Collective Learning in ‘Networks of Learning Schools’

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The article is based on a project of the National Leadership School, called Network of Learning Schools. The project started in autumn 1998 and was completed in spring 2000. It was developed as a school improvement strategy for 8 primary schools in Slovenia, based on the premise that schools cannot improve ‘unless teachers, individually and collectively, develop’ (Ainscow et al. 1996). In-service teacher training as individual teachers’ experience is well developed in Slovenia. However, not many opportunities have been created for developing collectively. Although our institution was established for head teachers’ training primarily, we have often been asked to run workshops for whole-school staff’s. The evaluations have proved that co-operation and professional discussions among teachers have been highly appreciated by all participants. Despite this, collaboration has not become a longer-lasting process, at least not among most teachers in schools. Therefore we developed a project which could stimulate collaborative cultures within and among schools. However, collaboration and collective learning is not always an easy process according to responses given by teachers who participated in the project. The findings and their implication for future teacher and head teacher in-service training are presented in the conclusion.

INTRODUCTION

Slovenia has undergone great political changes. In 1991, it became an independent country. Accordingly, the educational system has been reformed too, since ‘the quality of a nation’s education and training system is seen to hold the key to future economic prosperity’ (Braun and Lauder 1996). Compulsory education has been prolonged for one year (from 8 to 9 years), an extensive reform of vocational education and training has been implemented with the help of a Phare programme, new curricula are being developed at all levels of education.

In 1995, a public non-profit institution National Leadership School (Šola za ravnatelje) was established as one of the government measures
for quality education. Although it was primarily founded for training head teachers and aspiring head teachers for managing and leading kindergartens and schools, it has soon outgrown its core activity. Many head teachers – our participants, have been aware that their newly acquired knowledge and skills are not enough if they want to develop their schools. If real improvement is to occur, they have to modify internal conditions (Bennett and Harris 1999) and focus on learning at all levels (O’Sullivan 1997). We have been invited to schools to train the whole school teaching staff for two or three days. Most experiences have been very successful especially in terms of collaboration among teachers. Many of them have reported that they have discussed common school problems with their colleagues for the first time. Study groups have been very active in our country but they are usually bound to ‘subject issues’. However, opening the classroom door and discussing common problems concerning the whole school has not been a usual practice. For most teachers (and head teachers, too) these training’s have been a new, positive experience.

In spite of our common enthusiasm, we have also realised that it is not enough to bring people together once a year. Schools ‘reverted back to old behaviour’ (Fullan 1993). This was because it has been difficult to sustain the initiated process especially in educational context where systems and structures support individualism (Hargreaves 1994). Collective staff development and opportunities for the staff to learn together have occurred ad hoc, more as an exception to the rule. On the basis of these experiences blended with theoretical knowledge and research findings in other countries, a project called Network of Learning Schools was developed. Our original aim has been to convert the collective learning from an event to a process and to link it with school improvement.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT AND AREAS OF IMPROVEMENT

In 1998 nine primary schools (age 7–15) were invited to participate in the project. Eight of them decided to join the project. All of them had already organised at least one collective learning event. This was an important criterion because mutual trust was a vital precondition for effective work.

The basic aims and objectives of the project were as follows:

· to enhance the process of school improvement;
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· to enhance collective (collaborative) learning;
· to stimulate collaboration within and among schools;
· to develop the methodology of collective learning as a new type of in-service education and training in Slovenia;
· to increase school’s capacity for change.

Although the aims and the activities deriving from them are closely interrelated, they will be separated for the purpose of this paper and only those related to collective learning will be dealt with here. In fact, most activities among teachers and among schools were based on teamwork. ‘School development teams’ were formed at each school. These cross-curricular teams were the only imposed condition that schools had to follow. The teams were not formed to solve problems but to enhance and evaluate collective activities and events at each individual school. They had regular meetings with teams from other schools where they had to report about the progress. These meetings were also valuable experiences in terms of sharing experiences.

Before teams could operate in their school environments and organise training events they had to be trained. Two training events of two days’ duration were organised for them:

· School as an organisation with emphasis on setting priorities for its development
· Collaborative Learning and Problem-solving

More about training and the development of the system of in-service training in Slovenia is described in Nada Trunk’s article in these proceedings.

The knowledge and skills gained helped them set priorities for school development with their colleagues as well as design the strategy for improving the identified area. Their approach differed according to different contexts in which schools operated. The priorities for development also differed considerably: in the selected area, in their complexity and in different ways of tackling them (as a whole-school policy, as departmental or even individual class strategy; as annual, one-off or long-lasting activity; as involving teachers, teachers and students, other stakeholders etc.). The schools were deliberately left free in this sense because we were all learning from each other and every experience was taken as a contribution to our ‘informed practice’ (Dimmock 2000).
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The list of selected areas point to the variety of detected problems and approaches to their improvement in schools:

1. **Assessment of knowledge.** In school A teams of teachers examined the existing curricula and looked for the ways of how they could incorporate learning-to-learn strategies for pupils. In-service training for teachers about learning strategies and new ways of assessing was organised and at least two lessons per term have been devoted to learning strategies for pupils.

2. **Co-operation between departments in schools.** School B planned to improve co-operation among teachers. They organised a monthly ‘forum’ where teachers discussed current issues. The forum was also used to disseminate knowledge and skills from in-service training. After the project school underwent two major changes (head teacher and his deputy resigned) and the new head teacher has been looking for new ways of promoting co-operation among teachers.

3. **Learning habits of pupils.** In school C teachers focused on pupils’ learning habits, particularly on homework. They found out that teachers’ inconsistency could be one of the reasons that pupils did not do homework or did it carelessly. Besides, they realised that the amount of homework was imbalanced. They developed school policy on homework and have still been improving it.

4. **Pupils’ behaviour.** In school D teachers had been trying to develop an effective school policy for managing pupils’ behaviour already before they joined the project. They involved pupils in the development of ‘code of behaviour’ and produced a booklet for pupils, parents and teachers.

5. **Teachers’ care for pupils during breaks.** School E has a special architecture that makes looking after pupils during breaks very difficult. As they realised that the number of conflicts among pupils and between pupils and teachers on duty during breaks increased they tried to find more creative ways of spending time. They organised different activities for pupils: listening to music, drawing, reading popular magazines, listening to popular music, etc. Some of these activities have still lived on under the new head teacher.

6. **Communication among teachers.** For school E lack of information had been a problem for some years. Teachers felt uninformed which
had caused many conflicts. Within the project effective communication channels were established. Because of the nature of the area of improvement it was very important that the head teacher was actively involved at all stages of the project.

7. School environment. School G was being renovated indoors and outdoors so teachers wished to raise pupils’ awareness and level of environmental care. Pupils and teachers developed a plan of how to arrange and take care of a new park around the school. This project has been completed and new priorities have been defined.

8. Co-operation with parents. Although school H did not have problems in the selected area, teachers wanted to strengthen relationships with parents because the school is situated in a relatively competitive environment. They were searching for more effective ways of co-operation with parents than parents’ meetings. Dissemination of good practice within schools was their main strategy.

Some of these areas are more closely related than others to pupils’ learning. We did not insist on focusing on teaching at all costs because collaboration among teachers was more important for us at the initial stage than the identified area itself. Two schools have undergone changes of head teachers that has influenced further work on the identified problems. Two schools could not continue their work without external support while four schools have made major progress even from the national point of view. However, none of the schools could avoid the impact of their improvement efforts on pupils’ learning. Moreover, the methodology of work during the project itself was perceived as being very useful in the classroom.

**COLLECTIVE LEARNING**

This expression will be used to denote activities related to teachers’ learning within the project. It is closely related to what Talbert and McLaughlin (1994) propose as ‘central component in the development of professional communities’. Newman and Wehlage’s (1995) three general features (emphasis added) explain the essence of collective learning and professional communities:

- teachers pursue a clear shared purpose for all students’ learning;
- teachers engage in collaborative activity to achieve the purpose;
teachers take collective responsibility for student learning.

The notions of collaborative activities and collective responsibility have been the key issues within our project because the concept of teacher development has been based on seeking for possibilities and mechanisms of ‘breaking the walls of privatism’ (Fullan and Hargreaves 1992). At least two reasons have guided our approach:

· extremely positive experiences with whole school staff training;
· a wide range of evidence (i.e. Rosenholz 1989; Ainscow et al. 1994; Hargreaves 1994; Ribbins and Burridge 1994; Liethwood and Louis 1998; Dimmock 2000) that teacher collaboration and school improvement are interconnected.

The process of collective learning involves many features of collaborative learning (Peklaj 2000) which may be viewed as a process where each member may achieve maximum learning effect and also help others to achieve their maximum. Interaction is the key factor in the process of collaborative learning. Some preconditions for effective collaborative learning were provided. Direct interaction was enabled by teamwork. Teams were heterogeneous and the members were trained in some basic social skills (problem-solving, active listening, giving and receiving information). Training related to the task itself (identification of the core problem and planning for improvement) was also organised. However, positive interdependence and clear responsibility were being built during the process but not in all cases, as can be seen in the evaluations. Therefore, the expression ‘collective learning’ is rather used. The tables below are used to illustrate different levels of staff relationships. ‘Collective learning’ as referred to in this article may be seen as closer to co-operation than to collaboration. In Hargreaves’s (1994) terms it could be called ‘contrived collegiality’ in which team activities in schools were planned and initiated by external experts. Thus, schools have reported various level of teachers’ commitment to working in teams. It could have been expected that not all schools would move to genuine collaboration although all head teachers reported that the project made significant difference in team spirit among teachers. Figure 1 provides a framework of various levels of inter-relationships that contribute to organisational health and figure 2 distinguishes between the ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ factors involved in genuine as opposed to ‘contrived’ collaboration.
Teacher learning is at the centre of school development (Ainscow et al. 1994). Traditionally, teachers were seen to be autonomous and their in-service training followed this assumption. Training events were organised outside schools for individual teachers and basically subject-focused. This is still a prevailing practice in Slovenia. National baccalaureate and curriculum reforms have even increased the number of courses that are focused on individual subjects. In addition, the practice of sharing knowledge and skills has been more an exception to the rule than common experience. Along with the existing structures (rigid timetables, separated classrooms – even in more buildings, two-

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<th>Task elements</th>
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<td>‘Hard’ Collaboration involves shared:</td>
<td>‘Soft’ Collaboration involves shared:</td>
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<td>· goals</td>
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From Oldroyd 1998.
shift classes in some cases, etc.) they provided almost an ‘ideal’ context where teacher individualism could develop into an untouchable way of operating. Head teachers themselves have not wished to intrude in teachers’ acquired rights, for example, to ask them to stay at school after classes and work together on issues, which have not been directly linked to their subjects. On the other hand, study groups within and among schools have performed effectively and a lot of teachers have had positive experience with teamwork. However, subject-centred activities could even deepen the gap among teachers within the same school. They may result in balkanisation (conflict between groups) within the school, and fragmented communication with constituencies outside the school (Kruse and Louis 1993).

Collective learning within the project Network of Learning Schools has been seen as an opportunity to redirect the existing trends. The coordinators have been well aware that building a professional community through collegial learning means to respect teachers’ autonomy while at the same time to mobilising them to improve their schools (Leithwood et al. 1998). Mobilising teachers’ potentials has been understood in terms of providing such learning opportunities where teachers can learn from each other and thus share and develop their expertise together. It has to be clearly distinguished from ‘groupthink’ (ibid.) which is (at least in Slovenia) too often understood as a process where differences are not expressed, let alone used, in creative problem-solving. Such understanding can be linked to our previous political tradition of following one truth. For this reason, respect for differences in the process of collective learning has been clearly emphasised at all stages.

TEACHERS’ EXPERIENCES WITH COLLECTIVE LEARNING

New ways of teacher development may stimulate collaboration among teachers and thus extend teachers’ professionalism which is considered as one of the conditions for school improvement (Verbiest 1999). Collaboration can influence organisational learning, too. However, positive or negative experiences with collective learning events may influence this process as well as the existing school culture.

Evaluation of the project has been focused on three different levels:

- impact of the project on school improvement (evaluated by head teachers and development teams),
- impact of the project on school as an organisation (evaluated by head teachers),
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· positive and negative effects of collective learning (evaluated by teachers).

Since the latter are closely related to the possible new (additional) model of in-service teacher and head teacher training, only these results will be presented.

The participating teachers were sent semi-structured questionnaires. 247 questionnaires were sent, 178 responses were received. No other research method (i.e. interview) was used because we were working together with schools and teams at all stages of the project. The respondents were asked three questions. The data were analysed in a qualitative way.

QUESTION 1: Which advantages or strengths would you ascribe to collective learning within the project?

A range of different answers are classified into 7 categories that are listed according to the frequency of answers. The number of answers under individual categories is not explicitly stated because they were written in a variety of ways.

1. Sharing experiences among colleagues. The respondents claim that they have gained most in this area. The answers are very interesting since they vary from ‘we have known each other better’ to ‘collaborative learning’. They have learned different approaches to problem solving and a lot of new suggestions have been shared. They have learned their colleagues’ views and thoughts about certain problems at school. Most of them were able to learn about their colleagues’ work for the first time.

2. Better communication and personal relationships. The answers are similar to those in the first category but here some specific linkages are mentioned: between teachers and head teacher, between teachers teaching at separate locations, between teachers in primary and secondary departments. The following notions have been most frequently used: respect, relaxed relationships, a consensus, supplementing. One teacher’s response is very illustrative: ‘We were talking about issues which are never dealt with’.

3. Co-operation and seeking for common solutions. Although this category could be added to sharing experience, the word co-operation is often emphasised by the respondents. It is most frequently related to common – collaborative searching for solutions, decisions and
possibilities. One of the respondents wrote: ‘Solving problems in groups is easier.’

4. Personal and professional growth. The answers could be clustered into:

· acquiring new knowledge, skills, methodologies, ideas;
· acknowledgement that he/she acts properly;
· greater self-confidence.

Methodology of problem solving has been most frequently mentioned. This could be understood as ‘looking for recipes’ but according to the above answers we could rather speak about extending professionalism. However, reflecting on one’s own practice, stated in answers, such as ‘the feeling that I act properly’, ‘I work nearly the same as others’, ‘constructive reflection of my own practice’, is equally important. Although the answers do not provide information about the depth of teachers’ reflections, the stimulus for reflection should be appreciated. Self-confidence has been expressed in relation to different areas: ‘I can do more than I could imagine’; ‘presenting ideas in front of my colleagues’; ‘feeling of contribution to quality’, etc.

5. Concrete solution of the identified problem. The number of answers related to concrete solution of the problem is very close to the number in the previous category. The respondents have been satisfied to see that a certain step forward was made at their schools. Some have even stated that the problem seemed insoluble before. It is especially favourable for the project that solutions are perceived long lasting.

6. Team-work and climate. A positive climate has not only been perceived in the development team, it has also been related to teamwork generally. 17 respondents answered that only within the project they got used to teamwork, 31 said that teamwork is a relaxing but creative experience for them. The notion ‘positive energy’ appeared in individual cases. ‘When you work individually you are more exposed than in a group’.

7. The project itself. Only a few answers can be classified into this category, but they are important in terms of future development of the project. Some respondents appreciated the organisation, systematic work and good co-ordination.
QUESTION 2: What are the weaknesses of collective learning in your opinion?

The range of weaknesses or shortcomings of collective learning is not so broad although all respondents find some of them. Nevertheless, they should be considered in our future work very carefully. The answers were clustered into 5 categories. The first 2 can be called ‘organisational barriers’ while the other 3 may be classified as ‘personal hindrances’.

1. **Time.** Practically all respondents claim that time is the strongest hindrance: timetables, afternoon work, co-ordination of activities at school, additional work and courses on Saturday. Head teachers gave similar answers. According to these answers, more attention should be paid to planning and co-ordination of activities within schools. Another problem related to time is often mentioned. Since the project lasted for nearly two years some respondents expected faster results.

2. **Organisation of the project.** Twelve respondents recognised that initial instructions were not clear enough. The answers are not surprising because the project was being developed together with the participating schools. The instructions were modified according to the dynamics of the project itself. Unfortunately, 6 respondents believe that real problems were not identified. It would be interesting to know whether they all come from the same school.

3. **Embarrassment, uneasiness.** One fifth of respondents believe that they themselves carry a lot of resistance towards teamwork. Their initial feelings can be described as reserved, uneasy, afraid and embarrassed. They further explain that they do not want to expose themselves that they do not trust quality of their ideas, some think that their problems are not ‘equal’ compared with other people’s problems. Most respondents in this category say that they do not know their colleagues well while they know their work even less. A few answers point to that teachers are simply not used to working together.

4. **Colleagues as hindrance.** Twelve respondents find their colleagues a major hindrance for collegial learning. They feel that their colleagues did not want to talk about real problems, that they did not accept the mode of work itself while some people did not find
the project interesting or meaningful at all. Linking these answers to
the previous ones may inform us that ‘contrived collegiality’ (Hargreaves 1994) involves a lot of personal resistance, which may have long-lasting negative influence.

5. Fear of responsibility. The answers show that fear of responsibility was probably related to leading roles in the project, i.e. to members of development teams or to team leaders themselves.

QUESTION 3: Would you recommend the project to your colleagues from other schools? Why?

In spite of organisational and personal hindrances related to collegial learning only 2 respondents answered negatively. Due to limited scope of this paper, no thorough analysis of answers will be presented. However, one third of the teachers feel that they can use this ‘model’ of learning, co-operation and problem solving in their classroom, too. This conclusion exceeded our expectations. If this was the only output we could say that our mission has been accomplished successfully.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of teachers’ evaluation provides the basis for the future development of the project itself as well as for rethinking the existing training for head teachers because ‘school leadership practices have among the strongest direct and indirect influence on organisational learning’ (Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach 1998). Organisational learning is understood in this context as collective search for a solution of a problem in which individuals and groups within the schools are engaged (ibid.). Our guidelines for further development of the project are based on the premise that our networks provide opportunities for learning from a range of ideas and information, which occur from a variety of interests and experiences which are shared among the members. Besides, positive responses have encouraged us to continue our work. Considering the organisation of the project, special attention will be paid to quality of information, time and experiences with teamwork. Collective learning should not be viewed as additional work but as a process that fits into school development plan and in-service training. This means that it should be well-organised and planned before schools join it and that other school activities should be complementary with it.

Taking into account the theoretical views and our practical expe-
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Experiences related to collective learning it may be concluded that school improvement that is based on team-work may result in changing perspective of the source of learning. Instead of relying on in-service training (whether provided inside or outside school) teachers themselves generate new knowledge and learn at the same time:

- by identifying priorities they learn about school as an organisation;
- by solving problems they learn about the process itself and generate solutions;
- by working in teams they learn ‘how to live together’ (as Delors put it);
- by taking responsibility for results they become leaders – they learn how to lead.

Many authors (Stoll 1999; Ainscow et al. 1994; Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach 1998; Bennett and Harris 1999; Gray et al. 1999) believe that school context may provide opportunities or inhibit teacher development. Little (quoted in Fullan 1992) even claims that one can become a better teacher just by being on the staff of a particular school. Putting experienced people together in new opportunities usually results in new knowledge creation that is a vital ingredient of school improvement (Brown and Eisenhardt, quoted in Fullan 1999). There appears to be widespread agreement that leadership exercised by head teachers is crucial to the creation of such conditions (Southworth, quoted in Ribbins and Burridge 1994). Fullan (1992) provides a list of guidelines for action for head teachers to support collective learning mainly focused on re-culturing than restructuring. Leithwood, Steinbach and Jantzi (1998) find transformational forms of leadership especially helpful in fostering learning. Besides course-type training, more ongoing support and networking among head teachers should be provided so ‘that they can share their emotional traumas, vulnerabilities and uncertainties among similarly placed groups of colleagues’ (Hargreaves 1998).

Our experiences prove that head teacher’s support ‘in principle’ is not enough. Teachers need time to reflect, to learn and to work in teams. They also need knowledge about school effectiveness, about processes, such as planning, problem-solving, team-work, and about leadership. Above all, they need trust that their perspective of what is important for a school is as valuable as a perspective shared among other
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stakeholders. Thus, teachers’ learning to lead implies head teacher’s leading to learn. It is a continuous challenge for all those who are engaged in head teachers’ training to find ways to promote and support them.

REFERENCES


