

DEVELOPING TEACHER EDUCATION POLICIES THROUGH PEER LEARNING

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As part of the European agenda on Education & Training 2010 the European Commission has established a number of Clusters to facilitate peer learning between European member states. Within these Clusters, peer learning activities are organized where representatives from member states exchange examples of good policy practice and explore the implications of the EU's ambitions for new education policies.

One of these Clusters is the Cluster Teachers & Trainers, which has organized peer learning activities on a variety of topics concerning teachers and teacher education: continuous professional development; schools as learning communities; school leadership; preparing teachers (and student teachers) to teach in culturally diverse classroom settings; partnership between VET schools and companies; relations between schools and teacher education institutes. From these peer learning activities policy recommendations are derived that can support ministries in member states to improve their policies on teachers and teacher education.

In our paper we present a synthesis of the work of the Cluster Teachers & Trainers after two years of experience. Bridging the different peer learning activities and reports, we will investigate the outcomes and effectiveness of the peer learning activities.

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The context for peer learning on teacher education policies: Education & Training 2010

In the year 2000 the Council of the European Union announced its ambition to become 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion'.

To achieve this ambitious goal, it is necessary to invest in the quality of education. Therefore, in 2001 the Council identified concrete future objectives of education and training systems (European Council, 2001). In these objectives, three major goals were emphasized:

- to improve the quality and effectiveness of EU education and training systems;
- to ensure that they are accessible to all;
- to open up education and training to the wider world.

To achieve these goals, the Ministers of education of the member states of the European Union agreed on a detailed work programme Education & Training 2010 with thirteen specific objectives (European Council, 2002). Education systems in the member states have to improve on a variety of areas: teacher quality and teacher education; basic skills; integration of Information and Communication Technologies; efficiency of investments; language learning; lifelong guidance; flexibility of the systems to make learning accessible to all, mobility, citizenship education, etc.

With respect to the objective concerning teachers and teacher training, the work programme identifies four key issues:

- 1 Identifying the skills that teachers and trainers should have, given their changing roles in knowledge society;
- 2 Providing the conditions which adequately support teachers and trainers as they respond to the challenges of the knowledge society, including through initial and in-service training in the perspective of lifelong learning;
- 3 Securing a sufficient level of entry to the teaching profession, across all subjects and levels, as well as providing for the long-term needs of the profession by making teaching and training even more attractive;
- 4 Attracting recruits to teaching and training who have professional experience in other fields.

The open method of co-ordination

Although the ambitions of the European Union with respect to education are high, the authority of the European Council with respect to education is limited as it has no legislative authority in the field of education. Therefore the realization of the work programme Education & Training 2010 is in the hands of the individual member states. However, the European Council and the European Commission still have a number of policy tools to support the work programme. These tools are part of the so called 'open method of co-ordination'.

The Open Method of Co-ordination (OMC) is a way of co-ordinating and stimulating policy development at national levels. The OMC starts with defining shared goals and timetables for reaching these goals, followed by the definition of qualitative and quantitative indicators and benchmarks, development of national policy plans with targets, sharing of national experiences through peer learning and peer review and finally periodic monitoring and evaluation, both on a national and a European level (Presidency Conclusions, point 37, European Council, Lisbon 23–24 March 2000).

The OMC is seen as a soft law mechanism, based on the voluntary co-operation of the member states, as no sanctions are involved.

The OMC has several characteristics:

- normative: by setting specific targets and by defining indicators that can be used as benchmarks, a normative framework is created;
- oriented on mutual learning: through exchange of policy examples and good and bad experiences and through the shared discussion of existing dilemmas, mutual learning is stimulated;
- competitive: through benchmarks and rankings, member states tend to compare their performance with performances of other member states. No country wants to end up at

- the end of a ranking list. On the other hand, (economic) competitiveness between member states can frustrate processes of peer learning when countries are reluctant to share their policy practices, in order to protect their leading position;
- quantitative: to develop effective benchmarks and monitor instruments, indicators need to focus on clearly defined and easy to measure quantitative outcomes.

Within the work programme Education & Training 2010, the Open Method of Co-ordination is used as the main instrument for policy development.

In the work programme the goals, timetable and indicators are defined; through benchmarks the development of these indicators are monitored and evaluated on a two yearly base (see for example European Commission, 2004) and peer learning between member states is stimulated through peer learning activities focusing on specific topics within the overall Education & Training 2010 work programme.

Policy development through Peer Learning

Within the context of the Education & Training 2010 work programme, peer learning is seen as a process of cooperation at a European level whereby both policy makers and practitioners from one country learn, through direct contact and practical cooperation, from the experiences of their counterparts elsewhere in Europe in implementing reforms in areas of shared interest and concern. Around some of the objectives of the work programme, the Commission has created Clusters of representatives from member states that are interested in that specific theme. A Cluster consists of representatives from countries that have a vested interest in that specific objective and have expressed a desire to learn from other interested countries, or to share with others their successful or unsuccessful experiences. This peer learning is facilitated by peer learning activities (PLAs), thematic working conferences where specific policy issues are discussed through presentations of policy examples from the host country and other countries. Visits to relevant locations which give an insight into the particular policy theme are often part of those working conferences.

Aim of the peer learning activities are (European Commission, 2006):

- to develop a common understanding of success factors for the improvement of policy-making and the implementation of reform;
- to identify and disseminate key conclusions which can be fed into policy-making and implementation at the national level and European level.

In general, PLAs are small scale working sessions of four days with two representatives from each Cluster country that decides to join that specific PLA: one represents the policy level, who should be able to address the critical factors for policy development, and one is from the operational level, who is expected to address the critical factors for implementation.

During the Cluster meetings the PLAs are prepared, the outcomes are discussed and the impact of PLAs on national policy making is shared.

Summary of the five PLAs

Within the Cluster Teachers & Trainers, 21 countries are represented¹. The cluster started in April 2005 and five peer learning activities have been organized²:

The selection of the topics for the PLAs was based on their relevance for the participating countries and on the willingness of a host country to organize a PLA on that specific topic.

Continuous Professional Development for Teachers and Trainers

The first PLA of the Cluster 'Teachers and Trainers' was held in Dublin, 26- 29 September 2005 and focused on Continuous Professional Development (CPD) of teachers and trainers in the context of lifelong learning.

¹ AT, BE (Fr), BE(NL), CR, CZ, CY, DK, ES, EST, FR, GE, FI, IC, IR, IT, NL, NO, RO, SL, SW, TU

² The reports of the peer learning activities can be found at http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/objectives_en.html#training

Starting from the question of how to improve the quality of teachers in general, members of the PLA wanted among others to concentrate on the following policy related issues:

- existing reform options in the Irish system for CPD
- creating a genuine continuum through initial teacher education, induction and CPD
- facilitating schools to support and empower their staff in the process of lifelong learning and teachers to take greater ownership and responsibility in this endeavour.

The idea of the presented action research project 'Teaching and Learning for the Twenty First Century' (TL21), and the second national project 'Leadership Development for Schools' (LDS) as well, get to the heart of improving classroom teaching, challenging teacher learning by support based on clear vision within the education system. They were linked to induction, subject-based in-service training, mentorship training and qualifications reforms.

Among the PLA participants, there was consensus that the presented policy examples of collaborative teacher learning in cooperation with initial research based actions tend to raise teachers' engagement and personal involvement in becoming aware of their personal needs for further professional development. Reflecting their individual progress at that stage of professional learning also raises their awareness for learner oriented teaching and re-empowers them to intensify their responses to different learner typologies of their students. Attempting to equip future school leaders with management skills as well as the confidence and competence to support change and advance further staff development on one hand and to assist school management to develop positive leadership roles to support teachers in managing their individual change on the other, seemed to promote the idea of a learning community for all involved groups, pupils as well as teachers.

One main policy issue in the final discussion of the PLA referred to the period of induction for novice teachers supported by experienced teachers as mentors. Induction programmes were also understood as highly supportive for teachers re-entering the profession after years, for those changing schools and of course for newly appointed school-leaders. Despite the different national approaches (centralised or de-centralised systems) participants of the PLA found an appropriate balance to meet their own requirements or policy innovation. As it was the first experience of the Cluster T&T with a PLA, several process related issues within a PLA were discussed for consideration in further PLA planning.

Schools as Learning Communities for their Teachers (The Netherlands, May 2006)

In the concluding discussion and reflection on the PLA in Dublin, it had become obvious how the awareness for schools to define themselves as learning organizations can take a decisive effect on teachers' encouragement and motivation to fully engage in their personal professional development. All members of the Cluster agreed that on the way to the learning and knowledge society, school staffs need support to review their own learning culture, while at the same time policy makers, supervision boards and school leaders should question themselves how they motivate teachers for their own learning and further development.

Teachers themselves should increasingly focus on their individual needs, aligning them to their personal professional self-concept and perceiving them in the context of school development in a collaborative creative process.

Consequently the Dutch model of 'Schools as Learning Communities for their Teachers' was a challenging and exciting topic for a follow-up PLA.

During the regular four days of the activity the participants in the peer learning activity had the chance to visit schools that were experienced as learning environments. Further inspiration for the discussions between the participants was provided through presentations from different stakeholders (the Ministry, the Inspectorate, school leaders, teacher educators and student teachers). Pupils, teachers and school leaders presented a wide range of issues and many more were stimulated by questions of PLA participants.

While the country representatives had their own vision of how the development of learning communities could be promoted in their national systemic and policy contexts, the group gradually began to consider possible common implications of this concept throughout Europe. Despite the differences in teaching and training approaches in the member states and the national traditions of responsibilities, steering strategies and other preconditions, there was high

level of agreement that the examples of learning schools are apt to make an important contribution to school improvement, the development of new expertise for teachers and their own learning with a great benefit for the individual pupil experiencing learning teachers as positive role models in lifelong learning.

The following issues were especially pointed out as relevant for national and European policy:

- it is regarded to be more effective for teachers' professional development when there are systematic opportunities with conditions that allow change to happen with all partners involved
- highly prescribed CPD programmes, which do not take the individual development needs or the local circumstances and the participating actors into account are not likely to succeed
- irrespective of the different approaches like autonomy, centralization, de-centralization and shared responsibilities among teacher education institutions, all partners in the school sector should highly value the establishment of a new learning culture and encourage teachers accordingly
- following the vision to improve pupils' performances and results by means of improving the quality of teachers' professional development, the Dutch approach was perceived as a highly stimulating and inspiring future concept.

Along with parallel policy examples from Cyprus and Turkey the PLA allowed for a deep analysis of contrasting experiences enabling participants to reflect their national systems.

Partnership between Schools for Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Companies (Austria, March 2007)

The main goal of the PLA was that the participants learn and exchange about the different ways in which partnerships between schools and companies are managed, developed and supported in different countries, and how these contribute to the overall quality of their VET system. A special focus was put on teachers and trainers as main linking pins between the school world and the world of work at provider level.

A number of countries have school based systems where practical training in companies is an obligatory component, like the "sandwich model" of Iceland, the obligatory work experience in the different Irish programmes or the practical, contract-based training in companies in Estonia and Slovenia. In a number of countries (Portugal, Italy, and the Netherlands), both school- and company based systems coexist side by side, in some cases sharing the same target groups, learning objectives, and certifications.

While the majority of the countries state that the country either has adopted or is working towards a competence based approach, closer scrutiny showed that "competence based" seems to be interpreted quite differently.

In most of the participating countries VET schools employ both academics and persons with a professional background.

There appeared to be large differences between countries concerning the organisation of company based training and the roles and qualifications of company trainers. A few countries have no concepts of company based trainers. The formal requirements for trainers' qualifications appeared very varied. The extreme points were Germany, where trainers - besides a vocational qualification - are required to follow a course of 120 hours and pass an examination; and Italy, where enterprise tutors have to attend a compulsory training course of at least 8 hours.

The three main challenges that VET teachers and trainers face at the moment are the recruitment of teachers, the necessity for new competence requirements for teachers, the possibility for competence development of teachers and trainers and the definition of standards at national level to ensure the quality of training.

The partnership between the world of school and the world of work seemed quite institutionalised at national or regional levels; however, cooperation at the school-company level depended to a

large extent on the initiative from the school. The crucial challenge from the policy perspective was to bring teachers and trainers closer together.

Preparing Teachers to Teach Effectively in Culturally Diverse Settings (Norway, May 2007)

The experience of a changing school population and an increasing number of pupils with migration background has become a great challenge for some countries while others are rather experienced and have a long tradition with intercultural models and inclusive teaching approaches in the context of minorities in their society. Yet, in most countries teachers obviously do not feel adequately prepared to teach in culturally diverse settings. The follow-up PLA was conducted in Norway as one of the countries with interesting policy examples and a national institution that acts as bridge between policy-makers, researchers and schools. This Norwegian National Centre for Multicultural Education (NAFO) offers assistance in issues like awareness raising, intercultural competence development, networking and the dissemination of good practice examples.

Again in this peer learning activity the vital role of school leaders was noted by the participants and especially the need for a range of extra competences when leading a multicultural learning community. The participants in the PLA cluster had the possibility to visit different school settings and concluded, that decision making regarding culturally diverse schools needs policy makers, who are aware of the sensitivities in the field of cultural diversity and their societal implications with respect to social partners, parents' associations and others more. The very personal discussion with a mother involved in parents' work in this context deeply impressed the participants. There was great consensus that teachers in this specific field have to be prepared already in their initial phase of education. In this phase student teachers need to be confronted with the latest research results in the area of stereotyping and discrimination as well as gain background knowledge about the countries, the migrant families come from. The correlation of school success and the awareness of acceptance or lack of acceptance in society has been object for research especially in the Netherlands in the field of language teaching to children with migration background.

Another impressing policy example from the initial stage of teacher education in the Netherlands was the model of a teaching practicum abroad (without a Dutch mentor) for a large number of student teachers in countries like Turkey, African countries and others to become familiar with the cultural background of their pupils and experiencing some of the basic problems of living and working in a different cultural context; at the same time examining or reassessing their attitudes towards different cultures.

In the reflecting discussion, the participants concluded that teacher educators themselves should have specific competences in these issues and should strongly enhance research with closer contact to the daily teaching in such classroom settings. Further more, they should be willing and be able to support student teachers in developing their competences to deal appropriately with prejudice at school and to develop interpersonal and social skills like empathy and cultural sensitivity in communicating with pupils and parents. Student teachers disregarding the future level of teaching should be offered the chance for a teaching practicum in a multicultural setting during their initial teacher education. Such core knowledge and intercultural skills are regarded as a minimum standard for future teachers and those already at school should have the chance to develop further competences in the context of CPD.

Relationships between Teacher Education Institutes and schools (Denmark/Sweden, October 2007)

In all preceding PLAs participants continually engaged in parallel discussions on the cooperation of involved actors or even institutionalized partnership between parties in the addressed field. It was obvious that specific projects could be more successful and effective if the involved parties, especially teacher education institutions and schools (including CPD) were able to bring to life strategic partnerships to bridge the often experienced gap between 'theory' and 'practice' and to take advantage of the fruitful contributions that each party can make to the other.

As a number of member states were interested in exploring such approaches, Denmark offered to host a follow-up PLA to review and discuss existing policy and to contrast these models with further examples from Sweden, Germany and the Netherlands.

The view, that schools should play a central and active role in developing teaching methodology was shared in all models and by all participants. Partnerships between teacher education institutions and schools can contribute to the development of new knowledge about learning (learning to learn) and consequently to the design of teaching approaches that respond to learner typology, leading to curriculum improvements both in schools and in teacher education. To increase the benefits for both partners, the partnership should not only focus on the education of student teachers, but also on the professional development of staff within schools, on curriculum innovation and on shared research (like in the Swedish ThinkTanks).

While in some countries regional partnerships are already functioning effectively (like system where special teacher training schools are connected with universities like in Finland) others are in the process of developing such support systems to meet the above described ambitions.

The participants in the PLA strongly supported the vision that in the future all schools should be able to benefit from the partnership systems and the outcomes of partnerships within a national system. The quality of the outcomes and the effectiveness of the partnership in the light of the intentions involved should be externally evaluated and conclusions should be multiplied.

In the creation of such partnership models, especially in providing the necessary conditions for this endeavor, the members of the PLA identified a strong role for educational policy makers on national and regional level by intentional steering. Essential conditions for effective partnerships are: resources for the long term sustainability of partnerships, formally binding frameworks (e.g. by connecting these frameworks to accreditation criteria) with a focus on quality criteria and assurance, and flexibility to adapt the partnership to local conditions and contexts.

Common themes

Analysis of the reports from the four PLAs shows that there are a number of common issues that arose in more than one PLA³. These issues seem to be relevant for most member states countries in their policy development and in need of further development.

- 1 The theme of **lifelong learning of teachers** came up in all of the PLAs. The importance of lifelong learning for the teaching and training professions continues to be an important policy issue in driving up standards of teaching and learning in order to enhance pupils' and students' achievement. Through this, national governments recognize that initial teacher education could never be sufficient to prepare for the range of contexts and developments which teachers would experience and recognize the necessity to prepare and up-skill teachers for the emerging knowledge society and economy and to modernize working practices. To support lifelong learning of teachers, two important structures have been suggested:
 - a. The importance of competences and standards: Establishing and clarifying what should be expected from teachers has become a widespread policy goal. In many countries the role of these competences and standards is restricted to the area of initial teacher education, clarifying what a beginning teacher should be able to do. During the PLAs the importance of competences and standards that play a role during the whole of the teaching career was emphasized. Such a framework can stimulate ongoing professional development and lifelong learning of teachers.
 - b. The need for systems that support lifelong learning of teachers: the need to encourage and support teachers' lifelong learning has underpinned much of the policy debate in member states. During the PLAs, participants noted that although the training policy approaches differed in terms of location (school based or training centres), responsibility (individual schools or a central ministry),

³ In this analysis, an interim report on the work of the cluster from October 2005 to November 2006 has been used (Brumfitt, 2006).

and focus (on delivering the curriculum, on managing pupil behaviour or on teaching and learning), the underlying policy need to support serving teachers was constant.

- 2 **Ownership, self-esteem and self-accountability of teachers** were seen as important preconditions for both raising the attractiveness of the teaching profession and improving the quality of teaching and learning. The teaching profession should be seen as a profession with an extended professionalism (Hoyle, 1975). Professionals in education should play an important part in the design and innovation of curricula and learning environments for their pupils. Quality awareness and quality control by teachers and an attitude of self-accountability towards external stakeholders should be stimulated. Policy measures should respect and support this ownership of teachers.
- 3 **Leadership** was mentioned in all PLAs. The role of the head of the school in creating conditions for quality improvement, innovation and peer learning within schools was recognized by all PLA participants. Underlying this process has been the view that school improvement is best brought about by concentrating development efforts at the school level and seeing the school as the major unit of change in the education system. Associated with this trend has been the recognition that leadership and management need to be redefined and that a clearer shift away from the traditional hierarchical control mechanisms is needed toward a culture of shared leadership. As a result, attracting, training and retaining high quality school leaders is an important issue in policy making within member states. In the discussion, attention was drawn to leadership which moves away from a purely authoritative style of administration to a more collaborative style of management and distributed leadership. This asks for teachers that have leadership qualities and who are willing to become actors and equal partners in a change of culture and philosophy in schools today.
- 4 Many of the policy examples that were seen as promising policy approaches involved **partnerships between schools and teacher education institutions**. Such partnerships did not only focus on the education of new teachers. In such partnerships, initial education of teachers, continuous professional development, curriculum innovation, school improvement and knowledge development through research were integrated. The potential benefits of partnerships between schools and teacher education institutions are increased when the benefits of all participants (student teachers, schools, teacher education institutions and the system) are taken into account and when there is flexibility in the specific design of the partnership, leaving room for adaptation to local needs and conditions.
- 5 During several PLAs the concept of **'trust'** was mentioned. Transferring responsibilities to schools and teachers involves the transfer of trust. When school systems are dominated by control mechanisms, defensive attitudes might dominate, frustrating entrepreneurship within schools. The creation of an environment of trust allows school leaders and teachers to be confident that mistakes are part of the learning process, encourages more risk-taking with further 'trial and error' and therefore more innovative approaches. Trust needs to be developed on different levels: trust between ministries and schools, between teachers and school leaders, between teachers (schools) and parents and between schools and teacher education institutions. Trust can have different manifestations and should not only be based on formal contracts, but also on the relation and intentions of the participants involved (Byrk & Schneider, 2002). Policy measures should explicitly be evaluated on the extent to which they stimulate or frustrate trust between stakeholders within the education system.
- 6 To stimulate new policies and approaches it can be helpful to facilitate small scale projects. However, as the quality of teachers and teacher education is important for the whole of the education system, attention should be given to questions how to **stimulate, support and resource the whole of the education system**. Allocation

of time, effort and resources is needed to develop professional qualities through lifelong learning, to create learning communities within schools and to establish effective partnerships.

The sources of finance can vary, depending on national structures, resources and possibilities; they can be institutional (by changing priorities), regional (e.g. through local authorities), national (e.g. by project funding) or international (e.g. through the EU Lifelong Learning Programme). Financial support should always take into account the need for long term sustainability.

These common issues were considered important for developing and improving policies in all member states involved. The discussions considered both the strategic role of a central education ministry and the level of operational detail that was managed by centrally based officials or was left to the autonomy of the school. There was a consensus that the level of centralisation was not the most significant aspect in establishing and maintaining an effective education system. Far more important was ensuring a common understanding of how the system works, how roles and responsibilities are assigned, how progress and developments are monitored, and how each part of the system is held accountable for its performance. The level of regulation and deregulation should not only be seen as a deliberate policy measure to improve educational attainment and school performance, but has also to be regarded as the result of tradition and culture.

Benefits of peer learning

The concept of peer learning within the context of the European Union is relatively new. Within the Cluster Teachers & Trainers the participants have developed their own way of working based on the general outline of the European Commission.

The question is whether this way of working has been effective with respect to its aims:

- to develop a common understanding of success factors for the improvement of policy-making and the implementation of reform;
- to identify and disseminate key conclusions which can be fed into policy-making and implementation at the national level and European level.

In all PLA reports and evaluations, the peer learning activities are considered as an effective way of exchanging policy practices and to discuss underlying policy questions. The reports that result from each PLA summarize the common trends and conclusions, making the common understanding explicit. This has led to an ideational convergence, a convergence at the level of ideas. This means 'that policy-makers converge in their assessment of causal mechanisms at work in policy areas, definitions of desirable and unacceptable policies, and beliefs about how policies work' (Radaelli, 2003).

Both at the end of PLAs and at Cluster meetings, participants reported individual insights or findings that they could report and bring back into their own national systems. This indicates that participants were able to identify key conclusions on a national level.

Key conclusions that are fed into policy making and implementation on a European level are more difficult to identify. A clear and explicit mechanism for reporting and implementing outcomes on a European level is missing, as a result of the limited authority of the European Council with respect to education. However, themes and recommendations discussed during the PLAs can be recognized in the communication of the European Commission on improving the quality of teacher education (European Commission, 2007) and the Council's conclusions on teacher education (European Council, 2007). More implicit mechanisms for transferring PLA outcomes to the EU policy level can also be found:

- The Cluster is seen as an important European platform for policy development on the area of teacher education, as can be seen in the invitation for the EU conference 'Teacher professional development for the quality and equity of lifelong learning' organized by the Portuguese Presidency in September 2007.

- A number of the Cluster members are also members of the European Network on Teacher Education Policy (ENTEPE). This combined membership stimulates the mutual exchange of conclusions and recommendations on a wider scale.
- The Cluster is supported by the European Commission. The Commission's representative feeds the outcomes of the PLAs towards the Commission and to the Education and Training Co-ordination Group, consisting of representatives from the member states and responsible for the overall co-ordination of the Education & Training 2010 work programme.

The peer learning format that has been used by the Cluster T&T differs in several aspects from more traditional conferences or study visits:

- The PLAs have a unique combination of senior policy officials, academics and practitioners. In this way policy development is enriched by outcomes of research and academic discourse and by evaluation of the possible effects of implementation of policy measures in the reality of practice in schools and teacher education. At the same time academics are challenged to apply research outcomes and theories to the reality and limitations of policy making. This interactive and heterogeneous context creates a powerful learning environment that is valued by the participants.
- Despite the fact that the starting point of most PLAs is a specific policy practice in the host country, the PLAs extend to the underlying policy issues that are relevant for all countries. Therefore the PLA is more than a study visit or peer review, leading to common conclusions and recommendations that have a wider relevance for all member states.
- Starting with exchange of existing policy practices in the host country and in other countries, the aim is not to identify 'best practices' but 'next practices', policy practices that take into account current trends and developments and that are necessary to support schools in the 21st century.

Dilemmas in peer learning

Although the benefits of peer learning within the Cluster Teachers & Trainers are described above, the effectiveness of this peer learning can be questioned at the same time.

The aim of the peer learning methodology is to stimulate policy learning within the member states. The effectiveness of this peer learning should become visible in new policy approaches within member states. However, clear structures to evaluate the effectiveness of PLAs are missing. There is no systematic follow-up process gauging the impact that PLAs have on the development of national policies.

Not only evaluation structures are missing, but also support systems to help PLA participants to extend the learning benefits of individual participants to other stakeholders on a national or local level. The implicit expectation is that the (two) participants are able to transfer the growth of their personal understanding of the policy issue discussed during the PLA to a wider audience of policy makers, to extend personal peer learning to national peer learning.

This problem already starts at the level of the PLA participants and the Cluster. Not all Cluster members take part in each PLA. Although the PLA reports try to highlight the common understanding that has been reached during a PLA, the learning impact differs considerably for those that took part in the PLA and those cluster members that could not participate in the PLA and that can only experience second hand information through the PLA report.

The same problem arises again when participants in PLAs have to report back into their national or local context and to feed their personal learning experiences into the national policy processes. The question arises how authentic experiences can be shared.

At least four mechanisms for this transfer problem can be found. First there is the problem of a missing learning environment. The PLAs are evaluated as effective learning environments for the participants. While feeding back the outcomes of the PLAs to other policy makers at the local, national or cluster level, this learning environment is missing. Second, the eagerness of national governments to learn from other countries varies. Although not supported by clear evidence, we have the impression that new member countries are more eager to use the outcomes of the PLAs

to improve their policy making. Third, the impact of PLAs on national policy making seems also to be influenced by the size of ministries or departments and by the status of the PLA participant. Finally, the effectiveness of transfer is influenced by the under-estimation of learning within a political context. During the PLAs the participants have the freedom to open up to new ideas and approaches. However, 'learning in the context of the OMC is a political exercise. Policy-makers are not seeking truth, but power. They may be open to reasoned argumentation, but not to the point of overcoming the basic fact that they are engaged with politically-sensitive policies' (Radaelli, 2003). When PLA participants return home to their ministries, they face colleagues who are focussed on the limitations of the national political preoccupations. Both the political sensitive aspects of peer learning and the problems of effective transfer of learning benefits have received little attention within the Cluster.

Another problem is the involvement of other stakeholders in the peer learning process. 'Participation is essential for two reasons. One is obvious, that is, legitimacy. The other is less obvious: effectiveness. The method can work like a radar searching solutions only if it involves many different actors. Accordingly, participation should not be limited to those who operate in EU-level committees, but it should be extended to local-level actors' (Radaelli, 2003). This problem is also recognized by the European Commission as it formulates the ambition to find ways to increase 'the involvement of the broader education and training community, without diluting the existing exchanges between the Commission and Member States'. (European Commission, 2007b)

Finally, from the list of PLAs it becomes clear that the PLAs have been hosted by countries in the North-West of Europe. Also policy examples have come mainly from those countries. As a result there is no balance in the peer learning process. This imbalance has been addressed several times, inviting countries from the east and south of Europe to host a PLA. However, those countries seem to be reluctant in offering to host a PLA. The reason behind this is still unclear; the reluctance could be connected to the fear of not being able to provide good or best policy practice or to the fact that hosting a PLA is a time consuming activity for ministries which are overloaded with policy innovations. Both assumptions point to a noticeable imbalance between countries in the different parts of Europe.

Finally

The peer learning method is just one of several activities of the open method of co-ordination. It seems to be an essential part of the OMC as it supports member states in reaching the goals of the Education & Training 2010 work programme, although only few representatives can take part. Benchmarks can be useful in showing progress on those goals, but show no insight in 'how to improve', give no deeper understanding, and do not contribute to problem solving. It is the process of exchange and discussion of policy practices which gives insight into the "how to" question, thus contributing to improvement.

The shared ambition of Education & Training 2010 needs to be connected to shared learning. The challenge of the Cluster is to feed the learning outcomes of the PLAs into the local and national policy making and to extend the peer learning beyond the boundaries of ministries by involving other national and local stakeholders like schools and teacher education institutions.

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