are many more school events imprinted in collective memory.



Planning for untapping the potential

An active school heritage program can be an important means for schools to reinforce and reinvigorate their school identity. It can help strengthen their visibility and impact in the local community, help build lasting relations with parents and pupils and add to the credibility of their educational project. Several dimensions need to be managed in a **school heritage plan** to make the most of this potential.

The ecological environment

First and foremost, a school is located in a certain environment, often with historical or natural elements (buildings, gardens, other facilities and infrastructures). Its surroundings are also part of this ecosystem, and there is an impact of the school life and its population on the environment itself. A careful understanding on the historical environment and the impact of the school premises on it can be the start for a sustainable embedding where the school and its host of human activities are in harmony with its location.A concept in which the school, its

historical heritage and its busy activities is just as integrated in its surroundings (either in the city centre, at the outskirts or in a rural area) as a beehive is a first condition for the sustainability of the school. Such an explicit, well documented and communicated sustainability and enviromental planning can reconnect the school with its immediate surroundings.

The real estate

The historical buildings, grounds and objects of a school, deeply imprinted in the memories of generations of pupils and communities, might represent a serious maintenance cost: but are at the same time and invaluable asset. Modern renovation technologies should combine preservation of the style and visual identity of these buildings with state-of-the-art ecological efficiency. Of course, this is an investment that requires careful planning.

The intangible heritage and the community

A school is a place of experiences and memories, across generations. It has symbolic moments and rituals, such as graduation or sport events, and influences the lives, hopes and futures of pupils and families. It is is a place of knowledge, but also of deep emotions. Safeguarding the memories of the generations passing by is something the school can contribute to, provided there are tangible traces and documents of these memories: more importantly, this can establish functioning community relations through the school council as the primary leader for memory preservation in the school. A school planning that has in the agenda not only the current concerns and practicalities of school life but that also time is taken to look backwards and forwards, can strengthen the role of such school councils as the leading stakeholders, and supports the commitment of the participants. It also puts the pressing daily issues into perspective. For this, a solid, historically underpinned school vision and mission text are crucial instruments that the school management should deploy. New, updated and more inclusive rituals can also be an important tool to strengthen the community feeling and cohesion. This allows to maintain traditions in a changing society, while responding to the need for inclusiveness, and at the same time to adapt to changed behaviors of students and their families.

In our project, we noticed a growing attention by history teachers (but also other teachers, such as biology professors, science professors, art teachers…) to explore ways to reuse school heritage and leverage this potential to create learning and creative opportunities, to be introduced and repeated in school programmes.

Additionally, a crucial component of school community activities is an active alumni organisation. Maintaining contacts with alumni and inviting them to school activities gives a future perspective to pupils and provides input from a changing receiving world.

But the ambition can go beyond the immediate world of teachers - pupils - parents - alumni. Community work is also embedding the school, starting from its vision statement and identity, in the social network of the neighborhood: the city council, local small businesses, local sports associations, societies, museums, libraries, religious communities etc. A clearly explained school heritage profile and identity is the best introduction to build such deeper relationships.

Digitizing the archive and enabling storytelling with digital tools

An idea to start with fro a school can be to initiate a project for a decent school archive. This should involve more than the legal requirement of keeping records of the school supervision board and governance bodies. There is a need to care and preserve old documents, photographic heritage, other types of material heritage. Digital archiving allows to preserve a lot more of the school activities and events than previously would have been possible, but this requires a solid development of digitization workflow and production of descriptive metadata to accompany the digitized objects and stories.

A digitized archive also offers great opportunities to share stories of the school by using digital tools. A lively school website or blog that regularly publishes compelling content such as galleries, newsletters, virtual exhibitions and other storytelling items can help entice the interest of the community in the school life and history. A digitized archive also supports co-creation activities with the students, such as photo mash-up, collection days of memorabilia from the families, creative contests and other forms of interaction and participation in school heritage.

Opportunities of networking in an (international) collaboration

Not all schools have the opportunity to consolidate the necessary human resources and skills to develop a true school heritage programme. However, as the I2 project experience has clearly demonstrated, collaboration with other schools, locally or internationally, can help to identify viable strategies and offer advantages of scale. In particular, we found that school exchanges are a good driver to stimulate schools to have a deeper reflection on their values and traditions, in a spirit of openness and mutual respect. For the pupils (and the teachers also) experiencing another school tradition in an exchange programme stimulates reflection and opens up a more conscious understanding of the local traditions and their meaning.

Guidelines and policy recommendations

Action items to be possibly deployed

- develop a school identity vision
- work with external partners and engage in international projects
- organize students exchanges
- create/reinvigorate traditions (can be new traditions that build upon, or not, old traditions)
- make an archive inventory and a proper school planning that includes school heritage
- explore possibilities for creating a digital archive of school heritage
- use digital tools for regular communication and storytelling
- network with the local community

Guidelines in sharing values and building identity

Delivering the value of school heritage and of school identity to the various stakeholders can happen in a number of ways, also depending on the school's strategies and capacities. Final scope is anyway to engage locals and new comers with the school heritage, thus supporting the processes of community building and social cohesion.

Options include:

- inclusion of the history of the school into vision and mission for the future
- understanding the "customers": it is important to find out the reasons why students or parents choose a school
- using heritage resources and rituals (past and new ones) as an 'identifying element' to support school reputation and help create a collective identity, a sense of belonging to this community
- sharing with other schools/communities e.g through students exchanges; job-shadowing activities for teachers, working on school heritage with external partners at events, in international projects, in dedicated educational activities.

Policy recommendations

School management has the responsibility not only to run the school life in an efficient way but also to support innovation in education that is also based on preserving the values of school heritage. Recommendations include:

- Allow some freedom to teachers to integrate school heritage in their programmes
- Stimulate the implementation and use of digital tools for managing school heritage and communication
- Take into account the FAIR (Findability, Accessibility, Interoperability, and Reusability) principles in planning the actions to communicate school values and reach out to stakeholders

- School heritage can be an ideal instrument to promote UNESCO Sustainable Development Goals, in particular SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities). City councils and regional authority can use school heritage funding and initiatives as ways to foster these goals

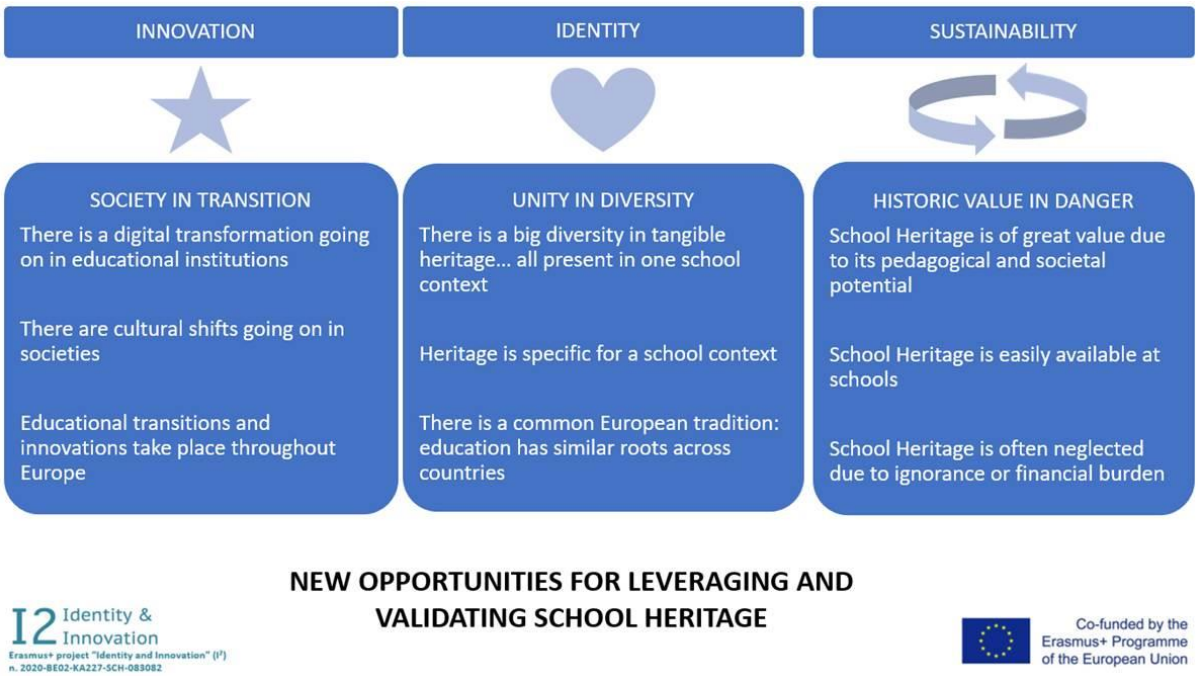
Conclusions

School heritage is often under threat due to a changing environment, of both the natural surroundings and the communities. High maintenance costs are often pushing schools to radically renovate premises by shutting down historical buildings.

However, a smart management of both the tangible and intangible heritage of the school as the expression of the lives of generations of citizens can be a powerful tool for community building and to create a sustainable environment for education.

Teachers and school managers should become more aware of the many opportunities of school heritage in engaging with students, families and the local community at large. The digital transformation process of the education sector is not limited to delivering school products and learning activities in a more modern way, but can also support preservation and sharing of the school heritage. Innovation through tradition can connect a glorious past to new horizons and a bright future.

Visual summary:



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