

COMMUNICATION OBJECTIVES OF MODERN SCHOOLS WITH STAND-POINT OF TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

KOMUNIKACIJSKI CILJEVI MODERNE ŠKOLE S GLEDIŠTA UČITELJA I UČENIKA

Nina Stropnik Kunič

Elementary School Louis Adamič, Grosuplje, Slovenia

Osnovna škola Louisa Adamiča, Grosuplje, Slovenija

Abstract

The article discusses the formulation of priority goals of a school in line with its developmental vision and the subsequent implementation of those in the classroom. It deals with the process of setting crucial teaching and learning goals at the school level, at the level of working groups and at the level of individual teachers. The article touches upon the process of devising action plans valid for entire working groups, as well as individual goals set within the same framework with the aim of fulfilling the school vision of the future educational work. Two goals are highlighted in the field of language learning: improving literacy as a learning goal and developing learning and working strategies as an educational goal. Within this framework special emphasis is put on developing reading comprehension and monitoring general student's progress in developing all language skills by means of a language portfolio. Activities will be carried out within the project set by Ministry of Education and Sport of Republic Slovenia, which is System of Quality Assessment and Assurance in the Field of Education (as part of Operational Programme for Human Resources Development for the period 2007-2013). The article also presents the process of gathering and analyzing the data, students' progress, and critical assessment of the process of self-evaluation, bearing in mind the overall goal of empowering the teachers and schools for the assessment and assurance of a quality learning process.

Sažetak

Članak se usredotočuje na kreiranje prioriternih ciljeva škole u skladu s vizijom škole te njihovom implementacijom u nastavni proces. Predstavljen je postupak kreiranja prioriternih ciljeva učenja i nastave na razini škole, stručnih aktiva te pojedinih učitelja. Tomu je posvećeno kreiranje akcijskih planova na razini stručnih aktiva i individualno postavljene prioriterni zadaci koji vode ostvarenju vizije škole. Nit vodilja praćenje je razvoja pismenosti kao obrazovnog cilja te jačanje radnih navika te navika učenja kao odgojni cilj kod nastave stranih jezika. Unutar tih krovnih ciljeva opisan je postupak poticanja razumijevanja pročitanoća i praćenje općeg napretka učenika pomoću jezičnog portfelja. Aktivnosti će biti provedene u okviru projekta Ministarstva za školstvo i sport Republike Slovenije *Utvrđivanje i osiguranje kvalitete u obrazovanju i osposobljavanju* (u okviru *Operativnoga programa razvoja ljudskih resursa za razdoblje 2007-2013*). Opisan je postupak prikupljanja i analiziranja podataka, učenikov napredak te kritička ocjena samoevaluacije u svjetlu cilja da se jača mogućnost učitelja i škola za utvrđivanje i osiguranje kvalitete.

Great demands are posed on the contemporary school. Not only should it respond to socio-cultural changes, economical changes, and technological changes, which reflect globalization,

digitalization and general development and adapt accordingly, it should in many ways anticipate the future trends and detect possible professional needs in order to equip students with the

knowledge, skills and learning strategies which would enable them to meet the forthcoming challenges, lead successful careers and effectively participate in various spheres of life. The future labour market will need not only employees capable of reproducing the knowledge, but being able of creatively inventing new knowledge, which will demand learning at the level of synthesis, with learning strategies such as association, capacity of making new combinations, and the ability to redefine a problem from an opposite angle or point of view. Veen /1/ is not an isolated example when he poses the following question: « Can the current education system respond to the needs of the new generations' learning approaches? Can schools respond to the challenges of a rapidly evolving information society? »

There is no doubt that schools should change, the questions, however, remain: how to adopt new approaches with satisfying learning results and how to successfully transfer innovative projects into a new educational context without the undertone of imposing them by force. In other words, every variation of the curriculum, teaching models, schooling technology and learning environment should be made cautiously and sensibly as well as systematically and consistently. First of all, changes should be implemented in the overall vision of the educational system redesign. Secondly, novelties imported from a different environment, within which they may function perfectly, should form a link with pre-existing concepts, rather than represent a complete rupture. In fact, every change is a process with new ideas working in conjunction with tradition, adapting refreshing insights to established approaches. Moreover, the concept of quality is valued differently in different environments and is far from being all-encompassing /2/. Thirdly, many authors /3/ support the idea that bottom-up approach functions better than top-down approach. Much more favourable results can be detected when the need for change arises directly from the school, or is at least felt as being necessary in that particular institution. Teachers base their willingness to try a different approach on their own practice with greater inner motivation. When personal need for change is present, new methods prove to be more efficient and effective. It should be borne in mind, however, that a similar vision of a particular change should be shared on the national level, providing the necessary encouragement and support. Sustainable changes, nevertheless, demand an indi-

vidual's disposition to at least partly depart from established models of thinking and perceiving and the willingness to accept alternative lines of thought. With the only constant in the future being the constant of continuous change, schools of the future should strive towards an open, co-operative and learning community with the capacity to alter and adapt.

The programme *System of Quality Assessment and Assurance in the Field of Education* (as part of Operational Programme for Human Resources Development for the period 2007-2013), sponsored by the *Ministry of Education and Sport of Republic Slovenia*, could be viewed within the fore mentioned context, that is favouring reforms stemming from the schools themselves rather than from external imposition. The project involves 74 institutions in the field of education and 4200 teachers and educators working in education and training organisations (from kindergartens, elementary and secondary schools to the university level). The aim is to equip individuals with the necessary knowledge to implement the model of external evaluation and self-evaluation. In that way school autonomy on the one hand, and unity at the national level on the other, may be achieved simultaneously. Furthermore, by developing the ability of evaluation and self-evaluation, the project aims to:

- contribute to a greater effectiveness of the educational system empowering individual teachers during the process
- develop a long-term system of educating evaluators at the national level
- empower individual teachers and trainers and enhance the culture of evaluation in the field of education
- incite information flow regarding the quality of education and encourage cooperation among interested public and educational institutions
- draw information from the process of evaluation and use them for further changes and improvements

The educational training on evaluation, which will conclude in 2013, is being carried out by the *National school of Leadership in Education*. Legally it is supported by 48th and 49th article as stated in *Zakon o organizaciji in financiranju vzgoje in izobraževanja (ZOFVI)* and 16th article as stated in *Zakon o poklicnem in strokovnem izobraževanju*

(ZPSI). The training builds on and evolves from the existing school practice, inherent teaching skills, knowledge pool and detected shortcomings. The approach throughout the training is learner-based, coordinated by the team for self-evaluation (the head teacher and two co-workers), carried out in form of workshops. At *Primary School Louis Adamič Grosuplje* those are as follows:

- Setting priority goals of learning and teaching
- Planning improvements and self-evaluation (activities, criteria)
- Monitoring improvements (collecting and analyzing the data)
- Assessing leadership and other factors in the course of the process of self-evaluation
- Analysis and reflection as the basis for self-evaluation
- Reports and long term planning of improvements
- Self-evaluating school model

The initial phase *Setting priority goals of learning and teaching* has been carried out through several steps. In the first step each participant listed five curriculum based learning goals that he or she wished his or her students to accomplish till the end of schooling. Furthermore, each individual listed five social skills, values or standpoints he or she would like his or her students to internalize till the end of schooling. After that, group discussion followed, where each goal was ranked according to importance each individual assigned to it. All rankings were gathered and new points were allocated according to the hierarchical importance of the goal. After group consensus was reached, the variety of educational and learning goals was narrowed and finally the discussion converged into a single educational and learning goal shared, and felt as crucial, by all the participants. Then the group discussion proceeded towards a more tangible realization of the goal, namely, the participants had to list students' characteristics and activities upon which the teacher could decide whether the goal has been achieved or not. Furthermore, the group had to decide upon three school activities with which we could move towards the accomplishment of the set goals. According to points allocated to individual goals two priority goals were set: improving literacy as a learning goal and developing learning and working strategies as an educational

goal. As far as improving literacy goes, different aspects of the concept were highlighted. They included: transforming information from a linear text in form of a mind map; extracting information from the text to compete charts, tables, graphs; developing different reading techniques; answering comprehension check answers, searching the information on the world wide web; writing notes, invitations, requests and several others. Developing learning and working strategies within the context of prioritizing an educational goal went in the direction of discussing working habits, learning methods and learning skills techniques and strategies. Three factors contributing to the development of this goal were outlined: parents by providing external motivation, positive example and control, teachers with professional knowledge of children development and their capability of choosing the most suitable learning strategy for a particular developmental phase and learners' active role in the process of education.

The workshop concluded in the general feeling of accomplishment, without ignoring the obligatory and always present trace of skepticism, as well. Nevertheless, the sense of positive, solution-oriented feeling was probably due to the fact that the priority goals were set gradually, stemming from every individual's standpoint. When in the course of the ranking process various opinions converged into one goal that was not too abstract or farfetched. In fact, due to the process itself, it was such, that individuals were able to relate to personally, with intrinsic motivation and personal involvement. In other words, the goal, determined as a result of discussion and in the atmosphere of open dialogue among peers and "critical friends" had perhaps a better starting point and a prospect to succeed than the same goal imposed, for example, from the Ministry of Education, in the form of a top-down approach.

In the subsequent phase *Planning improvements and self-evaluation* the discussion moved towards the level of professional working groups and it concentrated on each individual subject matter and the necessity to plan suitable activities to enable and monitor improvement. Before embarking on the task of planning, the importance of the following issues had to be established: why is it important to plan our future actions, what do we plan, who devises the plans and how do we plan effectively? Many advantages of effective planning were mentioned such as: realistic attainment

of the goals in the actual practice; correlation between existing activities and current documentation; better general overview that teachers, working groups and school in general have over the improvements; empowerment of individuals with new skills and additional knowledge; interdisciplinary and intercurriculum cooperation, higher responsiveness to demands and expectation; easier formulation of follow-up reports; unification at the national school level in the sense of common outline of priority goals, common vision, unified pro-change course of action, common decision taking. Among the most commonly voiced drawbacks were: time toll; goals, which are either too broad or too vague; too many activities and criteria, which results in too much data to process; unclear relations between various levels of the evaluation project; missing link between school documentation and activities, which were carried out; general working atmosphere and culture, paper work overload.

For effective self-evaluation certain starting points had to be established. First of all there are formal premises that range from legally set norms of teachers' jurisdiction and responsibility, to more or less standardized educational and learning goals. It can't be ignored that schools coexist with other schools within the network of public schooling, with approximately the same pedagogical premise of educating children according to the school vision and its code of values stated in the internal school act *Vzgojni načrt*. Within that context, external forms of examination in forms of *Nacionalno preverjanje znanja* and *Matura exam* set, in a certain degree, a comparable quality scale. If we move beyond the national level, schools relate to findings from various international projects and accept trends arising from European schooling systems or those existing in the educational field worldwide. Furthermore, effective planning requires a comprehensive analysis of the current state of affairs, which can be carried out via self-evaluating questionnaire, or various types of SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) /4/ as a framework for analyzing school's internal strengths and weaknesses, as well as the opportunities and threats, which might be faced during the process. There are also obligatory annular interviews with teachers, carried out by the head teacher, through which individual teachers can voice their visions at a more personal and perhaps more straightforward level. Another already existent instrument of analysis is

a document *Letni delovni načrt šole* (*Annual school work report*), a formal document, supplementing teachers' personal work plans (*Osebniletni delovni načrt strokovnega delavca*) on the basis of which the school enables and systematically fulfills goals as determined by the legislation and the realization of which is examined at the end of each school year. In the overall picture of planning, in order to devise plausible plans with attainable goals, we had to negotiate between several aspects during our activity of plan formulation. They were as follows: "what is legally required and has to be done, what is expected and should have been done, what is desired and is hoped to be done, and finally, what is the real state of affairs and has to be taken in consideration." /5/ Bearing all that in mind, the workshop at *Elementary School Louis Adamič Grosuplje* proceeded to another level in the process of self-evaluation, that is devising action plans of improvements. They were to be devised in the context of working groups, in our case teachers of foreign languages. In those we should have incorporated the vision of the school; principal area of quality improvement; priority goals; activities which would enable the accomplishment of the goal; criteria for monitoring the attainment of the goals, schedule of data collecting, monitoring and assessing the results; and possible contributing factors, which influence the final result. While considering the goals we were encouraged to make use of verbs with positive connotation, such as: improve, increase, change, introduce, incite, ecc. and to decide for goals, which are SMARTER. That is: **S**pecific; **M**easurable, motivational; **A**chievable, attainable, accountable; **R**ealistic, relevant; **T**ime specific, tangible; **E**cological, ethical, evaluative ;**R**ewarding /6/. When deciding on the goal within the context of priority goals determined at the school level, which were improving literacy as a learning goal and developing learning and working strategies as an educational goal, individual working groups had to consider which characteristics and activities could be anticipated from the students, which activities would be carried out in the function of monitoring the improvement, and under which set of criteria the progress would be evaluated. The foreign language teachers' group opted for developing reading comprehension as a means of improving literacy and monitoring general students' progress in developing all language skills by means of a language portfolio as fulfilling the educational goal of developing learning and

working strategies. As far as criteria for developing reading comprehension goes, we agreed upon analysis carried out through written exams. Even though the capacity of extracting appropriate information to successfully solve reading comprehension related tasks would be developed during school lessons, home assignments and various projects, the data for measuring the extent of improvement would be gathered by means of two written exams, one at the beginning of the school year and the other at the conclusion of it. The aim was to measure the number of misinterpretations and wrong answers and discuss the possible causes. The aim of language portfolio was to raise critical awareness of students, leading them towards independent life-long learning. The benefits of a language portfolio are, according to the *Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe*, "to support the development of learner autonomy, plurilingualism and intercultural awareness and competence; to allow users to record their language learning achievements and their experience of learning and using languages." (Council of Europe, 2011). By being able to evaluate their progress in language learning, by setting their own goals and voicing their attitude to language learning at large, we attempted to evoke the idea of taking part in sharing the responsibility for their success, or, in the opposite case, the lack of it. In addition, in a form of a questionnaire we collected data about their attitude towards foreign language learning, asking them what they could do themselves to improve their proficiency in the English language and what they had actually done to achieve that.

In the course of data gathering and monitoring of the development of the priority goals, another workshop took place. The aim was to discuss the advantages and eventual limitations of the process of evaluation. It turned out that the majority of participants felt that the greatest impact was felt in the improvement of students' performance, as well as in the increase of the effectiveness of teaching and learning processes. Furthermore, many believed it improved the general atmosphere and the culture of dialogue and favoured productive cooperation among teachers. Some pointed out that the sense of responsibility for the quality of education, shared by all employees, had increased. It was also noted that activities and school projects which had been initiated and were already taking place prior to the beginning of the process of self-evaluation, had witnessed a new

momentum during the process of evaluation, which also contributed to a better link between projects themselves. As far as limitations are concerned, the discussion concentrated on the doubts concerning the degree of effectiveness of the analysis and its general impact upon the learning and teaching processes, which was on the other hand also one of the advantages chosen by many. The discussion concluded with the reflection upon each individual's eventual contribution towards increasing the efficiency of the process of evaluation. Since the process of evaluation hasn't been concluded yet, the concluding analysis still awaits us. Nevertheless it must be noted that our senses have been sharpened and we have become more aware of the existing strong points in school activities as well as of the shortcomings of the educational practice. Moreover, by debating about the priority goals with students and parents at teacher-parent meetings and council gatherings, the process has connected all the crucial participants, who all contribute their share to make learning effective and efficient and stress its life-long component. Moreover, students have gradually become much more active in accepting their share of responsibility with so far quite encouraging results. Even though they are no longer the sole responsible factor for learning, teachers are, nevertheless, still the promoters and the driving force of changes, which can, however, happen only if teachers themselves have inner motivation to solve the problem, possess the necessary knowledge to do it and have confidence in the outcome /7/. In the education and training process, it is important to teach students not only to fulfill the objectives of a particular education programme, but it is also vital to teach them to independently set their own objectives in developing their future careers. By self-evaluation teacher's weaknesses may be exposed as well, which makes the teacher's figure within the schooling context more vulnerable than it used to be. Even though self-evaluation, in one form or another, should be the ever-present constant in school work, quality cannot be enforced nor guaranteed by any education system, legislation or outside institution. The focus on quality, should, however be structured and permanent and the responsibility of each participant in the learning process.

Notes

- /1/ Veen, W. 2007. *Homo Zappiens and the Need for New Education Systems*, Delft University of Technology, oecd.org
- /2/ Trnavčević, A. (ur). 2008. *Evalvacija zadovoljstva s šolo. Metodološki in vsebinski izzivi*. Ljubljana: Šola za ravnatelje.
- /3/ Komljanc, N. and F. Cankar, T. Majer, and G. Mohorčič. 2007. *Innovation Projects as an Element of Slovenian School Practice Modernisation*. The National Education Institute, Slovenia. V: *Professional Challenges for School Effectiveness and Improvement in the Era of Accountability: Proceedings of the 20th Annual World ICSEI Congress*
- /4/ Zupančič, J. 2011. *Usposabljanje za samoevalvacijo (delavnice)*
- /5/ Ibidem
- /6/ Ibidem
- /7/ Messner, E. 2005. *Kaj naredi samoevalvacijo uspešno? V: Ustvarimo ogledalo za svojo šolo, Comenius 3 mreža o samoevalvaciji*. Str. 29 – 34. Ljubljana. Komisija za ugotavljanje in zagotavljanje kakovosti v vrtcih, osnovnih in srednjih šolah
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9. *Vodenje v vzgoji in izobraževanju (2010)*, letnik 8, številka 2. URN:NBN:SI:DOC-T5BPOMBN from <http://www.dlib.si>
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