



Umbrella Organisation of Teachers' Subject Networks and Continuous Professional Development, Innovation at the Grassroots Level

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Abstract

Umbrella organisation of teachers' subject networks is trying to find the best practices in Estonian schools and present them in conferences to representatives of subject teachers' networks, using bottom-up approaches to balance existing top-down practices. All good ideas, what to do in the classroom are certainly not yet invented. We should give the ideas and inspiration the opportunity to spread and adapt. Different teachers need different ideas. At the same time umbrella organisation, is trying to spread evidence-based and scientifically proved ideas from other countries, for example ideas of Dylan William and John Hattie, Andy Hargreaves and Guy Claxton. For the same purpose quarterly bulletins and conferences are used. The bulletin also informs members about meetings and trips of different subject teachers' networks. Umbrella organisation organises competitions in order to find good ideas to foster teacher cooperation and the best of them get financing. To help the spread of new ideas we also organise programs for school teams and school heads. The project started as ESF programme "Raising the qualifications of general education teachers 2008 – 2014 and continues, based on national financing. The aim of the programme is to create conditions that support the professional development and other activities of general education teachers throughout their careers, support school principals and other staff.

1. Introduction

There is certainly plenty of room for new inventions and we can be sure: the best inventions are yet to be found. We can not only use top-down approaches in teachers' continuous professional development but also try to balance it with bottom-up approaches. We should generate space for exchange and adaptation of creative ideas to be used at schools. Best ideas survive and not so good disappear. If somebody has invented something interesting, that has improved learning, there is a great likelihood that others would like to try it as well. It is highly probable that in other circumstances it would work even better. During the infection process ideas mutate and adapt. An umbrella organisation of subject teachers' network appeared for this infection process [1]. Institutions resemble organisms. They are part of an ecosystem that lives their own life and influences others.

2. Subject teachers' networks activities

Estonia has a long tradition of subject teachers' networks. Often these networks operate, based on their own membership fees and donations. Occasionally they get government support, but there are always more good ideas than resources to implement them. We have been able to find additional ESF financing for this activity and using these funds supported to create even some completely new teachers networks what did not existed previously, for example primary teachers and hospital teachers networks.

Bottom-up approaches are needed as teachers work in different environments and they themselves are different. They are interested in different solutions and practices. One size fits all top-down type of trainings should be complemented with bottom-up approaches. We are like an additional resource to the usual good school environment where younger teacher can learn. We are like nation-wide innovation environment.

3. School heads and school teams programs

School heads should be aware of new teaching practices, know how to spread these practices in their schools and have attention on student's academic achievement, character development and learning to learn. They need the knowledge on how to adapt to globalisation and technological development in their specific circumstances, so that their students are prepared for the future challenges. School



heads should be able to give challenging goals to teachers, should know how to activate and scaffold students better.

School is not considered good because it has been able to get the best teachers and students but because it has good school climate which provides good growth environment to everybody to strengthen their life-long learning “muscles”. We can assist to improve school environments.

In facilitating the sharing of school heads practices, we try to assist them to see better existing and future challenges and spread their enthusiasm in dealing with it. Attention should be on the whole school environment, not only on single school members. That is the reason why we often run programmes for larger school teams. So that after going home they are right away able to implement new experiences. Teachers and school heads, who work in isolation and do not know what is going on in other schools, are less effective.

Practice does not replace theoretical preparation. Knowledge of theories gives depth for making decisions. Practical experiences are needed to apply knowledge more promptly. The best way to study is to have reflexive practices in teachers’ professional communities. School heads should provide challenges for teacher development. At the same time you can not replace enthusiasm with experience. Teachers are supposed to be intellectuals, not customer service. Teachers should have researchers’ attitude to their everyday practice and this all should be supported by school climate.

Our conferences have clear goals and use feedback questionnaires. If everything does not go well, we are able to notice it and do better next time. Often the same best practices are presented at different subject teachers’ gatherings and in dialogue with the audience they are adapting to different new circumstances.

4. Where do all these good ideas come from?

Teachers’ small professional community as self-help group idea for changing teachers’ habits was already brought up by Dylan William [2] to support introduction of formative assessment. He noticed that usually teachers’ skills were improving very slowly. Teachers often rely on experience that they got when they studied at school. Not as much on the theoretical knowledge from the university. Applying university knowledge means challenging oneself, making mistakes and changing habits. Teachers need time, space and support. One should move with small steps, supporting and inspiring each other to change established routines. John Hattie recommends that one should learn to know his or her students better and one should have flexible presentations of subject knowledge to adapt presentations of subject spontaneously to different students [3].

We got a lot of inspiration from Sir Ken Robinson inspiring speeches [4] about creativity and importance of bottom-up approaches. Education is not like a system, that you can fix, but more like a living and adaptable organisms in ecosystem. Teacher’ networks are important for creativity, inventing new ideas, trying them out and spreading them in their community. If teachers feel that they are owners of their inventions, they are more inspired to apply them. Creativity and adaptability are the core of lifelong learning.

Teachers’ professional community idea has been supported by Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan ideas on teachers’ professional capital [5]. Future of learning depends on the future of teaching.

5. Conclusion

Most of the ideas we have yet to invent and implement them in collaboration. We can not only rely on ideas what are working somewhere else. Teachers’ competence and teachers’ professional communities are certainly more important than curriculum, assessment or digital tools. We need that to be ready for tomorrow, when everybody is everybody’s teacher.

References

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