

# Case study

**The Network of Teacher Learning Communities of Pollack Mihály Primary School in Kazincbarcika**

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**EFFeCT**

European Methodological  
Framework for Facilitating Teachers'  
Collaborative Learning

## A Case Study of The Network of Teacher Learning Communities of Pollack Mihály Primary School in Kazincbarcika

### CONTEXT

Reviewing potential good practices at the local level we observed that there are several reasons that create obstacles to teachers' collaborative learning initiatives to become widespread. On the one hand, in the past few years many school consolidations took place in Hungary at the local level with the aim of reducing costs and raising educational quality. Nevertheless the process of consolidation rarely happened without conflicts. The combined institutions often had different educational approaches and teaching culture; expectations of teaching staff were often not fulfilled due to the lack of sufficient communication about the consolidation process. Moreover, often the newly appointed head of institution was not accepted by all staff. On the other hand independent schools within a city do not necessarily cooperate with each other because teachers usually are not aware of benefits of pedagogical collaboration and often there is a rivalry between schools to get the most skilful pupils on board so they are not really interested in sharing knowledge and good practices. The lack of sufficient funds to cover travel and organisation costs is also an obstacle to fostering collaborative learning among teachers.

However, there are some promising initiatives in this field. Specific conferences or thematic workshops are dedicated to share knowledge among teachers, but these aren't regular activities and they are organised only once or twice a year and often participants change from meeting to meeting. There are some good practices for adapting a programme from abroad e.g. the Creative Partnership Programme<sup>1</sup> developed in the UK. In Hungary the programme has been piloted with EU funding with the collaboration of the Faculty of Music and Visual Arts of University of Pécs, T-Tudok Centre for Knowledge Management and Educational Research and seven schools in Pécs, Baranya County, south-west Hungary. Other individual initiatives can be identified as well such as professional workshops held in

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<sup>1</sup> Creative Partnerships was the UK's flagship creative learning programme running throughout England from 2002 until 30 September 2011 when funding was withdrawn by Arts Council England. The programme was designed to develop the skills of children and young people across England, raising their aspirations and achievements, and opening up more opportunities for their futures. Creative Partnerships was managed by Creativity, Culture and Education (CCE) and was delivered through a range of regional Area Delivery Organisations who worked with over 5,000 schools. Further information about the Creative Partnership Programme: <http://www.creativitycultureeducation.org/creative-partnerships>

Alsómocsolád<sup>2</sup>, Baranya County, south-west Hungary. However, for this case study we chose to explore the so called “Network of Teacher Learning Communities” of the Pollack Mihály Primary School in Kazincbarcika.

The Pollack Mihály Primary School is located in Kazincbarcika, an industrial town in Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County, Northern Hungary. The city lies 20 kilometres away from the county capital, Miskolc, and 206 km from Budapest. Kazincbarcika was created during the Socialist industrialization period, when several villages were unified with the aim of creating an industrial city. In the 1970s Kazincbarcika already had 30,000 residents. In the 1980s mining and heavy industry faced a crisis, and the rate of unemployment was high. As a consequence of the industrial decline and unemployment the population of Kazincbarcika decreased but it is still above 27.000 inhabitants.

Due to a local educational government decision the Pollack Mihály Primary School was merged with five other primary schools each of which already had their own teaching tradition. The school consolidation took place in two major steps. In 2007 two schools, Árpád Fejedelem Primary School and Kazinczy Ferenc Primary School were combined with Pollack Mihály Primary School. At the time of the first merge the three institutions together had 1623 pupils. In 2012 the second phase started so that another school, the Ádám Jenő Primary School was attached to Pollack Mihály Primary School. The Ádám Jenő Primary School itself was a combined school including two previously merged institutions (Dózsa György Primary School and Gárdonyi Géza Primary School). In 2016 Pollack Mihály Primary School, together with its five other member schools, has 2368 pupils. The schools employ altogether 193 teachers. The percentage of disadvantaged pupils is 37,6%. Three out of the six schools are located in the city centre near to block of flats and another two schools are close to family housing areas. One school is situated in Szuhakálló, which is a village near Kazincbarcika. It is important to mention that the school complex named “Pollack Mihály Primary School” has the same name as the Pollack Mihály Primary School (Pollack School) as individual school. The principal of the Pollack School is responsible for the overall management and leadership of the school complex. However, each member school has its own school leader. All school leaders are committed to create an institutional culture, which

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<sup>2</sup> Further information in Hungarian: <http://alsomocsolad.hu/new/?p=1317>

aims at harmonising professional work of all member schools and at fostering collaboration among its teacher communities; furthermore at creating a welcoming and an inspiring school climate.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In order to identify the good practice for this case study we contacted experts and researchers if they are aware of good practices in the field of collaborative learning of teachers; moreover, we contacted teacher networks as well and carried out internet research. On behalf of feedback from this research we became aware of some potential cases. After that we made short interviews via phone calls with suggested contact persons about interesting cases to be able to find out more details about the given practice. After the short interviews we discussed all cases in detail with our project team and decided which of the practices seemed to be the closest to the evaluation criteria laid down in the „Guidance on the Research Phase”.

The development of the case study was partly based on interviews and partly on the analysis of strategic documents of the school such as annual work programme, the pedagogical programme and presentations made at various workshops. After we identified the practice of the Pollack Mihály Primary School in Kazincbarcika we contacted the principal-in-charge, Ms. *Fürjes-Gáborné Csépanyi Ágnes* and we conducted an in-depth interview with her. Moreover, we visited one of their collaborative teacher learning events in Kazincbarcika and carried out a group interview with the members of the *Art teacher learning community*. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Data collection was qualitative. In order to be able to carry out the interviews we created a list of questions to be used by our project team. All interviews and the case study paper are based on the paper „Guidance on the Research Phase<sup>3</sup>”.

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<sup>3</sup> The paper „Guidance on the Research Phase was prepared by the University of Hertfordshire team in order to facilitate case study development for the EFFeCT project.

## PRACTICE

After the school consolidation in 2012, six large institutions had to start cooperating with each other. There were differences among the schools in terms of requirements for discipline, standards for classroom management and preparation for lessons, and also the methodological skills of teachers were not at the same level. In order to harmonise the different school cultures and to get to know each other's everyday teaching practice the principal of Pollack School initiated mutual classroom visits and job shadowing. Teachers not only visited classes in their own school but also in other member schools. Due to the changes introduced in the Framework Curricula<sup>4</sup> and the Educational Programmes, in some subjects the number of compulsory lessons per week was raised so that some of the member schools did not have sufficient workforce to cover those subjects. As a consequence teachers from one member school had to become guest teachers in the other member school, had to get familiar with the other school's practice and had to fit in the other school's teaching staff as well. Thus, because of practical reasons, teachers were "forced" to visit each other's classes and teach in various schools it turned out that the establishment of so called *inter-institutional teacher learning communities* would be very useful. On the one hand, the forming of teacher learning communities was a top down process, because it was especially facilitated by the principal-in-charge of the Pollack School, and on the other hand it was also a bottom-up process because there was a strong need formulated by teachers to share knowledge, learn from one another and find ways of cooperation. The inter-institutional teacher learning communities consist of teachers who teach the same (e.g. mathematics) or related subjects (e.g. music and art) in the different member schools. This is the so called network of teacher learning communities. Being a member of an inter-institutional teacher learning community seems to be a great opportunity to learn new methods and share knowledge that can boost the individual professional motivation of teachers.

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<sup>4</sup> In Hungary, Framework Curricula and the Educational Programmes serve as a guidance to prepare and compile Local Curricula. The Local Curricula have to be based on the National Core Curriculum (NCC) which formulates principles, goals and tasks in a broader sense that have to be adjusted to local institutional characteristics and individual learning paths. More about [NCC](#).

The main aim of the teacher learning communities is sharing knowledge and experiences in teaching of their subjects. The overall goal is to contribute to balanced learning outcomes among all member schools of the Pollack School.

Main activities of the teacher learning communities:

- sharing exercise databases
- sharing teaching methods
- sharing good practice
- disseminating knowledge gained at a specific workshop by one of the individual members of the community
- organising brainstorming sessions
- organising workshops
- organising festivals, school celebrations and other school events<sup>5</sup>
- recommending relevant readings
- preparing or harmonising common assessment and evaluation systems
- designing and organising school competitions
- discussing problem cases in educational issues
- keeping touch with parent organisations
- preparing and implementing projects
- reviewing local strategic documents
- benchmarking
- reviewing the efficiency of processes and practices

There are all together 9 thematic inter-institutional teacher learning communities based on different subjects such as:

- Humanities
- Mathematics
- Natural science (biology, geography, chemistry, physics, nature studies)
- Arts (music, art)
- Physical education

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<sup>5</sup> E.g.: „The spring buzz” Festival; or open school days (see in the portrait)

- Foreign languages
- Measurement, assessment and evaluation
- Primary teachers (grade 1-4)
- Teachers of Special Educational Needs

The inter-institutional teacher learning communities prepare their own work plan for the respective school year and they define their own aims and tasks which will be approved by the head of institution of the Pollack School. There are common principles that have to be respected by all teacher communities:

- applying common requirement criteria in terms of pupils' outcomes;
- respecting diversity of institutional backgrounds;
- enhancing high professional standards.

Each community is led by one of its members who is responsible for the preparation of the work plan (with the contribution of other members) and the coordination of the work of the group. The number of teachers who are involved as members varies in each community. There are communities which meet bimonthly and there are others which meet 1 to 4 times per month. The location of the meeting is one of the schools. Sometimes meetings only focus on information exchange and on solving operative problems, but there are regular meetings which are dedicated to collaborative learning. Topics of collaborative learning meetings are laid down in the work plan as we saw it in the case of the Humanities teacher community who had a workshop on the issue of reducing drop-out rates. The communities are open to exchange their knowledge with teacher communities from other cities as well. In the autumn 2015 a group of teachers from Budapest visited mathematics and an art lessons in Kazincbarcika to learn about the hosts' good practice. After the lesson observations there was a lively conversation and knowledge exchange among teachers.

## **PARTICIPATION**

The inter-institutional teacher learning communities are open to all teachers interested in cooperation. When it comes to decision making, there is no hierarchy among the members, as decisions are made on the basis of consensus. If a decision has been made the community

is committed to implement it immediately in classroom practice and they also follow-up the effects that have resulted from the decision. If necessary, corrections and adjustments are made in the implementation process.

However, pupils or parents are usually not involved in the decision making process. Parents are in some cases contacted and asked for their opinion but these are cases of “low risk” from the pedagogical point of view. Pupils can benefit from the positive effects of the decisions but their opinion or ideas are not taken into consideration; however every school has a Pupil Government.

The principal-in-charge is usually not present at the teacher community meetings. There are sometimes situations when there is a direct request from her to solve a specific problem. In this case she only sets the goal but it is absolutely up to the community to decide about the way of solving the problem and this solution is accepted by the principal-in-charge.

Innovative ideas are welcome and are often facilitated by brain storming sessions. It happens quite often that new ideas emerge. There has been a recent innovation which concerns competency development of pupils as explained below.

Teachers experienced that pupils’ performance is relatively low in competency assessment tests such as PISA and other national measurement and assessment test. After analysing pupils’ results the respective teacher learning community came to the conclusion that the reason behind pupils’ failure might be that the applied teaching material is not really focused on competency development and the methodological skills of teachers need to be improved. Thus, they agreed that every teacher will be encouraged to introduce new methods and to try at least one exercise per lesson which supports competency development of pupils.

During the interview that we conducted the principal-in-charge was asked to place their practice on a scale between 1 and 5. Number “1” corresponded to a practice that was based only on information exchange between teachers and number “5” referred to a real collaborative learning practice. The head of institution placed themselves on the scale between number 3 and 4. According to her explanation the reason behind this result is that on the one hand it seems that not all teachers can fully understand why and how collaborative learning can contribute to the success of their own career if the idea that was put into practice was not one of his/her own. On the other hand there are a lot of senior



teachers (average age over 53) who have their own old fashioned pedagogical culture which is not easy to change.

Concerning the way learning communities function, the cooperation is based mostly on common understanding and common motivation but there are no written guidelines besides the annual work programme.

One future aim is that these communities cooperate more effectively and more closely, possibly even on a daily basis. Furthermore, the communities are encouraged by the head of institution to use ICT technology in communication, and to discover platforms for sharing good practice. Another future aim is that school competitions should be extended to cover all possible subjects taught at the member schools. Teacher learning communities are expected to facilitate school competitions and to involve pupils in activities.

#### DEPHT

Participation is not explicitly compulsory in the learning communities, but it is expected by school leaders that teachers in key positions become members of one of the communities.

Teachers try to stick to the work plan and they do their best to attend all gatherings. If someone is not able to participate, there are no negative consequences. They notify one another by e-mail or phone if they cannot take part at a meeting.

Teacher learning communities are organic part of the school structure, and their operation is also embedded and highlighted in the institutional strategy as the principal-in-charge stated. She strongly supports the teacher learning communities as she formulated:

*“Human collaboration is, I believe, the most important; this is the way how we can move forward.”*

Kazincbarcika is a relatively small city with a limited number of schools so teachers in different schools know each other and it is easy to organise a meeting. In the *Art teacher learning community* the connections among teachers are really tight, they have the feeling of being a real community. After some years of working together in the community they learned how to collaborate in a productive way. If there is a new challenge, the community is committed to carry out the task in high quality, fully supporting each other. However, not all members are active at the same level. There is a core group which is very active and often

comes up with new ideas. Other teachers are willing to participate in activities and share their expertise but there are some teachers who are more reserved and don't reveal their opinion very often.

Some teachers of this community formulated their opinion about collaboration as follows:

*“It is interesting in terms of professional relations that tasks have to be carried out in collaboration with teachers from different member schools. On the one hand this is very inspiring from the point of view of human relations and on the other hand new things can emerge from the cooperation.”*

*“Very often we come up with our own ideas, but it is not sure that it could have been used if we had not shared it with each other. The power of community is really apparent when together we can create a quality which could not have been created individually.”*

However, teachers also feel a pressure to perform their tasks at high quality level. Teachers mentioned that there is no time for relaxing and leaning back because new challenges appear quite every day which very often require an instant solution.

## **EQUITY**

The principal-in-charge has a clear view on how to deal with equity issues. First of all she believes that drop-out rates and the number of class failure have to be reduced:

*„The aim is to give all children the support they need to gain a certain level of knowledge, because I am sure that every pupil can show progress if they receive a thorough and thoughtful development.”*

Thus, the head of institution expects from all teaching staff that they deal with pupils at risk according to a systematic plan. Consequently, individual learning programmes need to be developed for the whole school year to support pupils at risk. Teacher communities contribute to this process by discussing the cases of pupils and they come up with plans for solution. Members of the team seem to have a strong motivation to achieve better results with their pupils. It seems that thanks to this attitude the number of class failure could be significantly reduced in the in the past few years.

In order to support the work of teachers so called **exercise databases** and other **interactive teaching materials** were created by the teacher learning communities which turned out to be a great help for the daily work. The databases and the interactive teaching materials are accessible for all teachers, not only for those who are members of the learning community, but for the whole teaching staff of the school complex.

## LEARNING

One of the greatest achievements of the communities is that a good flow of information and a lively professional exchange of experiences could be established among teachers of the different member schools. The younger generation of teachers can benefit from the experiences of teachers with a longer teaching practise and senior teachers are able to renew their teaching practices and try to follow the new trends in methodology. Teachers receive from one another concrete help and assistance if needed. Sometimes this means giving advices, sharing ideas and sometimes teachers offer hints and tips for a suitable teaching material or teaching method. It happens often that the members of the community prepare together a teaching material or they invent new exercises for the classroom. As an example one of the innovations of the *Art teacher learning community* can be mentioned. One of the art teachers paints a picture and the music teacher improvises music to the painting. The process can be also opposite so the music teacher plays a melody and the art teacher tries to paint a picture that fits to the mood of the music. The teachers liked this idea so much that they decided to introduce it in different schools and they also tried to find out together how this new exercise could be best introduced in the classroom and how they could involve their pupils in it.

Usually all teachers work in their own school on their own tasks, but then they come together as a community and present their work to the others which appears to be very inspiring for teachers from different schools. Usually they find some elements in the presentation or in the new exercise that they can build in their own practice. They carry out more work than teachers who are not members of one of the communities. Nevertheless, they do not experience the work in the community as a burden, because they see that their

teaching practise became more diverse, more colourful, and they are able to offer pupils and parents a larger scale of opportunities. So the new tasks brought new perspectives as well.

The communities very often receive assignments from outside the school e.g. from the local government but they experience this as a challenge which really inspires their work as a community. They try to do their best to cope with these tasks. For example, once they had to prepare giant puppets for a city celebration. In this case all members worked enthusiastically sharing the best of their knowledge to create a great product. However, it is also important to mention that assignments coming from external partners require a lot of extra work from the community which sometimes take the focus from their own collaborative learning activities.

Based on the opinion of teachers, community learning also facilitates individual learning because each teacher feels an internal motivation to show that she/he is able to perform at high quality level. Teachers feel a need to be in top form so that they are very motivated to continuous learning.

As far as the effect on pupils is concerned it seems that teacher learning communities can contribute to positive results in terms of pupils' outcomes because every teacher is motivated to bring out the best in their pupils.

## **FACILITATORS**

The complexity of the institution seems to be a great advantage and a factor that can facilitate collaborative learning. As the principal-in-charge said *“there is a large number of teachers with similar interests and aims who can come together and have a conversation on their everyday challenges. As an example, in a small school in the countryside there is maybe one mathematics teacher but in our case there are 10-12 teachers who can have a meeting and they can consult about various issues, they can get an insight into each other’s work, they can share their expertise, and this is what leads us to success.”*

Besides the institutional structure the leaders of all schools are very supportive towards the teacher learning communities. There is a weekly meeting of school leaders which also serves as a kind of 10th inter-institutional learning community. If the community has a problem they can turn to the school leaders who will surely discuss the issue. The flow of information

of the school leader gatherings is well established so the communities are informed practically about every development and decision made.

The school complex is relatively successful in networking with external institutions such as the local government or even with companies. This holds true for the internal relations among teacher communities, parent organisation or student government as well.

There is also a healthy rivalry between schools, as they all want to work on high quality standards and show good performance of pupils and this way they inspire one another.

### **BARRIERS**

In this case mainly personal characteristics can be mentioned as factors holding back the practice. Firstly, the age of the majority of teaching staff is over 53 years which means that these teachers have a different methodological culture compared to a younger generation of teachers so it is sometimes a challenge to show them the benefits of collaborative learning.

Secondly, the older generation of teachers will retire nearly at the same time and it is not easy to attract newly qualified teachers to teach in schools of Kazincbarcika this may lead to workforce shortage.

Finally, some member schools try to enroll the most skilful pupils from advantaged families because they do not really want to deal with pupils from disadvantaged social background. The reason for this might be that teachers tend to believe that pupils from disadvantaged background will be automatically low achievers and they are difficult to handle. As a consequence, they are afraid that they won't be able to show a significant improvement of pupils' outcomes. This is a quite harmful process because it could lead to segregation which needs to be handled among the member schools but there is a certain resistance at some schools end.