



Teachers' Networking as a Means to Improve the Quality of Subject Teaching

¹Anna Golubeva, ²Krista Saadoja

¹The Foundation Innove, ²Network of Teachers' Associations (Estonia)

anna.golubeva@innove.ee

Abstract

Teachers' Associations are an important and influential part of the Estonian education system as they constitute the framework within which teachers of different subjects receive the support they require for professional development and for improving the quality of their work.

However, cooperation between associations of different subject teachers is of even greater importance. The interdisciplinary approach in subject teaching is regulated at the national level, as the national curriculum of Estonia says that "integration of different subjects is to be achieved through teaching of the common content in different subject areas, developing of in-school projects, using the interdisciplinary approach in the choice of both content and teaching methods. In order to implement such integration, the Basic school organizes the study process, creates the learning environment, and establishes cooperation between teachers in a way that allows the interdisciplinary approach – i.e. by specifying the competences, setting learning objectives, and analyzing the common problems of different subjects" (the National Curriculum of Estonia 2011: General Part § 5, items 5,6).

In order to deliver the subject content at the required level, it is important for teachers to learn how to cooperate at the professional level first, and then at the level of the classroom. The non-profit organization Network of Estonian Teachers' Associations aims at providing representatives of different teachers' associations with possibilities to discuss problems, exchange experience, and, the most important, find common solutions to raise the quality of subject teaching.

Introduction

Cooperation between teachers is no longer seen as the issue which matters within a particular classroom or school. It is an important aspect of teachers' professional development which has a direct influence on the situation in the classroom, i.e. the quality of teaching. Estonian education pays special attention to support of teachers' cooperation as a means to enhance the quality of education – this is done through emphasizing the importance of the interdisciplinary approach in general education, through raising teachers' qualification, as well as through providing teachers with possibilities for experience exchange and professional coaching.

Legislation is often a starting point in defining importance of a matter. Thus, in Estonia, the interdisciplinary approach in subject teaching is regulated at the national level, with the national curriculum of Estonia stating that "integration of different subjects is to be achieved through teaching of the common content in different subject areas, developing of in-school projects, using the interdisciplinary approach in the choice of both content and teaching methods. In order to implement such integration, the Basic school organizes the study process, creates the learning environment, and establishes cooperation between teachers in a way that allows the interdisciplinary approach – i.e. by specifying the competences, setting learning objectives, and analyzing the common problems of different subjects" [1].

Having the legislation-based grounding for teachers' cooperation, to some extent, makes this joined effort teachers' duty. In order for this responsibility not to actually put teachers off teamwork at different levels, it was also important to offer them possibilities for organizing cooperation and show the benefits of it both for teachers themselves and for the situation in the classroom. This became



possible owing to the project within the ESF programme: “Raising the qualifications of general education teachers 2008-2014”.

The purpose of the ESF programme “Raising the qualifications of general education teachers 2008-2014” is to create conditions that would support the professional development and activity of general education teachers throughout their careers. The programme activities support the professional development of teachers and teachers are involved in developing the field of teacher education through cooperation networks. Thus, the quality of teachers’ primary education and in-service training is improved.

Among its numerous activities, such as standardizing and implementing methods for professional self-evaluation, developing and implementing the consultation system necessary for shaping professional development, and developing and distributing materials needed for applying for teacher certification, the programme also aims at establishing and supporting professional and specialized cooperative networks of teachers. These networks help to spread the best experiences, support methodological and subject-based didactic development activity.

Associations of subject teachers are supported in their activities individually on the basis on continuous or one-time projects, e.g. specialized in-service training, study trip, organization of speciality-based seminars. However, the drawback of such customized and speciality-specific support is narrowing down cooperation of teachers to teamwork within one speciality, which basically does not help integration between subjects. Thus, an umbrella organization, called Network of Estonian Teachers’ Associations was established.

Members of the Network of Estonian Teachers’ Associations are:

- Association of Estonian Biology Teachers
- Association of Estonian Hospital Teachers
- Association of Estonian IT Teachers
- Union of Teachers of Estonian as a Second Language
- Union of Estonian Physical Education
- Union of Estonian Primary School Teachers
- Association of Estonian School Mathematics
- Association of Estonian Handicraft Teachers “Aita”
- Union of Estonian Kindergarten Teachers
- Union of Estonian Technological Education
- Association of Estonian Teachers of Crafts
- Step by Step
- Association of Human Studies
- CLIL Estonia Network
- Estonian Association of Chemistry Teachers
- Estonian Society for Education through Art (EstSEA)
- The Association for Teachers of History and Social Studies in Estonia

The Network is a non-profit organization which is financed by the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research and the ESF programme: “Raising the qualifications of general education teachers 2008-2014”. In order to foster interdisciplinary approach to teachers’ cooperation and their professional development on the whole, the Network organizes all-Estonian seminars for subject teachers called “Cross-associations Cooperation Day”. This day has become a tradition and this March (2014) the Network is organizing the 6th seminar of its kind. However, the first all-Estonia days of pedagogical cooperation were the ones that allowed to establish the tradition and make teamwork of different subject teachers the matter that is now taken for granted.

The first three “Cross-associations Cooperation Days” were held in 2012: in March, August, and in November. The structure of the seminar became clear from the very first event: participants are members of different teachers’ associations which introduce their pedagogical activities and share



methodologies through the prism of the seminar topic. Working teachers make presentations and lead workshops. Another tradition is the display consisting of posters/works of teachers and students/study materials presented by different associations.

The first seminars did not only establish the traditions but, as they were dedicated to the most current topics of nowadays pedagogy, helped the participants to create common understanding of these issues and their aspects. Shared visions are an important basis for sustainable cooperation. On the other hand, they play an important role in the choice of teaching methods and aids allowing to unify the models teachers of different subjects apply all over the country.

The topic of the first seminar in March was “Assessment and Assessment Models”. Teachers-participants introduced assessment models they use on the daily basis and exchanged practical experience. The choice of workshop topics was wide: “Subject Integration and Assessment”, “Assessment of Practical Tasks in Research Education”, “Creative Work in Human Studies”, “Assessment of Children with SEN in Technology Lesson”, etc.

The second “Cross-associations Cooperation Day” held in August was organized in an outdoor tourist centre and attracted over 100 teachers-participants. The topic of the day was “Interdisciplinary Approach in Subject Teaching”. Teachers introduced their experience of cooperation with colleagues and made presentations about ways to integrate Mathematics and Art, Nature Science and Local Lore, and organization of School Olympic Games.

The third seminar took the Network and the issue of teachers’ cooperation to a new level – that of the international expertise. The day was dedicated to innovations in teaching and was divided into two topics – CLIL as the innovation in teaching methodologies and the use of information technology in education. Presenters included international experts Fabrizio Maggi (Italy) and Natalia Maldonado Martin (Spain) as well as local teachers.[2]

“Cross-associations Cooperation” seminars are gaining popularity, and the number of their participants, as well members of teachers’ associations is constantly growing. What is more important, is, as participants’ feedback shows, the gained experience and knowledge and the new skills they acquired have helped them to become better and more efficient subject teachers.

References

[1] National Curriculum of Estonia 2011: General Part § 5, items 5,6. Available at www.oppekava.ee

[2] Newsletter of Network of Teachers’ Associations. Available at www.ekk.edu.ee/opetajale/puuk220312