

NETWORKING AS A STRATEGY FOR CAPACITY BUILDING

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Abstract: Self-evaluation is a tool, an approach through which we assess and assure quality in education and training. The success of self-evaluation is influenced by various factors. One of the most important is to strengthen the capabilities of everyone involved in the evaluation. In the paper we present the key reasons for choosing networking as a strategy for strengthening the capacity for evaluation and the research on the existing practice of networks at Slovenian primary schools. In depth we are exploring the form of networking between developmental and weak schools in self-evaluation. The goal of such networking is school improvement on the systemic, organizational and personal level. We present the research and the dilemmas that arise at this stage.

Keywords: Capacity building, self-evaluation, capacity-building strategies, networking, schools, quality assessment and assurance

1 Introduction

The need to assess and assure quality¹ in the field of education is not new, the reasons for this are in the focus on autonomy, the opening of learning environments, increased sensitivity to equity, increased use of data and so on. (MIZŠ, 2017).

Upon reviewing the systems of assessing and assuring quality abroad and practises in Slovenia we find, that different systems (models) of assessing and assuring quality are being used. (MIZŠ, 2017, Brejc, 2014; Brejc & Sardoč & Koren, 2013; Brejc et al., 2011, Kos Kecojević & Gaber, 2011; Brejc, 2008; ...). Nevertheless the process with which we assess and assure quality contains similar key steps that relate to the famous Deming circle of quality or PDCA circle (Piskar & Dolinšek, 2006, p. 165) with which it is possible to achieve improvements in quality.

Most countries included in the Eurydice and OECD analyses use internal evaluation for assessing and assuring quality, complemented by external evaluation. We talk about internal evaluation when the processes of evaluation are performed by those involved in the process that is the subject of evaluation. It is a kind of self-reflection that is directed and guided in accordance with the prescribed procedures. One of the forms of internal evaluation is self-evaluation.

In Slovenia we received our first statutory regulation (ZOFVI, Ur. List RS, št. 16/07, 49. člen) in this field, which included kindergartens, primary schools, secondary vocational schools and gymnasium in 2008 and specifies that the headteacher is accountable for "assuring and assessing quality with self-evaluation and preparing an annual report on self-evaluation of a school or a kindergarten". This article does not specify self-evaluation in detail. It only says, that the report on self-evaluation is accepted by the council of the Institute. However, the statutory regulation was followed by several European Commission projects, with which Ministry of Education directed quality assessment and assurance with self-evaluation with trainings for kindergartens and schools (Brejc & Koren & Širec, 2014, Brejc et al., 2014, Brejc & Sardoč & Koren, 2013, Brejc & Koren & Zavašnik Arčnik, 2011, Brejc et al., 2011, Koren & Brejc, 2011).

The success of assessing and assuring quality with self-evaluation is influenced by various factors such as the willingness of professional workers/teachers council on systematic reflection, motivation or the internal need for improving their work, that the teacher council want to achieve common goals, that leadership is distributed properly and assures active participation of all professional workers, that there is effective communication and cooperation, and strengthening the capabilities of everyone involved in self-evaluation etc. (Zavašnik Arčnik & Gradišnik 2011, pp. 45-66; Vanhoof 2011, pp. 107-122). We are particularly interested in the last factor.

Building capacity has to be strengthen on multiple levels: on the level of an individual, organization and on the system level. The capacity of an individual refers to knowledge, skill, perception, attitude and experiencing oneself. As for organizational capacity it refers to common practises, context of organization (schools), vision and leadership, shared commitment, knowledge or access to it, organizational structures etc. Both capacities are connected and affect one another. The goals of strengthening the capacity for evaluation (in continuation SCE) are to enhance and preserve the organizational capacity with the help of evaluation projects, access, strengthening and the use of evaluation knowledge, continuous organizational learning and the support for self-evaluation. It is important that the SCE is guided by a plan to establish, preserve and continually recreate the opportunities for SCE and that it is not a one-time activity but a process with focused efforts and practise of day-to-day implementation. It is based on main components: professional development, resources and support, and a stimulating environment in the organization. The purpose of SCE is to design or assure a sustainable practise of quality evaluation which serves organizational learning (improvements, the desire for a learning community, communication of results) and confronts external demands. (Brejc, 2014, pp. 47-77)

¹ In Slovenia, several synonyms are used: assessing and assuring quality with self-evaluation, implementing improvements and self-evaluation, quality management, assessment and development of quality and so on.

In order to strengthen the capacity for evaluation, it can be stimulated by different strategies. These should also include work with the entire organization, not just developing the skills and knowledge of individuals:

- encouragement to participate in the evaluation,
- formal education,
- formal and informal mentoring,
- connecting formal training with experiential learning,
- open discussions on evaluation,
- opportunities for participation of the employees,
- established feedback mechanisms,
- effective communication system,
- access to a database of good practises,
- information's on sources of evaluation,
- learning with evaluation (learning by doing),
- etc. (Brejc, 2014, pp. 47-77)

When building capacity, we have to be aware that it is necessary to take into account "different needs, experiences and responsibilities in relation with evaluation. It is also necessary to act flexible in designing and implementing initiatives to strengthen the capacity to evaluate. We need to begin where the learning individual (or organization) is and to strengthen from there on." (Taylor Powell & Boyd, 2008, 67 after Brejc, 2014, p. 75).

2 Networking in education

Network is defined as a structure where two or more actors (individuals or organizations) connect in different ways in a more or less formal way (Borgatti & Foster, 2003 in Muijs et al., 2011). Broadly Muijs (2009, p. 7) defines networking as "the co-operation of at least two organizations for a common cause that takes at least some time." Co-operation is defined as "joint activities between participants from different organizations within the network" (Muijs, 2009, p. 7).

In the 1970s of the 20th century Illich also believed in the co-operation and networking and revolutionary proposed the abolishment of the current system of education and instead of schools, as one of the alternatives, proposed "*learning networks, that are composed of individuals with similar interests which meet around a problem that they self-initiative choose and determine and which progresses on the basis of creative and research learning*" (Haralambos, Holborn, 2001, p. 740). The networking of schools described in such a way allows the usage of different capital that is in possession of all participants in the network by which they enhance their capacity in different areas.

Many principals are aware that with the care for the development of oneself and their employees, they must also promote the transfer of this to another school (Robinson 2012, p. 144), as they thus fulfil the responsibility of returning the whole system reciprocally by networking and sharing the practice. This contributes to the overall well-being.

The goals for school co-operation can be different – improvement of schools, enhancement of different capabilities and resource sharing (Muijs et al., 2011). Studies (CUREE, 2005, Chapman & Allen, 2005, Hadfield, 2007, Muijs, 2008, Ainscow, 2012) show that co-operation and networking have a positive influence on:

- students and teachers,
- school improvement,
- specific groups (for example: children with special needs),
- the achievements of the students.

Muijs (2008) has proven that special forms of co-operation and networking can influence the achievements of students when a stronger school pairs up with a weaker one.

For a successful network it is important (Duffy, Gallagher, 2016; Muijs 2015; Muijs & Romyantseva, 2013; Muijs et al., 2011):

- to understand the context of schools involved,
- to have clear goals and tasks,

- to find the right partner school,
- to establish clear communication,
- to create trust,
- to share leadership/guidance,
- to increase expectations,
- to gain the ability to manage changes,
- to have the capability to co-operate and improve,
- to take care of professional development,
- to be aware of the time limitations,
- and to define the conclusion of the co-operation.

Networks allow schools to learn from each other and at the same time they can be creative and innovative. And just this is in the school field, which is dynamic, diverse, has no clearly established and measurable results or outputs, a big advantage. Schools can co-shape improvements in networks based on their needs in the context, in contrary with the classic pre-prepared programs of education and training that in certain contexts do not work (Datnow & Hubbard & Mehan, 2002 in Muijs et al., 2011, p. 5). And the mere fact that networks co-shape their own solutions and do not perform externally developed programmes, leads to an active development of knowledge and with it effective learning. In various studies it is clear that cooperative learning basically enhances the schools capacity (Chapman & Allen 2005), helps previously isolated schools (Harris et al., 2005) and can be an efficient means for the exchange of good practise (Harris, 2005, Datnow et al. 2002).

According to Muijs and others (2011) there are some contexts in which the co-operation of two schools has a faster influence on the practise of both schools. Authors state that the cases show fast and direct influence on activities which are relatively easy to improve or introduce. However, in order to strengthen the capacity of a school, a different approach is needed because it takes time to introduce such changes.

Nevertheless, networking can be sometimes fragile and does not give the expected results. Also, we have to be careful with the assumption that there can be learning and an easy exchange of capabilities from one school to the other. The school's capacities are contextual and build in a sense that they are located in the people and in culture. (Nootebom, 2004).

Hansen (2002, 67) emphasizes the following setbacks for participation in the network:

- people are not willing to search for contributions outside their own home community,
- people are not willing to share information and help others when asked for,
- it is hard for people to find information and other people,
- people are not able to transfer complex knowledge from one organization to another,
- there are certain reservations for co-operation but we are unable to identify and deal with them inside the organization.

Network co-operation can also fail due to (Muijs et al., 2011):

- no available time for group activities
- the lack of mutual perspectives and understanding
- co-operation which is self-serving
- there are no clear benefits for all participants
- the lack of internal capacities in schools
- the lack of clear objectives

3 Research

The purpose of the research is to evaluate the situation in the field of networking between primary schools and determine what kind of networks exist between schools, which contents, who is networking (headteachers, teachers etc.), how they are networking (in person, through digital tools, social networks). Furthermore we will in-depth evaluate the form of networking which connects a stronger and a weaker school together on a certain field. With the help of the research findings we will develop a model for the form of networking that connects a stronger and a weaker school and defines the possibility to use just that on a system level.

The objectives of the research are:

1. to study the literature in the field of networking in education,
2. to determine the forms and criteria's of networking in education,
3. to research the practise of existing forms of networking in Slovenian schools and their respective content,
4. to research the form of networking stronger and weaker school from the perspective of assessing and assuring quality with self-evaluation (hereinafter AAQ with SE) (the case study),
5. to develop a networking model that connects stronger and weaker schools with the purpose of improving a certain area (conditions, quality indicators),
6. to determine the possibility of networking usage on a system level from the perspective of building capacity for schools for UZK with SE.

Research problem

Research and paradigm of constant improvement among other factors emphasize co-operation at school level and among them the importance of networking to achieve improvements in schools. From this reason we highlight the problem, how to implement among schools and teachers such networking, that will encourage and improve the learning process on all aspects.

Research questions

The empirical part of the study will address the following research questions:

1. What is the practise of networking among Slovenian primary schools (forms, frequency, persons involved, network support etc.)?
2. What is the usefulness of stronger schools in networking with weaker schools for the purpose of progress in a certain field of networking?
3. What are the possibilities of continues usage of networking forms among stronger and weaker schools on a system level?

Hypothesis

Using the quantitative method of data collection we will check the following hypothesis:

1. Co-operation in networks between Slovenian primary schools is frequent, usually guided/managed with the support of public institutions.
2. Existing networks (in primary schools) encourage or build capacity of schools for evaluation.

Research methods

The research will use a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods of gaining data.

For the purpose of establishing the existing practise and determining the degree of the professionalization phenomenom of networking in Slovenian school we will use the quantitative approach and the method of the questionnaire. We shall send the questionnaire to headteachers of all existing primary schools (cca. 450) on their respective school email addresses.

With this method we will gain data for analysis in the SPSS program. We will check the hypothesis using descriptive statistics (frequency distributions, minimum and maximum values, arithmetic core, standard deviation) and inferential statistics (T-test, Chi-square test, Wilcoxonov, Mann-Whitney test).

To answer our research questions we will use qualitative data which we will obtain by case study, inside of which we will use the following methods:

- group interviews (with headteachers of strong and weak schools in the project²)
- document analysis (reports on self-evaluation, records from schools on networking)

In the case study 6 schools will be included – 3 of which will be stronger school on the field of assessing and assuring quality with self-evaluation and 3 weaker schools on the same field. They will

² The author is cooperating in the national project, that includes 32 schools and kindergartens. They cooperate and network on the field of assessing and assuring quality with self-evaluation.

have an 18 months long period of networking, inside of which they have cooperated in all necessarily steps of self-evaluation (in the project).

With the group interview, analysis reports on self-evaluation of the included schools and in between school reflections on networking we will determine the usefulness of this form of networking as a means of progress in the defined area of networking and the potential of further use.

Answers to opened questions from the interview will be encoded and analysed using the Atlas.ti program.

The reports on self-evaluation will be analysed using self-evaluation indicators which were designed and tested for the purpose of external evaluation.³

We will not use the qualitative methods of research to deepen the study of the networking phenomenon in Slovenia but for an in-depth research of a specific form of networking which includes a stronger and a weaker school for improvement in a particular field.

Limitations

Limits to which we will be careful in the research and then in the interpretation are:

- the link between the author and the project through schools that will be included in the case study (objectivity, ability to connect, and simultaneously differentiate from the project),
- awareness of the fact that we are studying only one variable of all effects on school capacity for evaluation, so it will be challenging to identify impact of our variable,
- the qualitative method does not allow generalization.

3. Conclusion

In the area of education and school level, there is not a lot of literature on networking available. Therefore, the findings on the praxis of networking in Slovenian schools will significantly highlight the current practice and the perception of the phenomenon of networking in the school environment. Furthermore the findings from the research of the network, which connects stronger and weaker schools in order to improve a particular field, will give an additional value to national policy decision of using this form of networking at the system level in terms of strengthening the capacity of the schools for evaluation.

³ Brejc, M. (2013). *Zunanje evalvacije: priročnik za zunanje evalvatorje in evalvirane zavode*. 2. eddition. Kranj: Šola za ravnatelje

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