

Piloting school self-evaluation practices

Milan Pol, Masaryk University in Brno, the Czech Republic

Jana Vašátková, Palacky University in Olomouc, the Czech Republic

This paper informs about the Czech involvement in the project “Bridges across Boundaries...”. Mission statement, main forms of work and also more detailed information on one participating school’s relevant activities are paid attention to. Authors emphasise richness and usefulness of project activities, enthusiasm of those involved, achievements reached by now. In general, they find the Czech participation in the project beneficiary.

Why does the Czech team consider the project *Bridges across Boundaries, Cross-disseminating quality development practices in Southern and Eastern Europe*”¹ as important? It has general characteristics of other projects (there is a plan of activities, meetings, conferences etc.) and above all it is its topic “school self-evaluation”, its idea of knowledge and practical experiences dissemination that can have a great impact on the future work of Czech schools.

The issue of the project is highly important as yet the concept of self-evaluation in institutions at primary and secondary level is not well known in the Czech Republic. The external evaluation needs to be balanced with support and the internal effort to perform in a better way. School self-evaluation brings new dimension into the work of Czech schools and is gradually becoming an integral part of their future development. As for Czech schools, the issue of the project is highly important because as yet the concept of self-evaluation is not well known.

It is obvious that the immediate impact of the project will systematically lead and support schools’ self-evaluation efforts. However, perhaps a more far reaching effect of this project will be through a translation of the book *Self-Evaluation in European Schools: a story of change*, thus making it accessible to those people who are not well versed in languages of English and German. Its rationale and the tools are something that Czech school may really welcome as there is nothing like this available at the moment.

No self-evaluation can be successful without critical friends that is why a relationship of support and critique through critical friendship in the project ensues between the Czech Republic and Greece; on national level among Czech coordinators and schools and also schools involved in the project. Besides, we keep close contact with Slovak and in certain degree Hungarian and Polish colleagues. This concept of “critical friends” is again quite new to Czech schools as well (on formal level, informally of course head teachers, teachers mutually helped each other but not continuously and systematically etc.). From the above mentioned summary it is apparent why we set the **Czech team – mission statement** as follows:

1. to help Czech schools to overcome fear and uncertainty from self-evaluation processes and to help them to understand its pros,
2. to support the practice of self-evaluation in schools which is rather at its beginning in the Czech Republic,

¹A two-year project within Socrates; Accompanying Measures, Socrates Action 8.

3. to translate the book into Czech language that will serve as a possible tool for self-evaluation,
4. to establish critical friends in Czech context
5. to realize critical friendship not only within our state but across borders as well. This means to exchange experiences among schools in particular but among other institutions as well,
6. to organize a national conference, which will strengthen the dissemination of ideas,
7. to disseminate the ideas and experience from self-evaluation not only through web pages but by publishing articles in press (in Czech specialized journals) as well.

Schools involved

There are seven schools fully involved in the project, among them three basic schools, one secondary general (grammar) schools, three vocational schools. They are located across a large area of Moravia, one of them is from eastern Bohemia part. Schools are participating on voluntary bases, which means that they want to learn; they want to improve things. Some of the school teams have already had some experience with self-evaluation, and in those cases (two cases) one can see the difference in a current level of progress. However, the most important is that they all ask questions and in teams at school look for possible answers.

At the beginning schools were supplied with Czech version of the crucial parts of the book (concerning SEP and its use, instruments etc.). Seven schools involved means that there are seven different ways of putting self-evaluation processes into practise. Schools use a large variety of self-evaluation methods, focus on different issues and involve different stakeholders. They need to adopt and in many cases even develop new approaches, instrument appropriate for Czech culture and their own possibilities and needs, which is rather time consuming. The quality of involvement and enthusiasm of school teams are remarkable, so is the interaction of co-ordinating team and schools. Internal feedback is very positive from both sides.

The way we cooperate

The whole team of Czech co-ordinators meets with the schools teams together once in 4-5 week, usually for a half day meeting. We all have agreed on regular meetings not only because of the great distance (geographical one) among schools but rather because we wanted to help them to create self-supporting system of school cooperation that could last even after the end of the project. These meetings are very useful as all the schools` needs can be discussed in a detailed way in an environment of trust, without any threat. Moreover, information or experiences are shared, counseling and even methodological support is provided.

The Greek critical friend (Georg Bakagis, University of Patras) attended one meeting of all the schools, which was very helpful and also motivating for the Czech schools. Next one will be attended by one of distinguished Czech experts on the topic of self-evaluation. The reason of the latter is networking of the initiative with soon-to-come national-wide activities (could also be seen as a part of dissemination). Challenges that Czech schools are facing in the project and that are also discussed during the meetings are as follows:

- tendency „to solve the whole world” especially at the beginning of the project,
- finding the meaningful areas or activities,

- skills to process and interpret the data,
- expectations of pupils and teachers raised very high,
- possible danger of „overwhelming“ everybody in the school,
- lack of time
- ...

Besides these meetings, schools get individual supervision and counseling type of assistance. These individual talks and school site visits are highly appreciated. In the course of time several problematic areas have occurred nearly in every school. They could be characterized as for example:

- where and how to find *critical friend* for schools in the future (in the whole system there is no consultancy available for the schools at the moment),
- how *to deal with the results*,
- how to *present the results*,
- what (and how much) should schools *really „say“ to the Czech School inspectorate* about the results, process of self-evaluation,
- where *to get more information* and practical examples of instruments.

Some of them have been to a certain degree solved during the joint meetings, some need more time or external solutions. Through the work in the project we hope to address again at least some of the areas. Nevertheless, schools started to exchange experience and provide support to each other – using also the web site of the project, <http://www.phil.muni.cz/ped/selfeval>, e-mails etc. Positive moments that are visible nowadays (after a few months in the project) can be summarized in the following way.

- increasing mutual cooperation on all school levels and also among schools
- learning more about other people’s opinions (respect, patience etc.),
- disposing of the indifference towards the life in the whole school (not only classrooms),
- being proud of „piloting“ very important issue, of participating in international project.

To get more precise view of the course of the areas for instance basic schools have chosen helps further chart. Schools at the secondary level have chosen more marketing target topics such e.g. why do our students apply just to this schools, what is so special about it etc.

Basic school Olomouc	Quality of learning and teaching School as a learning place
Basic school Ostrava	School as a learning place School and Home
Basic school Moravský Krumlov,	School as a social place

Basic school Ostrava

A case study that is now being presented should describe the course of work in the first half of the project at one basic school. This school is one of the largest in its town – it has

830 pupils and 45 teachers. A new headteacher came to this school 4 years ago and things slowly started to change. Teachers welcomed changes in communication; school rules were accustomed more to teachers' and children's needs. Teachers of this school are very enthusiastic and willing to try new things in order to improve their work. Nowadays this school regarded as a prestigious one. Its main focus is in developing sport activities, basketball in particular. That is one of the reasons why this school doesn't have problems with the lack of children, on contrary. Due to the fact that the range of after school activities is really wide, it is strengthening its reputation.

At the beginning of the project there was one important question to be answered, which was "*What exactly does the school want to address in all the activities to come?*". A critical friend - the project coordinator came to the school and attended the meeting of teachers and the management of the school (eight people were present at this first joint meeting). Discussions about the area for "proper" self-evaluation were underpinned by openness and willingness to listen to each other. Crucial was the fact that a school provides a lot of various activities for children, parents and the community. However, parents are seen as rather passive by the members of the school. Parents come to various events but they are not really involved. Second big issue was workload for children. As majority of the pupils are actively involved in sports, go to trainings, matches, teachers sometimes wonder if they have time to learn at all. In the end, these were the main reasons for the choice of the following areas: ***School and Home, Time as a resource for learning.***

Initiative group was set up, deputy head was chosen to be the leader. More and more people attended following meetings (nowadays there are about 30 teachers involved, in a rather intensive way) and discussions how to deal with the chosen topic took place both formally and informally. A lot of other activities throughout the whole school started in order to actively involve pupils and even parents. A proper plan with deadlines for all activities was created, which was found very useful later on. The initiative group has split into two parts, each of them dealing with one topic in a more detailed way using different approaches and methods. The aim is to switch topic, activities after couple of months and to learn from each other experiences.

Teachers started to develop their own instruments so that they could ask relevant questions parents, pupils and themselves. Some of them were designed with the help of parents and pupils. Before using any, initiative group met together with the project coordinator and management of the school and discussed question by question. Then a pre-research was done and only later on were the instruments really used to address every single stakeholder of the school. List of concrete instruments follows:

- *questionnaire for parents* („How to understand each other better“),
- *10 parents kept diary for a week* („I wonder how my child spends time after school“),
- *questionnaire for teachers* („How to understand each other better“),
- *document analysis by teachers* (Do we know our pupils?“, our parents?),
- *log /self-observation by teachers* („How do I spend time in the classroom?“),
- *drawings by pupils* („How I spend time during the breaks in the school“),
- *questionnaires for pupils* („Time to learn, time to rest“),
- *essays by pupils, taking photos by pupils,*
- *portfolios by pupils.*

This list indicates the range of activities that lead into data collection by the above mentioned instruments, first analysis and discussions about the results took place too. However, it also suggest that too many activities were planned. Everything resulted in too high workload on teachers in particular (they lacked time). Very helpful was getting the

feedback from pupils and parents. The level of students` responsibility while answering various questions, writing essays, taking pictures surprised teachers. When they analysed the gained data, they even got the chance to laugh, to relax and to learn more about one another. This brought them feeling that the work they have done was worth it and motivated them, proved them that they are on the right way to improve the school life. Next few months will maybe help them to make further steps .

Conclusion

We have already come across several projects. Yet the project “Bridges across Boundaries” is positively remarkable in some respects. It brought together real enthusiasts about the school self-evaluation and they get along well. It is piloting the mechanisms which will very soon have to be adopted (and adapted) by all schools in the country. If everything goes as good as in piloting schools, we should not really be worried about the Czech school development.