SLOVENIA

Slovenian case for ILE 'System Notes': introducing changes and stimulating innovations through school development teams

Introduction

In this paper we will introduce a broader project initiative that concerns strategies and initiatives designed to spread and sustain innovative learning in Slovene schools, based on the principles of empowerment and shared leadership. The initiative arose from our previous pilot project with the meaningful title: "Introducing changes into schools".

The main aim of this project (with the common working title: Renovation schooling through school development teams) was to develop a sustainable innovating model and strategy for its realisation including the system of change agents for its implementation (with the belonging programme of in service training).

The project is a combination of very different approaches, such as: "direct promotion, provision of incentives, network creation, knowledge management, leadership strategies and other professional development capacity building, creating new forms of expertise and change management, and more general drives to create climates favourable to innovative learning." It has involved different groups of groups: learning professionals; pupils and students; concepts of change management and concepts of learning and teaching and different concepts of knowledge, materials, facilities, and technologies that were organised and combined in many different ways. The project combined the model of change management, the institute of change agents, research and professional development network programmes, networking etc

Some initial ideas were first examined for three years on 10 schools, than spread on whole the system of Gymnasium (over 70 schools), and now we are broadening it on the level of Primary schools, especially in the connection with different specific developmental priorities (such as reading literacy, e competency and others). The whole process have lasted for almost 10 years, however its main features were designed and successfully examined and implemented in three years. Because having operated through long time there are many evidences of implementation and concrete effects.

We believe that our broad project initiative shows "holistic understanding of learning environments as encompassing all the different components that over time define the way in which learning is organised and experienced by students" and ensures long last longing effects.

1. Aims

The learning to be changed

- to encourage the use of process and problem approaches at learning,

- to foster higher order thinking and competency development

- to encourage a wider repertoire of teaching and assessment methods and strategies,

- to establish inter-disciplinary and cross-disciplinary connections and promote elements of integrated curriculum,

- to enhance the authenticity of learning situations,

- to find appropriate solutions to organisational issues that will support renewed ways of teaching and learning etc.

The learners targeted

At the beginning we were oriented mostly on teaching methods which will foster above mentioned aims, connected to learning. Meanwhile we redirected our attention from the methods and approaches to the pupils' wished outcomes. We were thinking more and more about what kind of knowledge, skills and competencies we want to support and we pointed methods especially in the connection with the goals we wanted to reach (and not as the mean by itself).

The environments and sites to be brought in

The general purpose of the project was to gain following two sustainable effects:

1. stimulating didactic innovations by individual teachers or interdisciplinary teams of teachers (for example: implementing more inter-active methods, a more interdisciplinary approach and introducing the new assessment and grading culture – all this for stimulating higher order thinking and developing competences).

2. initiating and introducing changes which would be thoughtfully coordinated on the level of whole the school - strategic and systematic planning and implementing all above mentioned innovations and all the school development.

That means that at the beginning the main aims of the project were more didactically oriented but then more stress was put on strategies of introducing changes and implementing innovations.

2. Leadership and Partners

The main initiative for starting this project in such a way was on the side of NEI. But in fact from start of this century very clear need for changes in gymnasium way of teaching was identified and schools were also the ones who in fact wanted changes or at least recognised the need for them. Therefor the pact about going on with this project was made between three sides: one was of course NEI as an initiator, another was the consortium of gymnasium (in fact there were two of them, one for general gymnasiums and another for technical ones), and the third was the Ministry or more exact The state office for education at the Ministry, which has assured for necessary conditions especially for the financial support with placing the project in the ESF plan.

At first the project was meant as pilot (in fact in previous years we have already had a kind of pilot project which was similar but now we wanted to examine some novelties in leading project) but still at the first moment exactly the half of the schools decided to start to cooperate immediately. So we planned the project then in such a way that we started with them in the first year and then another half joined in the next year after having shorter compensation preparing programmes so that they could go on together in next years.

We were pretty much autonomous in designing project in its methodological manner. Of course the main features were prescribed with national and European outlines, but the way how to cope with this was on us. The methodology of the project was therefor designed by NEI and then presented to the Ministry and to the schools. But after initial methodological preparation schools were stimulated to lead their own developmental way and to choose their own developmental priorities. We only prepared them for leading innovation processes and offer them basic concepts and strategies for the most important priorities that were the most frequently chosen by schools.

Both change agent institutes (that is school development teams and later also school project teams) were connected into network in which they learn and prepare together, show and discuss the examples of practice, practicing critical friendship and cooperate one with other on various ways.

3. Strategies and activities

The most important difference in this new project approach in relation to our previous approach was the next. In the past all important activities (for ex workshops) were prepared and executed by our project team in all schools that were invited into such a project. All the goals and activities were prepared by ourselves. When the years have passed we have realised more and more that these activities should be put in the hands of schools themselves. We have learned that when people are not included they don't feel changes and innovations as their own. The most important transforming idea of this project was therefor to invite teachers to design the project together with us or even better: that we are the ones who only support them by planning their own project.

Therefore we ask headmasters to establish school development teams which would lead all important project activities for their schools and adapt them to their needs and capacities. We didn't go to schools any more. We only prepared teams that were established meanwhile for the developmental methodology and

supported them as tutors when they met resistances or specific problems situations in meanwhile activities. Everything rest was done by them and their colleges.

What does it mean?

School developmental teams didn't serve for a transmission from us to schools (as it used to be in the past with similar groups), but will be the real change agents on their schools. We prepared them therefore for their role of change agents: we introduced them into change processes, their stages and principles, into resistances and strategies for overcoming them, into moderation skills and into evaluation strategies.

At first we paid a lot of attention to start-up activities, i.e. on preparing an environment conducive to implementing change. School developmental teams were trained for facilitating and moderating following processes at their schools:

- Discussion of the need for changes (we construct some workshops for this purpose in which teachers' attention was focused to various competencies their students will need in the future
- Analysis of the initial stage at the school's and at personal level , analysis of the school climate and their capacities (SWOT, DION and similar techniques were used),
- Confronting and investigating the teachers' naïve philosophies , their personal professional beliefs and values and discussing concepts and indicators of school quality
- Some schools decided to make a (re)new(ed) vision after this stage
- After such careful preparing (which lasts for one year) we stimulate schools to make further steps, that is: to start finding out what are their priorities and to start planning;
- Defining expectations and priorities on the ground of former discussions, analyses and reflections
- The development plan was designed which included the list of their own goals, appropriate activities and strategies with which they intent to realise their priorities.
- Also the plan of education and other support activities for teachers were planned.
- Finally the evaluation plan was designed.

Still after all this stages which were led by school developmental teams on the school level, teachers start to introduce changes into their work by plans. These plans were prepared on the level of school (school developmental priorities) and on the subject level or on the level of the individual teacher (where it was posed how they will implement school priority or priorities in their own teaching). For example: if the school priority was interdisciplinary curriculum or learning how to learn, the individuals or small teams have planned how to implement this priority in their curriculum; but all this should be planned together and coordinated at the school level .

That means that only the training in common developmental stages and strategies were the same for all the schools. But then each school developmental team decided which way to use and which kind of workshops and methods to choose and combine which strategies for introducing changes and for preparing colleagues to them with regard to their own specific situation – with one sentence: how to work with his own colleagues in the specific context of their school.

Another strategic decision specific for each school was on the level of school developmental priorities: each school has chosen (form the prescribed national list) the ones appropriate for them with the support of its school developmental team.

From here on the second part of the project has gone on: the efforts of whole the teachers assembly have from now on been put into specific teaching innovations that should support the chosen priorities. The real innovative work in classes has started at that time after the initial developmental work at the school level has been finished.

For some most frequent priorities (such as interdisciplinary connections, learning to learn, stimulating critical thinking) additional – school project teams were established. If school developmental teams were at the top of facilitating and coordinating the wholeness of changes at the school level on methodological or strategic level, school project teams were established for coordination of one specific developmental priority (for ex. interdisciplinary connections). In most cases the leaders of project teams were also the members of school developmental team so that the optimal coordination was guaranteed.

The role of school developmental team in this stage has remained coordination of all this different incentives and efforts, in overcoming various troubles, open questions and resistance and especially in collecting, evaluating and presenting cases of promising and excellent practice.

In our strategy of working with teams we added to initial central meetings also region meetings to foster cooperation between schools in region. This has also enabled the opportunities for more individualised approach. In last years of the project we upgraded this with even with individual consultations for all the teams and team coaching and supervision for especially interested ones.

4. Context

The new social circumstances (at the global as well as at the national and also at the family level) have posed schools and teachers in a new role that demands new knowledge, skills and competences. Above is the list of some changes to which teachers have to react:

- Increase of heterogeneity in the classes (children of different religious and cultural background, different nationalities, languages, refugees, children with special needs …) demands even more attention on social needs and relations, on classroom climate and personal wellbeing.

- Teachers have become more and more an organiser of an stimulating educational environment, they are supposed to give directions and encouragement of a teaching and to moderate learning process, they facilitate cooperation and active forms of learning ...; they are no longer the only source of knowledge, but they have to know various sources of literature and information and make children familiar with them and to cope with them and treat them thoughtfully and critically.

- Their role is no longer limited to the teaching and their own class, they are expected to work actively with all the colleagues and other employees at school and outside it while sharing responsibility for the entire (opened) curriculum.

- New wider and more complex concepts of knowledge are put into focus, the need for teaching for competences and higher order knowledge and skills is recognised.

- The nature of nowadays professional challenges demands interdisciplinary skills and cooperation therefor the need for interdisciplinary teaching and cooperative learning has grown.

- Not only subject level of curriculum is important, but also the school and (cross)curriculum level is of the great importance.

- Schools function as an open learning environment, they build connections with parents, with other schools (networking), with local community and other institutions.

- More autonomy is given to schools and teachers, the need for empowerment and shared leadership has increased instead of completely top down lead initiatives.

- There is more emphasis on new teachers' developmental and research role. They are expected to care systematically for their own development and their career and to research their own practice.

- All these needs the new culture of peer relationships based in critical friendship which include peer monitoring, peer coaching, action research and first of all – dialogue and negotiations.

- To manage all this different needs, tensions, new roles, demands the skills of moderating all this processes, the skills of developmental designing and thinking, the skills of sharing leadership on one side and of coordinative cooperation on the other. Schools and teachers become more and more change agents.

All this needs and new roles calls for urgent changes in teachers' education and qualification. Ten years ago, when our project was designed, our secondary school teachers were still educated with the emphasises especially on academic knowledge, whereas the need for wider concept of knowledge (f.ex. competences) was diminished; also the need for creating stimulating learning environments for all pupils and the importance of teachers research was still less recognised. Therefore our main aims were to make teachers awared of the urgent need for new kind of knowledge (for higher order knowledge and competencies, for interdisciplinary connections …) and for new kind of schools – schools as learning communities.

What does it mean? We have recognised in previous projects that the teachers felt no real ownership over the goals and activities, they felt like this projects were to some extent imposed on them and not defined through a shared process of cooperation. We obviously overlooked their needs and expectations, their priorities and preferences, their real feelings and fears. Therefor our project strategy has gradually transformed from top down to the combination with elements of empowerment. Our general aim became more and more oriented towards supporting schools in development planning and action research held by themselves with a view to changing schools into genuine learning communities with their own developmental strategy.

5. Resources

As already mentioned the main financial resource was from ESF. Both of key partners, NEI and schools were included, each in separate funding. Schools have got the most of founds for their innovative work, however NEI has got money for its conceptual and developmental work and for designing and organising training programmes. Also some new support staff was employed.

Later on some national financial support was guaranteed for one of the most important priorities from our project, namely for team teaching.

6. Development over Time

Using some solutions and learning's from one previous pilot project (with 10 schools) and one nationally founded project (with 18 schools, called European classes) which started 10 years ago, the project we describe here started in the year 2008 and lasts until now. Formally it will be finished this year (2013), but we have prepared school development teams for sustainable development so we all hope the main ideas and strategies from the project will go on.

The project is different than the pilot ones in some main features (especially in the direction of bigger school autonomy and empowerment and in emphasising the role of schools as learning communities in widest sense). It has also changed meanwhile in some aspects as we all learned more about real cooperation and react flexibly on different unexpected challenges. For example at first we planned only school developmental teams but then the need for additional school project teams has arisen. We have been trying all the time to adapt to changing context and to findings we have got meanwhile and especially through evaluations.

But the most important is its transfer on other fields of the NEI developmental working. At the end we should stress also that this kind of project model is now widely spread through many other NEI projects and incentives and that the institute of school project teams is used for different other developmental priorities, more and more also at the level of primary school, for e. for introducing e competency and for fostering reading literacy.

7. Evidence of effectiveness and efficiency

There are many different kind of evidence and efficiency. Somewhere spontaneously detected from the school developmental teams or from our side, some were evidenced or even measured.

One of the most important effects was that school developmental teams referred how the culture of accepting the need for changes had really changed. In all these years the initial stage of massive resistance and doubting has turned into widely accepted statement that we all have to put developmental efforts in our

work. Of course also higher level of healthy criticism of what is worth efforts and what not has developed. Schools are now awared of the need for strategic developmental approach and systematicity of introducing changes. Also the climate has changed, teams refer that teachers are more connected, that much more activities are going now cooperatively (on the level of discussion, planning, acting, evaluating), the culture of constructive critical friendship has been built etc.

We also detected all this improvements with our questioners, where also many other pluses are exposed.

Between the most value achievements are:
- The establishment of school developmental team
- The shared responsibility for changes and for the school development at all
- Fostered cooperation at all levels
- The awareness of importance of careful planning at all levels
- The need for reflection and evaluation
- The need for clear evidences etc.

Material evidence which has arisen from all this efforts are:
- Concept and models, published in documents
- Cases of good practice together with evaluations or critical comments published in handbooks and on Internet
- Evidenced and published school innovation projects together with material
- Festivals of cases, final conferences etc.

8. Success Factors

Some of factors of success were from outside: the need for change together with public expectations that gymnasium should change. Also the acknowledgment and support form Ministry was important, the cooperation of headmasters and especially the efforts or school developmental and project teams. The model of project in which we build on them was probably one of the crucial for the success of the project. And – of course as already mentioned – that the schools have an autonomy about the priorities and the way of gaining them.

One of the permanent risks were the resistances at schools in relation to school developmental activities which were gradually overcomed. We have namely still since beginning count on this and have prepared teams exactly for this role. Also workshops were very preciously designed so that they could have impact on different types of teachers and so that teachers at schools will be actively involved in all important actions.

Meanwhile we have introduced one previously not planned activity which was extremely well accepted: individual consultations for teams about their acute challenges and in some time for some of them also permanent team coaching.

Our last training for teams was exactly on moderation skills because they still report that some have problems with having impact between colleagues.

9. Tensions and impediments

The first obstacle was that teachers are not educated to be change agents and to lead processes on the school level. Therefor a lot of persuading, support, championing and of course especially specialised training was offered to them (especially to teams) that the finally accepted this role and many of them recognised it as a very value experience and upgrade of their usual teaching role.

Another obstacle were teacher assemblies where teams were loud speakers and facilitators. It takes a lot time and efforts for teams and headmasters to get a critical mass on the side of common and coordinate efforts. But in some schools this did not succeed and the spirit of cooperation wasn't reached and common planning remained perceived as something unuseful and time consuming. We try to help teams from this schools with different kind of individualised support such as consultations, coaching …

Perhaps is also important that we all absolved a lesson that we can't influence on all but that it is of value if we influence a critical mass and send a persuasive message how important is to cooperate and put efforts for permanent improvements.

10. Sources

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