

Case study

The DeMo project

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Collaborative Learning

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Introduction

Two years ago The Foundation for Democratic Youth (DIA) initiated a project for civil society organizations to network, learn together and share experiences and knowledge with each other. The thirteen organizations that participated in the project called *DeMo*, all work with children who live in deep poverty, often studying in segregated institutions characterized by lower quality education. On the one hand, the organizations participating in the project use different methods and strategies. On the other hand, they have to face very similar challenges, thus, sharing their experiences can be essential in expending their knowledge and effectiveness.

The following case study seeks to present and examine the DeMo project as a good practice of *collaborative learning*. I am going to analyze the case following a set of previously defined criteria and look at to which degree does the project show evidence of *participative professionalism, collaborative enquiry, advancement of equity, and impact on deep learning*.

Context

The following section provides a brief contextual background, which is necessary to understand the aims of the DeMo project, and the challenges that the participating organizations have to face in their daily work.

It is important to point out that when it comes to Hungary the discourse about poverty and about the Roma minority is almost inseparable. Being the biggest acknowledged minority group in Hungary, after the collapse of state socialism, the Roma population had to face inequalities on multiple levels. The increasing level of unemployment, residential, and institutional segregation are all factors that pushed many of them in extreme poverty.¹ Now,

¹Zoltan Barany, *A a Kelet-Európai Cigánység: Rendszerváltás, Marginalitás és Nemzetiségi Politika* (Budapest: Athenaeum 2000 Kiadó, 2003).

more than two decades later Roma are still overrepresented among the poorest social strata, and the inequalities rooted in several, intersecting factors keep on perpetuating. Educational segregation plays a very important role in this context. Recent studies show evidence that in general, both intra- and interschool segregation is characterized by decreased requirements and poor quality of teaching, students are affected by negative attitudes, and by the lack of inter-ethnic relationships. All of these factors lower the chances of Roma students in further education and integration or inclusion.²

It is important to note that when it comes to the DeMo project, there is no emphasis on the fact that the majority of the participating organizations work with children who live in segregated Roma settlements, in the poorest regions of Hungary. However, on their project blog they do reflect on the above mentioned problems that particularly affect Roma students living in deep poverty. The challenges that the participating organizations face are also inseparable from this context: balancing and compensating the deficiencies of formal education and closing the social gap between the majority and a disadvantaged, marginalized social group.

The two-and-a-half year long DeMo project was funded by the Norway Grants. With the help and coordination of DIA, the participating organizations went through a process of organization development, worked on their communication strategies, exchanged professional knowledge and good practices by doing field visits, formed working groups focusing on methodology and created a network that makes it possible to share knowledge amongst each other, and create and communicate knowledge publicly.

Methodology

This present case study is partly based on the publicly available material on the website of the DeMo project, and partly on the personal experiences of the participants. I conducted qualitative research to gain a more complex understanding of these personal experiences.

I used the method of in-depth semi-structured interviews. I conducted face-to-face interviews with four people, and –due to geographical distance - one interview over the phone. Moreover, as an additional source I collected written feedback from a number of participants.

²Gábor Havas and Ilona Liskó, “Segregation of Roma Students in Primary Schools” (Institute for Higher Education Research, 2005).

The written feedback served more as a source complementing the interviews, as the short answers that the respondents gave could not reflect the complexity of the experiences that emerged from the face-to-face interviews.

The interviews were structured according to the following design:

I. General information about the project (project aims, achievements)
II. The process of working together (strategies, rules)
III. The community (participants, intergroup relations)
IV. Long term plans (perspectives, barriers and facilitators of similar projects)

The interviewees are all representing different organizations. Moreover, I interviewed the project manager of DeMo and the director of DIA, the foundation initiating the project. The interviews generally lasted 1.5 hours long, and were all recorded and transcribed. In the following case study, I am going to cite from the interviews keeping the interviewees anonymous, except for the director of DIA and the project manager.

In terms of the epistemological position the analysis of the interviews follows a positivist approach, as in this present case study, my aim with choosing this research method was to gather information about the process of collaboration that the participants took part in, without going deeper and looking at the linguistic or socio-political aspects of the interviews.³

Practice

The DeMo project had three keystones: field visits, sharing good practices and organizational development. All the organizations had an opportunity to visit three other organizations, observe their work and methods in real life, and later on to discuss the experiences of the visit together. Everyone could freely choose their partners, and decide from which organization they could learn the most. The travel costs and the accommodation were funded by the project. Based on the interviews, these field visits were one of the highlights of DeMo. For the organizations that received visitors, this was an opportunity to consciously think through how best to present their daily work. For the visiting organizations this was a meaningful experience to meet people, who work in similar environments and face similar challenges, and

³Paul Dowling and Andrew Brown, *Doing Research/Reading Research: Re-Interrogating Education*, 2 edition (London ; New York: Routledge, 2009).

to learn from and reflect on their solutions. Based on the interviews, sharing knowledge in this 'real-life' setting was more stimulating and inspiring. Moreover, as mentioned in all the interviews, it helped the participants getting to know each other better.

Strengthening the structures and strategies of the involved organizations was also an essential part of the DeMo project. DIA has many years of experience in organizational development. In the beginning of the project they provided individual coaching for the organizations. Program design, social impact indicators, volunteer management, communication strategies and PR were all important areas of the coaching process. As the interviews show evidence, this phase was really helpful for many organizations, and often it was the first time they ever thought through these questions, that turned out to be essential to carry out effective programs.

Knowledge-sharing also occurred at the regular meetings. At these occasions, most commonly one or two people represented each organization. Originally, these meetings were planned with a certain thematic setting, however often the initial plans had to be changed.

"There were planned activities, like we meet; we talk about this and that topic etc. But we saw -and this is really interesting, partly a challenge or a failure, but partly not - that sometimes things that we thought are going to be relevant, turned out to be irrelevant for the participants. They came and they said they want to talk about something else, and then that always worked out really well."

Rita Galambos, director of DIA

The flexibility that is reflected in this interview excerpt was really important during the whole project and it is mentioned in all the interviews. As it was often emphasized, if the design does not meet the needs of the participants, the project cannot be effective. Thus, the project has to be flexible enough to be able to suit the interests of those who are supposed to benefit from it. This also requires the participants to be assertive in communicating their needs

"Having no structure is also part of the structure. I don't think that it is a good idea to hold each other's hands for two and a half year. It's important to create situations, where everyone can figure out what they need, and that needs to be supported."

Participant 1

Thus, as it seems, flexibility was an essential feature of the DeMo project. Knowing in advance what will be the best for the participants of the network is almost impossible. DIA was responsible for providing them options and opportunities, reflecting on what seemed to be the most relevant for the participants and adjusting the activities accordingly. However, it was also crucial to create an environment where the relevant problems can come to light, and opportunities for the participants to articulate and to work on these difficulties.

Participation

The previously explained flexibility of the project also affects its leadership roles. The leader of the network is not responsible for telling anyone what to do, or how to do it. It only provides options, possible ways to work together, and helps the process by facilitating and coordinating the progress of arriving to a solution.

As the director of DIA also mentioned in the interview, it was one of the conclusion of the project that you cannot force people to learn.

“You can’t predict on what level learning will happen. Even if we organize a training and we invite the most interesting lecturers we will see that people are sitting there bored. But the moment they bring in their own problems and one of them can say something helpful, they know who they should talk to. These connections could not happen without the meetings.”

Rita Galambos, DIA

As the excerpt shows evidence, some of the events within the project were not as successful as the organizers thought. However, the personal meetings were still crucial in providing a platform for the participants to meet and establish connections. Rita Galambos, the director of DIA described their role as a leader of the network with a metaphor of a spider making a web. The spider is not in the center, or outside: it has the function of slowly connecting the little parts and constructing the web.

Thus, despite of the flexibility of the activities and the freedom of the participants in determining a large part of the process, the leadership is still crucial in this collaborative network. Without trusting the ‘spider’ the network could not operate. This was highlighted by the participants in the majority of the interviews. Accepting DIA as the coordinator was a

prerequisite of a successful collaboration. It is important to note that the participants of the network were selected by DIA, mostly based on previous connections, thus, the risk of not being accepted and trusted as a coordinator was lower in this case. Regarding the participants, some of them knew each other previously, but most commonly they met for the first time.

To conclude, the interviews conducted with the participants and the organizers of the DeMo project suggests that on the one hand, the presence of a leader who is accepted by the participants is crucial in order to hold the network together. On the other hand the participants have to be able to determine the content of the collaboration based on their own personal needs and interests. Thus, the DeMo project can be described as a democratic model of collaboration. The flexible structure and the fact that the participants have the freedom to influence the process provide an ideal context for innovative ideas to be born.

Depth

Collaborative practices can be described in terms of their depth. In this understanding group cohesion, a high team identity, emotional and professional support of each other are all important factors that characterize complex forms of collaboration, something that is more than merely sharing information with each other. Based on the interviews, the DEMO project displayed the characteristics of a deep level collaboration in several aspects.

“For me this was a real community experience, feeling that you are not alone with your problems, you are not stupid you are not doing anything wrong. Your challenges are legitimate and other people are facing similar ones too.”

Participant 2.

The *community experience* was mentioned in several interviews. Many participants felt that they could emotionally benefit from being part of the project: even if some challenges are not easy to solve, the fact that others are struggling with the same obstacles provides emotional support. These excerpts also suggest that previous to the DEMO project they often felt isolated and alone with their difficulties, thus the networking and collaborating was especially meaningful for them.

„You have the same problem and you cannot solve it either? Then we are not alone, that’s good. Let’s start thinking together, and then it’s even better if there is an organization that can coordinate and facilitate this process.“

Participant 1.

As this excerpt suggests, the feeling of not being isolated with a problem can be an inspiration for starting to collaborate with each other. It is also emphasized that with adequate coordination the process can be especially fruitful. Based on the interviews it seems that when it comes to the DEMO project fruitful collaborations were formed between people facing similar challenges. People found each other based on how relevant each other’s knowledge and experiences were. As a consequence, several sub-groups were formed within the project team. The sub-groups were determined by the relevancy of the knowledge, experiences and good practices they could share with each other, as well as on personal sympathy.

“Every organization ended up in a little drawer, plus there was one drawer with those who we don’t have anything in common with, either because they were inactive or because we don’t have any relevant common points. But the others all represent something specific, in terms of what can we learn from them.“

Participant 1

These sub-groups were not exclusive: one could belong to multiple of them, and profit from various different things. As another interviewee explained, the level of collaboration within the sub-groups also showed a variety. In some cases participants only exchanged information – for example everyone knew which people are experts of online communication, and then they knew they can turn to them in case they need help in anything. Often these connections proved to be temporary, and sometimes no connections were formed at all between the participants. However, in other cases sub-groups were characterized by a certain group identity, because they had so much to share with each other, or they could work on certain projects together. As one of the interviewees mentioned, the field-visits played an important role in strengthening the connection between the participants, as they gained a real-life experience of each other’s work. Another interesting comment concerned the name DeMo, indicating that having a good name also played a role in the emergence of a group identity, or of sub-group identities. Moreover, the previously mentioned selection of the project participants might also be important in how smooth the participants functioned as a group.

To conclude, the sense of belonging together can be comforting when it comes to the frightening feeling of isolation, while mutual trust can facilitate collaboration with each other. Moreover, the formation of strong groups also guarantees that the connections and the collaboration survive the official end of the project and can work on a long-term.

Equity

When it comes to the DEMO project, it is unquestionable that the aim of the participating organizations and the aim of the project itself is directly or indirectly advancing equity. As I mentioned in the beginning of this case study, the participating organizations work with disadvantaged children who live in poverty and often study in institutions characterized by a low level of education. All organizations have their specific aims, programs and methods, but most commonly they provide after-school help and mentoring, they organize events and activities for children -often their parents and locals as well-, they play with them and learn with them. Most of them work with a large number of volunteers, who are all committed enough to spend their free time once or twice a week with children who are less privileged in terms of their socio-economic background.

„Helping disadvantaged kids on a long term is a special area of voluntary work. I think it is outrageously unfair what happens to these kids intellectually and on other levels as well. I believe that we have to go and be there, and we have to connect people, and we have to be responsible for each other, for those kids, because we live here in Budapest in our pretty little world, so it's our responsibility.”

Participant 2

Being responsible was a reoccurring expression in the interviews. In fact, many of the volunteers and social workers travel from Budapest to segregated villages where they meet the local communities. As it is mentioned in the interview excerpt as well, the motivation to do this could be the sense of responsibility, or social solidarity: coming from a privileged background, it is one's duty to be socially sensitive and to have an active role in advancing social equity.

However, the work of these organizations leads to a number of very complex questions that were also touched upon in the interviews. These organizations provide informal educational

service for children who otherwise attend formal educational institutions. They involve the kids in learning activities that the formal educational system has been unable to provide. Thus, they exist in an imperfect system and try to balance its deficiencies. On the one hand, it is an important question whether their work has any effect on formal educational stakeholders, or to what extent their approach and knowledge can be transferred to formal education.

“We probably cannot reprogram teachers, they are burnt out, and feel like it’s really unfair that they have to teach these kids. It’s horrible, and we thought we might be able to transfer some of the enthusiasm and the really high quality work that happens in the civil sector (...) But it is really difficult always going against the mainstream, and not everyone was born to be a revolutionist, not everyone wants to be attacked for thinking about things differently. And this is the limit of this whole thing, that the volunteers go every week to the kids and they are so enthusiastic, but if they want to become teachers, they will be told off, told not to do it like this.”

Rita Galambos

As the above cited excerpt suggests, one of the main obstacles of these initiation is the barrier between formal and informal education. The formal educational system is unable to meet the needs of these disadvantaged kids, and it only reproduces unequal power structures in society instead of advancing social equality and mobility. Most commonly there is no channel between civil initiations using alternative methods and formal educational institutions. As a result the incredible efforts and amount of work of the civil society sector often remains invisible on a systematic level.

Learning

All the interviewees I talked to emphasized that taking part in the project, being present at the meetings and other activities was a very fruitful period, where they could develop professionally and personally as well.

“I’m happy it was not a waste of time. It was energizing and I had a lot of positive experiences with a long-term beneficial effect.”

Participant 3

Emphasizing the fact that the DeMo project was not a waste of time might suggest that the interviewee was somewhat surprised that this event was actually useful. It is true that in general, workshops and trainings often have a goal that sounds good, but they fail at achieving it. Participants tend to leave with the feeling that they wasted their time and didn't learn anything. When it comes to DeMo this was not the case. There are several factors that played a role in making this project successful and useful for the participants.

As emphasized in several interviews, personal meetings and field visits helped the participants to become involved and motivated to work together. As many of these organizations generally work in a somewhat isolated way, being part of the project and establishing connections was refreshing and inspiring.

It was a reoccurring theme in the interviews that for a successful collaboration it is essential to understand that sharing experiences and knowledge does not equal 'stealing' from each other. For the DeMo participants, taking part in the project helped to embrace this approach and recognize its importance. As many of them emphasized, *sharing* instead of *competing* with each other is especially important in the civil sector. When it comes to organizations that have a similar mission, it is their 'duty' to help each other's work by sharing their expertise. However, even in the civil sector this approach is not yet salient.

"When I started working in the civil society sector I realized that there are many interesting little islands everywhere, and everyone is protecting their own little treasures, and they don't like sharing it. Others would share it, but they don't know that they should share it, or they don't have the tools that they need."

Participant 1

It's also fortunate that the people who were involved in the project all believe in knowledge sharing. (...) I thought that this is something that everyone does in this new generation, like a new fresh breeze in the civil society sphere, but no, it's still a thing that everyone is trying to protect their own little pile of rubbish."

Participant 2

In case of the DeMo project, it is certainly true that the participants were open to this change of attitude – understanding the importance of sharing instead of trying to protect their own good practices for themselves. On the one hand, they were selected by DIA based on previous positive experiences; on the other hand, joining the project –and staying part of it – was not compulsory. Thus, the participants were all motivated and willing to collaborate with each other. Moreover, due to the democratic approach to participation, they had a chance to

constantly give feedback and shape the project in a form that is most useful for them. Thus, having less strict rules and more opportunities and space also played a role in promoting learning together.

Facilitators and Barriers

Exploring the DeMo project, several conclusions can be drawn regarding the factors that play an important role in making a collaborative practice fruitful. It is important to note that DeMo was a funded project. Having enough financial resource to organize certain activities –e.g. travel and accommodation costs at the field visits- was certainly a facilitating factor in this case. However, after the end of the project sustainability is not guaranteed, and the only thing that can keep the practice alive is the personal motivation of the participants, who understand the positive effects of sharing and learning together.

Another question that emerges concerns to what extent the participants managed to transfer the knowledge they gained during the project to their own organizations that they represented. This could be a weak point of practices that operate with representatives, especially if organizations do not always send the same delegate. This risk was taken into account in case of the DeMo project as well; however, based on the interviews the system was nevertheless successful.

It would also be important to explore to what extent the conclusions based on the DeMo project as a good practice of collaboration could be generalized to collaborative learning in general. Enough freedom and space to come up with a design that really serves the needs and aims of the participants, enough time and energy are all factors that seem essential to create a successful collaborative team. When it comes to Hungarian formal education, it is a rather ambiguous question whether these factors are all accessible for teachers. However, projects like the DeMo certainly play a role in promoting the idea of collaboration and could be inspiring for educational stakeholders as well. Using the words of one of the interviewees:

“It would be very good if we could reach a point where we would not need money or a project to network and share with each other, but it would be the most obvious thing to do”.

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