

Analysis of LeLeNet Output 2 interviews from Slovenian Partner

1. A short description of the situation related to school networking in Slovenia

Networking among schools has a relatively long tradition in Slovenia. It has been initiated to what Muijs et al (2011) call as “experiment with networks and collaborative approaches to improvement.” In late 1990’s National School for Leadership in Education (NSLE, hereinafter) started a national project called Networks of Learning Schools. It was based on the idea of school improvement with its main focus on schools as the centres of change. The project emphasised collaborative learning in schools and among schools with 6 to 10 schools in a network. Since then Networks of Learning schools have included more than one third of schools in Slovenia. School networks have been initiated by various actors, such as Ministry of Education and Sport, National Institute of Education, Centre for Vocational Education and NSLE. They are seen as a means of facilitating school improvement, innovation but also as contributing to large-scale reforms.

In general, we can talk about networks aiming at school improvement, and those supporting large-scale reforms. Among the first we would place Networks of Learning Schools, traditional networks based on regional clue, and different networks that are developed by schools themselves (i.e. for developing new learning approaches, strategies for working with children with special needs, common events for pupils and/or teachers). Finally, networks among schools are also formed in different projects either national or international. Most of these projects are focused on improvement of teaching and learning.

The second “type” of networks has become ever more popular by educational politicians. It started with extensive reform of basic education where a group (network) of schools piloted the new curriculum and organisation. They were selected by the Ministry and strongly supported both financially and professionally. After the piloting phase they were obliged to form their own networks to support other schools. A similar strategy was used in the case of the reform of vocational education and also for minor policy initiatives. Lately school networking is being used as part of setting/implementing national school quality system. The so called ‘developmental schools’ support ‘pilot schools’ at building the capacity for self-evaluation. Networking is facilitated by external institutions (National School for Leadership in Education, National Education Institute...).

2. The aims of the data gathering

The aim of data gathering by means of conducting interviews was to get to know the situation and needs of head teachers in the area of managing networks in individual partner countries and to make the analysis as a base for the training module.

3. Methodology

Two group interviews were conducted with altogether five experienced head teachers participating in different programmes offered by the National School for Leadership in Education (i.e. Headship Development, Mentoring Newly Appointed Head teachers). The

interviews took place in March (15th and 28th), each lasting about 45 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcripts were made for data analysis. All head teachers lead schools with pupils aged 6-15 years.

4. Participants

<i>fictitious name of head teacher*</i>	<i>Size of the city</i>	<i>Size of the school (no. of pupils)</i>	<i>Length of the practice of the head teacher</i>
SI1 (female) Suzana	1000	99	6 years
SI2 (female) Marija	3000	350	5 years
SI3 (female) Matejka	1546	113	5 years
SI4 (female) Irena	23000	412	22 years
SI5 (female) Zvonka	3150	284	14 years

5. The results of the analysis

5.1. Linking networking with teaching and learning

Collaboration/Networking seems to be an inevitable part of teachers' work inside as well as between different schools. For instance: *„Teachers share good practice, different teaching approaches, they present what they are doing in classrooms, they do peer observations so that other teachers can start using these approaches in their classrooms. “* It is very important, *„that teachers receive feedback about where they are and also approval of their practice so that they can use something from other teachers who they find better or different, new from what they are usually practising. They include it in their own practice in a positive critical way. “* In the case of a small school, one HT said: *„We are a really small school and we collaborate enormously if we want to implement anything. “* In this case it is not a matter of choice but a 'must'.

There is collaboration between schools as well: *„We collaborate with a neighbouring school, we are carrying out a project together, we share practice in a way. We are one of the first schools that introduced learning walks. At the moment our teachers cannot visit other schools, we invite head teachers and teachers to our school, to show our good practice. But we always include one of our teachers into the learning walk. In this way they collaborate and good practice can be shared. So the group make presentations at international conferences as a group so that they can support each other. “* Or as another HT says: *„In practice, we have very good networks among pre-schools. This is the result of our work, development or work in subject groups. Our subject group leaders collaborate and network with other pre-schools at the regional level in different ways. I find this as an innovation and it works very well. They are very enthusiastic when they come back from other schools, institutes, pre-schools and afterwards they bring this new practice into our school. And vice versa: those who have visited our school have also been excited. “*

As one of the HTs stated, there is a link between networking, teaching and learning: „*The quality of lessons has been improved because pupils we work with are not the same they used to be many years ago. Consequently, teaching methods should be up-dated; the approach itself can most easily be upgraded when you learn about your colleagues'practice. "It is important however to get feedback about the results or the impact, especially from the students: „In my opinion specific experience how to meet the pupils'needs is to get feedback from pupils. This year we work on a project about values and we linked it very well to other activities. School fund also has to be mentioned. We raise high amounts of money mostly by collecting waste paper. We targeted all pupils and this year we will make wardrobes. We received very positive feedback at pupils'parliament, pupils praised a lot. It was very nice to receive direct feedback from our clients. So that they know, we gave meaning to our goal and to our activities and now this award. They have identified themselves with it, they have the sense of belonging, and these wardrobes are fruit of their labours. We also seek for feedback during our routine activities, we have it here, and we have also pupils'feedback. "*

And the impact was also mentioned: „*... it is positive and teachers also benefit from it. That they realise that it can impact the improvement of their practice. For example, pupils may reach the learning goals faster when we discuss this during peer observation. I find this very important when we talk about networking. "*

5.2. Topics for networking (both, inside and/or outside of schools)

There seem to be many different topics that ground teacher networking in and between schools mainly aimed at improving teacher practice and students' activities and achievements.

In school networking:

All activities with a common goal	Statement: „ <i>In our school we talk about activity days, cross-curricular planning, all activities related to common goals, such as festive fairs or projects. "</i>
Digitalization/Computer Literacy	Statement: „ <i>For example Cloud 365 (Microsoft tool) to develop e-notebook as support to formative assessment. Before formative assessment we worked on gifted pupils, we introduced e-contents and e-textbooks. "</i> Statement: „ <i>During the last two years we have been systematically worked on computer literacy because we reviewed pupils'knowledge and we planned what we will teach them. We produced a shared document that everybody can look at. So when pupils come to the upper grades we know exactly what they should have known by then. "</i>
Responsibility	Statement: „ <i>Responsibility is one of the elements in our school. Responsibility in the classroom, responsibility for one's knowledge and for one's own life. Let's take one of the elements within the formative assessment: it promotes pupils' responsibility for their learning while the teacher's role is how to teach for such learning. One aspect of creativity is networking among schools in order to get ideas to be creative and to share the ideas. So you can grow personally. Responsibility in the</i>

	<i>classroom, responsibility for knowledge for living. “</i>
Activity days	<i>Statement: „Mostly we collaborate during the so called activity days when everybody is included every day. For example, during days of natural science not only natural science but also social science teachers are involved. So, activity days are a super opportunity. We have been working on them for quite some time. We developed a common framework for preparation, implementation of activities and after some years we added evaluation. We have findings from performers as well as from pupils. “</i>
School projects	<i>Statement: „We have a whole year common project every year. This year it is intended to the development of patriotism or patriotic awareness, titled Our wings grow from our roots. It is an upgrade of 650th anniversary of Novo mesto. Last year we joined the project The growing book. We have some common activities within this project. Last year we published a book. “</i>

Between schools

Joint school events and projects	<i>Statement: „Then it could be some common performance with two teachers who prepare it. They collaborate very well and learn a lot from each other. “</i>
Organizational issues	<i>Statement: „ We collaborate and form networks with other schools or institutes because of specific organisational or practical matters. For example, we borrow cross-country ski equipment among each other. “</i>
Transition of children and pupils	<i>Statement: „Collaboration is already planned and led. We named it For easier transition to school. All schools with pre-school units had a kind of monitoring and some training on this topic. Then we collaborate with secondary schools on career advising. “</i>
Gifted pupils	<i>Statement: „We will start to develop activities for gifted children in a community with 6 schools. We have realised that we would successfully develop this area and we could start to perform the activities. So we will link teachers in different schools. “</i>
Networking of subject working groups leaders	<i>Statement: „In practice, we have very good networks among pre-schools. This is the result of our subject group leaders collaborate and network with other pre-schools at the regional level in different ways. I find this as an innovation and it works very well. They are very enthusiastic when they come back from other schools, institutes, pre-schools and afterwards they bring this new practice into our school. And vice versa: those who have visited our school have also been excited. “</i>

5.3 Teachers motivation to networking

The group interview gave only the perspective of the head teachers. Here are some arguments given by our HTs that give some ideas about teacher motivation. Seems alike HTs strongly believe that teachers need different forms of networking/collaboration in order to do their job the best way possible. It is for keeping up with changes in the world/society,

being informatively accountable to stakeholders and growing professionally in a trustworthy environment.

Knowledge	Statement: <i>“You can get more knowledge. If you do such kind of a job, you should grow and enrich your competence. On the other hand, generation of children change. Times are not the same, you should adapt to new times and places. “</i>
Community of learning – or perhaps self-confidence	Statement: <i>“On the other hand, if it is about such community that is willing to learn, you can easier cope with external influence from parents or Ministry. You can cope with challenges. If you have support from your colleagues, you can really learn. “</i> Statement: <i>„Teachers have made strong alliances due to collaboration. They trust each other, they know that they can support each other, they see that somebody is strong in one area, they value each other, they can praise each other and receive praise, they grow from within and make professional progress.“</i> Statement: <i>„They are not the ones who are alone in the classroom; they can feel support from colleagues and from the head teacher. They dare to ask, they perform in public more confidently and they also propose changes. “</i>
School climate – relationships	Statement: <i>„Teachers have made strong alliances due to collaboration. They trust each other, they know that they can support each other, they see that somebody is strong in one area, they value each other, they can praise each other and receive praise, they grow from within and make professional progress.“</i>

5.4 The role of HT in networking

For teacher networking, HTs agree that: *„The head teachers must also support it. One cannot expect it self-explanatory if you are not a part of the process. “Or. „You cannot just say: well, let’s collaborate. A lot of opportunities should be set. „It is never true that something may last forever. You should constantly get involved and monitor where we are. “*

Based on the interview answers we could say that HT to be successful in initiating and sustaining teachers’ networks needs:

- to know his or her staff really well,
- to be professionally informed and knowledgeable about pedagogical questions (learning),
- to have a clear vision about school development and learning,
- to know different strategies for motivating teachers to collaborate
- to facilitate/guide networking/collaboration of teachers in general, so that everybody is involved at some point and to a certain extent.

„I can see an additional, connective role of the head teacher. I feel that in our case my role is less of the content or planning nature, it is more about creating conditions. For example, the financial part or in organisation, such as what else we could do. This is my part. “

5.5 The benefits from networking

HTs report different benefits for teachers and students in their schools that support the idea of initiating, supporting and sustaining of teacher networking

Benefits for the teachers

- sharing good practice
- collaborative learning
- approval of strengths and identifying weaknesses
- collaborative problem solving
- developing creativity through networking among schools
-

Benefits for the students

- Improving quality of lessons with appropriate teaching methods
- Higher activity of pupils, effectiveness, engagement and better knowledge „...*how to outwit them that learning is cool and we have realised that pupils are more engaged, they like working and take on an active role.*“
- Motivation for learning „...*raising intrinsic motivation when pupils somehow see the teacher acts as a role model who enriches his/her teaching with teaching methods, more up-to-date approaches that are more familiar to pupils. Thus they directly motivate for learning. Intrinsic motivation is important for both.*“
- Transfer of knowledge from teachers to pupils. „*Then the transfer to teachers began and at the same time teachers, who participated in training, transferred their knowledge to pupils. There was also e-portfolio for pupils to record their achievements and goals. We realised that it is quite different and more feasible if you record something or if you only speak about or keep in your mind. You can take a more active role. It proved very well, pupils accepted it immediately. They took over the new way of learning. Later The Institute of Education opened a new tab 'My learning' for pupils to set their goals, criteria and assessment of learning together with teachers.*“

5.6 Strategies of HT for networking support ...

HTs talked about different strategies of initiation, supporting and sustaining teachers' networks. One of the very clear messages was that they need to be consistent in terms of not just setting the environment for networking to happen but also to be aware of the fact that it **needs to be monitored and evaluated**. „*It is important to ask yourself about how to sustain good networks. You have to add something all the time, monitor, give your best, praise teachers, search for opportunities and not just let it be.*“ „*We do not have projects for the projects sake, but to improve our ways and methods of teaching. When we reach a certain phase of finishing the project we do really end it. We want to sustain or even upgrade what we have achieved.*“ „*If we want to sustain good practice, it is sometimes necessary to control a little bit.*“

The head teacher is the one, „**who must be present and support it.**“ HT also **needs to know the topic/content of networking**: „*I as a head teacher was the first to attend 3-day training for e-portfolio, [...] before we joined the project. The teacher project group was*

trained, they underwent the same process and only after that we started this innovation with all teaching staff. We are a small school and everybody always participates. “

For successful networking all teachers need to collaborate, but „I never push that everybody should work at the same level but it is **necessary that everybody participates actively at different pace.** “ In order to do that, HT **needs to know his or her staff.** *“You must teach yourself and your staff all the time how to communicate, how to collaborate, what team work means. If you know your staff you can notice who is not a team worker so you do not push him/her. How to continue? You must tell other colleagues that someone is not a team worker and should be treated a bit differently. We cannot change him/her, we can just accept it and treat such people differently. These are skills that you should seek for and a lot of self-education is needed. “* HT **needs to listen to what teachers say and suggest, search for staff support when introducing new initiatives.** HT needs to:

- *„praise teachers and be interested in their work“;*
- *“encourage them to investigate their own practice“;*
- *„support peer observation, professional discussion and participate in them“;*
- *„communication is very important, that we can sit together, organise effective meetings with concrete conclusions and agreement about who will do what. “*

It is important that not too many activities go on *“it is necessary to balance”.*

5.7 Limits, challenges and needs of HT

HTs, no matter the size of the school or years of headship all agree that there are limits and challenges they face with teacher networking:

- *„As a relatively new head teacher I can say that, **I lack of knowledge.** “ – Expert knowledge in a specific area.*
- *„I miss networking“ – among head teachers – „sometimes you network with someone and realise that it is not only you who has problems but there are more who share the same ones, you can get some hints... A different aspect may open so that you do not go round in circle, you can look upon a problem from outside. “... and once again: **„Perhaps we head teachers really do not have enough networks. We should be better connected so that we can trust each other and learn from each other. NSLE is the right partner for this. “***
- **Establishing stimulating learning environment for teachers:** *„In our school there might have been the problem of acceptance among teachers: I like you, I do not like you... I will not collaborate. Communication was very important and giving people a lot of opportunities to spend time together, to work together, to get to know each other gradually, to trust each other, to rely on each other. And to dare to ask if you do not know something and to know that nobody would make fun of you if you do not know everything. “*
- **Encouraging teachers to take the initiative for their own professional development** *„Not many classroom teachers can easily be promoted to their professional title; it is difficult for them to get credits. We had a serious discussion (it is difficult to call it professional discussion) when I tried to encourage them to reflect, to plan or develop their professional path. So I wanted to extend their role, to make their own planning, find opportunities in their everyday teaching. They should plan how they can improve*

their practice in finally be promoted to the title. It is difficult for classroom teachers; it is much easier for subject teachers. The latter have many competitions, projects – and this might be a challenge for the former ones. They were very happy after our meeting and came to tell me that I had really encouraged them to reflect and they even organised meetings afterwards.“

- *„To place the same teachers to key positions. “ It is however important that you distribute it somehow evenly, „and thus give opportunities for learning to the others. “*
-

5.8 Short summary

5 head teachers with different years of experience as well as different size of the school agreed that teacher networking/collaboration is one of the important elements of teacher professionalism. There are many good examples of collaboration in and between schools that empower teachers to do better, try new things, exchange ideas and improve classroom practice and potentially pupils' attainments. As HTs state it is not taken-for-granted, that good networks (i.e. with clear goal, focus on learning etc.) will just continue nor that they will even start. They all agree that one of the most important roles of the HT is to set the environment and opportunities for networking to happen. In order to do that, he or she need to know the staff well, to be professionally informed and knowledgeable about pedagogical questions (learning), to have a clear vision about school development and learning, to know different strategies for motivating teachers to collaborate, to facilitate/guide networking/collaboration of teachers in general, so that everybody is involved at some point and to a certain extent etc. In terms of challenges and needs, HTs report they lack certain knowledge about networking/collaboration (especially at the beginning of his career), pedagogical questions, ideas on how to set an open and safe learning environment for teachers. They also miss opportunities for Hts professional networking/collaboration – to share ideas and learn from each other.