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Learning Schools

Learning schools project

Summary Report

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Covered countries:	BULGARIA, SPAIN, ITALY, TURKEY

1. Introduction

The Learning Schools Project, an Erasmus+ innovation Project developed by educational institutions in Bulgaria, Italy, Turkey and Spain, addresses a problem common in many European countries: the loss of knowledge and experience when teachers retire, or move to different institutions or countries. This loss is often due to a lack of mechanisms or systems necessary for the retention and sharing of knowledge. The aim of this study was to analyse, reflecting on Senge's systems' perspective, how change, innovation and leadership is promoted within schools in these four countries and thus to identify ways to enhance individual, team and organizational learning. The analysis, reflecting the diversity of the cultural, economic and educational contexts of the participants, was to provide us with an overview of the characteristics of schools in each country, their best practices and existing levels of knowledge management. With this overview, we proposed to create a tool with which schools can assess their success as learning communities and plot a course of action to improve.

2. Methodology

The methodology followed was qualitative: grounded theory method which represents a reaction to deductive approaches and permits a different means of analysing social reality. Glaser and Strauss (1967) defined it as an inductive approach, in which immersion in the data provides a starting point for the development of a theory about a phenomenon. Discovering theory from data reverses the established order of first literature review and then data collection. Grounded theory attempts to adapt previous findings to characteristics of the phenomenon under scrutiny. Glaser and Strauss (1967), founders of the grounded theory method, wanted to improve "social scientists' capacities for generating theory that will be relevant to their search" (p. vii). There are several interconnected criteria relating to grounded theory in sociology. It should: permit the prediction and explanation of certain behaviors; be useful for the development of theory in sociological studies; be usable in practical applications and its predictions enable the practitioner to comprehend and control some situations; allow some perspectives on certain behaviors, and

2

finally, guide and instruct on how to carry out research into certain areas of behavior (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The data was collected and analysed using the following methodology. A **literature review** was conducted by each country including an analysis of the roles and recruitment of directors and teachers, innovation in education, teacher training and entrepreneurship. This analysis was carried out at regional, national or international level, depending on the legislation of each country. Each country then conducted between 3 and 5 **case studies** of different school types (public, private, semi-private, rural and urban). In total, 17 schools were studied (3 in Italy, 4 in Spain, 4 in Turkey and 5 in Bulgaria). **Semi-structured interviews** were conducted, based on Senge's systems thinking for learning organizations. Each country interviewed several experts on Education, as well as a number of school principals or boards of directors and teachers. The semi-structured interviews addressed to the experts were based on 4 blocks of questions: knowledge assessment, knowledge gathering, knowledge capturing and synthesis and knowledge sharing. The interviews addressed to the principals and directors were slightly different, dealing with 3 main blocks with subtopics (see annexes I and II).

With the results of the interviews and the case studies each country elaborated a **country report**, describing the situation within each country, as well as their conclusions and preliminary findings. A report summarizing all the findings was then prepared. Each country provided transcripts of the interviews and the case studies in English, so that we were able to create a **code tree** (fig. 1). The code tree shows the issues and themes that arose most frequently in the case studies and the interviews. It is important to mention that new codes were introduced throughout the process in accordance with grounded theory and the inductive characteristic of this methodology.
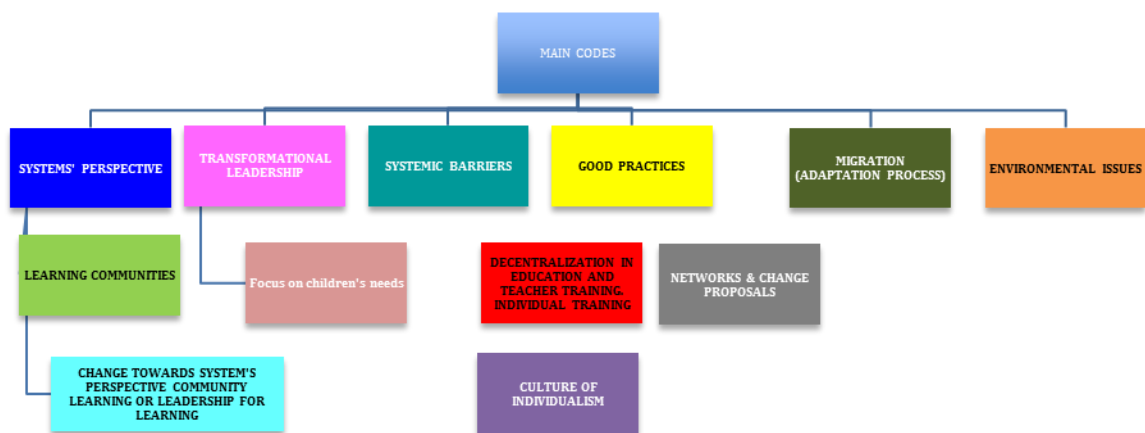
Figure 1. Code Tree.

In total, 1.118 fragments were coded and those appearing most frequently were as follows: learning Communities (16,5%), Systems' perspective (15,83%), Good practices (15,4%), Systemic barriers (14,5%), Leadership: transformational or pedagogical (12,70%), Change towards system's perspective community learning or leadership for learning (11,2%).

Finally, all the partners met to discuss and create a **developmental model of Learning Schools**. A draft has been prepared and the next step will be to create the final version of the model and put it into practice.

3. Key findings

Our main findings from the country reports are as follows. All four countries have undergone and are undergoing recent educational reforms with varying focuses. The main aim of Turkey's Education Vision 2023 is student centred: "to raise science-loving, skilled, and ethical individuals who take an interest in culture and are willing to use present and future skills for the well-being of humanity." There is a broad-ranging school reform in Italy called The Good School (La Buona Scuola, 2015, Law 107/15) which has the aim of improving the quality of state education and enhancing merit- and performance-based nationwide systems. In Bulgaria the 2015 Law on Preschool and School Education repeals all previous acts. Key regulations

currently in force concern vocational education and training; financing of pre-school and school education; the status and professional development of teachers, principals and other pedagogical specialists. The LOMLOE, Organic Law 3/2020 in Spain focuses, among other elements, on "a professional model of leadership that is aligned with European recommendations", involving managing resources and activating pedagogy.

In general, schools in these 4 countries appear to be moving towards a more horizontal organizational culture but these changes are at present not publicly recognised or systematised. There is always a person or a team (principal's team) that has control and makes important decisions. This would seem to indicate a more vertical organizational structure. This may have something to do with the fact that collectivist societies tend to accept and even require a hierarchal organizational culture in relation with work organization (GLOBE project, 2021; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2010). Italy also cites the need to move towards a mature culture of transparency, responsibility and sustainability and, on the other hand, governance toward the principles of management autonomy and resource optimization and performance. Until these factors are addressed, truly transformational leadership and the creation of learning communities is difficult . The recruitment of school directors also needs to be reconsidered in some countries. In Italy, experts recommend that knowledge and teaching experience are not enough, but that directors also require formal training in specific skills required by a changing world where a school director needs to be a cultural, strategic, educational and receptive leader.

In all four countries, teachers in state schools are selected by means of a public selection examination. Schools are involved to varying degrees in the selection process. In Italy and Spain, for example, schools have no power in the recruiting, pay-roll and dismissing of teachers. Schools request not a particular person but just somebody to teach a certain subject, regardless of whether they are personally a good fit for a particular context. In contrast, in Bulgaria the school director, together with a senior subject teacher, plays a part in the selection process and is also involved in teacher contract extension and termination. A lack of school involvement in the recruitment process could be considered a barrier to the formation of effective learning communities and transformational leadership. The number of candidates at each public exam also means that, due to the time available, the exams tend to focus on subject knowledge rather

than 'soft' skills such as communication, problem solving or teamwork for example. In both Bulgaria and Turkey newly appointed teachers have an initial evaluated trial/training period.

Various training programmes provided by government bodies are described and evaluated. Turkey's Teacher Strategy Paper (2017-2023) is a roadmap in the teacher training and development process from 2017 to 2023 and aims to improve teacher quality, development and the perception of the teaching profession. A School Based Professional Development Model (OTMG) has been developed to contribute to personal and professional development of the teachers. The model allows teachers to take on the responsibilities of learning and development by self-assessment based on competencies, and to share and collaborate with their colleagues. One accessible and economical programme is Turkey's cascade training system: leadership training programmes are organized by the national authorities or ministry in which some 'mentor' teachers receive training and then train other teachers at regional and/or local level.

Some dissatisfaction with government professional development programmes is expressed, for example in Spain, tools to assess their effectiveness and degree of implementation are lacking. Bulgaria has a trial period for teachers and compulsory training or 'qualification' courses throughout the teachers' careers. However, according to the country report, these "Qualification programs for teachers are not aligned with the teacher's needs and the school's strategy and purposes. Only 30% of the schools have developed a qualification plan based on research of teacher's needs." In Italy there is no evaluation of directors' or teachers' performance.

It is generally recognized that greater collaboration between schools and universities is required. Educational conferences are seen as key in bringing teachers together and forging ties between tertiary institutions and other education levels. The Turkish Ministry of education for example, arranges for university academics to become academic advisors to schools. Rather than this 'top down' relationship, it would seem necessary to encourage teachers to research their own practice and share their findings with academics. Research methodology should perhaps be included in teacher training programmes, as indeed it already is in some pre-service programmes.

It is generally agreed that training and knowledge sharing within and between schools through networks has more impact than externally imposed programmes, as they can be better

adapted to local conditions and context. Innovation in teaching maps were mentioned in Spain as a means of showing which schools are developing innovative actions, They help to detect needs within a particular region by identifying schools that need to implement educational innovation plans and allow schools to get in touch with each other to share or learn about best practices. In Italy there is a 'visiting' programme in which new teachers visit innovative schools to observe good practices.

The inclusion of students, parents and other stakeholders in decision-making and information-sharing processes is also cited as key to effective learning communities. This is done for example by means of regular online questionnaires, meetings and digital platforms.

Although there appears to be a willingness and a need to share knowledge and to innovate, there are systemic barriers to this. Examples cited are, in the case of Spain for example, on occasion a lack of adequately trained teachers to implement necessary changes, as was evident in the move towards bilingual education which was undertaken in an unsystematic, uninformed manner. The rigidity of the curriculum was also mentioned as hindering change and the implementation of certain innovative practices such as teaching methodologies like Cooperative learning or problem-based learning which require more time than traditional teacher-fronted classes. The focus tends to be on academic results rather than the development of other competences required by fully rounded members of society.

Another reason often given for a lack of effective knowledge sharing, was a lack of time factored in for team meetings and the difficulty of finding time slots convenient for all participants. Most efforts to share knowledge and innovate are not remunerated or programmed as part of the teachers' workload. In many cases 'middle management' or 'mentor' teachers are selected by directors and receive little or no additional time or other incentives to pursue that function. Teachers also commented that there was a lack of description of their functions as coordinator or mentor and that organising and 'ordering' peers to do things, did not come naturally and was not always received well in what has been for many years a vertical structure.

Mentoring of new teachers by more experienced colleagues, retired teachers and ex-directors is often mentioned as a valid team learning and knowledge sharing practice, but it does not appear to be systemic in any of the four countries but is organised at individual school level. Related to

7

this is a repeated reference to teaching being considered an individualistic activity and that teachers are often reluctant to adopt an 'open door' policy. There is little reference to co-teaching practices or to any kind of observation practices, peer or otherwise, although the Bulgarian country report does state that "Open lessons for sharing teaching practices are done on internal and national level".

Effective strategies for learning communities would therefore include the creation of community networks; greater collaboration between schools and universities; The inclusion of students, parents and other stakeholders in decision-making and information-sharing processes; the systematization of knowledge sharing; more time and defined functions for coordinators or mentors; mentoring procedures for new teachers; the implementation of co-teaching and observation protocols; a move towards an increasingly horizontal organizational structure. These and other strategies will be included in the developmental model of learning schools.

4.   Bibliography

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