

Bi-lateral meeting and joint evaluation of the fitness and impact of the Draft Methodological Framework in the Hungarian Educational context.

As we had suspected, from our research into and our previous knowledge of the educational system current across Hungary, many of the pre-cursors necessary to promote and sustain the acceptance and practice of collaborative learning as ingrained in the Framework are missing.

This is, in our opinion, on 5 important levels broadly split as follows: -

Central Control and Management

- the requirements of the national framework, its implementation and management by governmental departments and policy makers.
- the subsequent knock-on effect of this central control on the descending levels of management in the regional, local and individual institutional context.
- The requirements of inputs and outcomes arising from the criteria set by the above leave little opportunity for autonomy on the part of heads of educational establishments and consequently their staff

Curricular Requirements

- Emphasis placed on specific subjects
- Controlled timetables

Cultural Factors

- little or no ethos of sharing or co-operating
- ingrained suspicion of outside scrutiny,
- past history of not deviating from centrally imposed norms
- there are few or no organised educational agencies promoting or supporting different ways of thinking and acting in teaching and learning

Attitudes

- teachers regard their classrooms as their 'kingdom'
- reluctance to let others see what they are doing
- fear of being found wanting 'found out'
- no ethos or experience of 'sharing'
- incredulity at the notion they should share their educational ideas and practices with others
- set-ways of preparing and teaching lessons – tend to teach as they were taught
- managers favour top-down control, showing reluctance to deviate from the accepted norms

Knowledge

- although preparation courses for new teachers are introducing new ideas and practices, on taking up a post beginning teachers are initiated into the

prevailing culture of the schools and face difficulties in putting their learning into practice

- many of the concepts, categories and criteria used in the language employed in DMF are not recognised or understood by the educators in Hungary
- teachers on the whole have no experience of ‘co-operation’ and fear the concept will show up their in-aptitudes
- educationally collaborative learning is an ‘unknown’ to them.

As a result there was no whole school involvement in the pilot programme with direct EFFeCT project immediate contact with teachers. This was a negative aspect in trying to assess the present draft MF for use in the Hungarian context.

Positive Opportunities to gauge necessary amendments to the DMF and its future use in developing the climate to foster Collaborative Learning do however exist

How we came to believe this possible

Having outlined the general picture above, it can be seen our Hungarian Colleagues in planning for their pilot project were left with a larger dilemma over whom to approach as participants in the Evaluation than some. Institutions with a history of progress towards partnership, co-operation and/or collaboration appear not to exist or be willing to take part in the pilot programme.

Consequently they decided to address this dilemma by acquiring the consent of two existing agencies who have a background in taking part in some of the activities pursuant to the development of collaborative learning. These are of long standing. They are “DIA, the X-labour” and “Partners Hungary, Step by Step collaboration” (a detailed description of their ethos, beliefs and practices that illustrates their connection to the objectives of the DMF can be found in the Hungarian Pilot Project evaluation on Trello). Each group had around 35 members. X-labour in particular provided the measure of freedom, joint planning and setting of different personal goals that appeared to provide a fertile opportunity for the development of collaborative learning.

Additionally TEMPUS set up under their own auspices a project with the use of ICT in the classroom as its focus point “TPF – creative use of ICT tools in pedagogy”. Their group of teachers, all involved or responsible for the development of how to use ICT as an impetus and aid to learning in the classroom, were, as in the other two constituencies draw from a range of types and sizes of institutions providing education. Most did not know one-another or had met before; there were a few instances of a pair from the same establishment being part of the group but this was not the norm. The participants had not been introduced to the draft methodological framework and were therefore not familiar with its contents. Data gathering of their opinions of its use in their context were not therefore possible,

Our views of potential development were gained on our joint reflection following taking part in the discussions after the presentations given by DIA, SbS & TPF and observing, note taking, and joining in one of the whole-day training sessions with TPF. This latter session included our running a ‘play session’ through the use of a board game of chance designed specifically to introduce stages in co-operation and collaboration and promote in-team discussion (posted on Trello). We also gave the

participants a run-down on what Irish teachers saw as steps on the journey to Collaborative Learning. The contents/design of this game arose from the Irish Workshop and addressed qualities/categories recognised by the Irish teachers as being those essential parts of Collaborative Learning that they had found reflected in the DMF during their scrutiny and evaluation of it in the Irish Workshop. The workshop in Ireland targeted the levels of 'fit' or possibilities of modification of the DMF to the Irish Context, (a description and analysis of this workshop and its findings will be posted on Trello and included in a report at the conference in Latvia if requested).

The use of the game in Budapest included playing alongside the participants, answering queries as they arose about concepts and language sparked off by their analysis of the meaning and possible consequences of the situations arising in the board game. (Materials were translated into Hungarian and simultaneous translation was provided).

We also had in-depth conversations with the group leaders, the External Examiner and subsequently feedback sessions and discussion with the Hungarian team of colleagues.

Our conclusions following the bi-lateral visit

These were reached as a result of analysing the contents and practices of the three programmes, discussions with the programme leaders and from observations of the conduct and conversations of teachers in their working groups in TPF and dialogue with individual teacher members of the working groups.

Some of Positive points and reasons for holding these

Attitudinal

The 3 pilot partners recognition that their greatest difficulty was that their group of teachers had no knowledge of the terminology or meaning behind cooperation and therefore an introduction to the process and content of cooperation was what they had to do first.

This was done by 'practicing what they preached': adopting a democratic approach, surveying for needs and wishes, provoking and enabling debate, using tools that fostered cooperation, exchange and joint planning, setting personal goals etc.

Members of their groups said they liked to opportunity to learn new methods and techniques that worked well in the classroom.

Evidence of experiential learning and teaching was shown in the evaluation process.

This showed that some pockets of development were possible and the attitudes of teachers could be changed given nurturing circumstances.

Moral challenges were also ventured as possible attitude changers by the participants

Practice

Group working using innovative methods and contents, firstly supplied by the leader and later generated by and through paired and group self-made and sourced materials, showed that individuals were prepared to initially use the ideas of others and after some confidence had been gained, to try out and share items that had been successful for them.

This however was counter-balanced in some instances of individuals being very ready to download materials, but reluctant to upload their own.

In the 'participation audit' tools used in the observation of members of the TPF pilot group, in 3 of the groups involved, all members took some part, offering opinions, suggesting solutions, querying others' contributions; praising ideas. In one group all but one participant took an active part, and only on one occasion did a single individual dominate the group. This would suggest that some sort of co-operative planning does take place.

It was interesting to note that these discussions featured items with a concrete outcome.

Knowledge of MF categories/concepts

The strongest indication of covert knowledge and use of some of the items essential to developing collaborative learning were seen whilst playing the game of chance based on the Irish teachers 'essential attributes/attitudes' (this involved 'landing' on squares where a positive or negative aspect connected to CL was written). Here in discussing the meaning, understanding and use of the statement, the teachers demonstrated by their actions and words that they were 'doing' CL things they did not recognise as such.

Actions

The sharing, deferring, accepting, challenging and praising whilst working on a common solution or coming to a generally acceptable definition within the group sessions, were further illustrations of curiosity, reflection, attitude change and willingness to try something new that underpin the development towards collaborative learning.

Commitment

Discussion about what went on in their respective schools indicated that there were a few pockets of what would be regarded as co-operation going on in Hungarian schools. This however was not the 'norm'; most teachers stressed the isolated nature of their practice and expressed reluctance and fear of sharing experiences with others. They also cited 'Time' as a justification for their not venturing into new territory. Few had any deep knowledge of recent research in the area. In discussing the academic language 'titles' of the ideas/processes encapsulated in the game of chance, there were a variety of positions expressed, from 'that would not possible in my school' to 'that's what I do' and the fact that it had up till now been unrecognised by them. All agreed they would be willing to try something different if it had been successful in the classroom for someone else. This tied in with the pilot group leaders comment about the willingness to download materials but reluctance to upload their own. It also, opens in our opinion a route into collaborative learning in the Hungarian context. 'Tips for teachers' may not be our ideal, but could be a pathway to further development.

Motivation

Having access to techniques/tricks that work well gave, in the opinion of the pilot group leaders, motivation to try something different and experimental learning and teaching, a point echoed in our discussions with the members of TPF.

Provision of 'learning apps' act as a stimulus to take part and should be increased. As 'given' at first and then self-produced as part of a learning assignment during the course as motives/enablers/bribes to professional development.

Negative Points and some possible changes to the DMF to alleviate these.

Language in the DMF

This needs either to be formulated in ‘teacher register’ or to have a comprehensive glossary of a common understanding of terms used with concrete examples of illustrative examples.

Pace

One size does not fit all. The effect of ‘Contextual’ aspects was underestimated in the formulation of the DMF. The developed versions needs to take into account the teachers knowledge, comfort with the concepts and subsequent knock on experiences, both attitudinal and practical of working towards collaborative learning. This needs to be addressed at a ‘management’ as well as ‘classroom teacher’ level. A stepped programme, with supporting material including verbatim/real life examples echoing managers and teachers needs and concerns should be part of any subsequent version of a methodological framework.

Support

Pre- ‘collaboration training’ should be supplied for managers/leaders/mentors etc. within schools/groups working towards collaborative learning.

Within the stepped Framework, practical support materials at each stage, covering underpinning factors at both practice and theoretical levels needs to be provided either as part of a comprehensive portfolio of resources, or as elective ‘add-ons’.

Opportunity

In some contexts the freedom to experiment and even fail is not part of the accepted culture.

This suggests the EFFeCT project needs to engage more fully with the policy makers and senior managers without whose support, bottom-up development is unlikely to take place.

Material aimed specifically at this cadre, explaining, describing and selling the benefits of the development of CL to them and their education systems capacity to improve teacher performance and thus pupil learning could be a major asset.

Embeddedness

Is not there, not surprisingly given the described context of Education in Hungary, except in a section of a couple of schools whose teacher/s were part of the 3 project groups used by the Tempus Foundation in their DMF pilot.

It is with these subgroups that Tempus should now make direct contact with schools to seed the incorporation of Collaborative Learning into the basis of teaching and learning in schools.

Conclusions on the Tempus Foundation piloting of the DMF.

The initial objective of the pilot was to assess the suitability of the present draft of the framework or its adaptation to Hungarian education, teachers and schools. The only

obvious result seems to be that it needs considerable additions and amendment before it can be of major use as a template for development.

Unable to form partnerships with any schools or whole staff directly the Tempus Foundation chose to use two on-going established groups who mirrored in their approach, beliefs and actions some if not all of the categories etc. of the MF. They also set up a group of their own with a specific focus. This ensured that, although a new working group, the teachers all had one thing in common, in this case ICT. By adopting teaching methods that encapsulated the mores of CL they in effect set up a programme that would introduce the concepts in practice. This together with the cooperative centred approach practiced over the years in the other two groups, has ensured, as we have observed, exposure at least to some of the principles and objectives of CL as set out in the methodological framework have been aired and to some extent absorbed. They are to be lauded for making the best of a very difficult if not impossible context in which to work.

A positive step forward to taking the principles of CL into schools and engaging practising teachers could now be made. By contacting the leaders of the three groups and setting up a meeting with those teachers whose managers support and/or colleagues are already involved in cooperative and in some cases collaborative learning, a movement towards enabling working teachers to grasp CL is possible. The leaders of the pilot groups know who these pivotal people are. At least one is the head of a school and others work in a collaborative way with some of the other teachers in their school. This encompasses subject areas, planning and delivering. We would strongly urge Tempus Foundation to take this next step.