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Creating a Platform for Teacher Mentors: A Project on Teachers' Professional Development in Zlín Region in the Czech Republic

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Abstract

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This paper presents experiences with creating a platform for teachers' training as well as the results from selected instructional modules. The aim of the project is to provide a specialized professional assistance to teachers at all stages of their professional development. The project is based on a holistic model of teachers' training that is structured for novice teachers, expert teachers and teacher mentors. The project includes sixteen differentiated instructional modules suited to the actual needs of participating teachers. The project was created thanks to the Fund for Education Policy of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic and it has been implemented by the Faculty of Humanities at Tomas Bata University in Zlín since 2014. The paper also deals with the selected outcomes of the project evaluation.

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1. Process of Adaptation of a New Teacher with Teacher Mentor's Involvement

Teaching staff includes teachers of various ages, with varying amount of professional experience, various relationships and personality traits. All these and other factors affect the dynamics of the work team which in turn influences the school climate. Novice teachers also take part in this structure and apart from adjusting to the new environment, they must undergo an adaptation process. The headmaster can decide to pair the novice teachers with teacher mentors. Together, both parties in this relationship



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can create their own project of adaptation training. The choice of a mentor is a sensitive process because mentor should be an experienced and great teacher who has the potential to guide and help younger colleagues professionally. However, it is also important to choose such a person that can handle feedback even from a younger colleague. (Wiegerová et al., 2015)

1.1 Situation in the Czech School System

Professional growth of teachers and career system formation of educators plays a relevant role in the current educational discourse in the Czech Republic. When comparing the situation of novice teachers in other countries, it becomes clear that unfortunately, we are disadvantaged by the fact that the position of a teacher mentor is not rooted in current legislation and is in no way formally included in our educational system. This means that each school invents their own solution for the adaptation of newcomers and to a certain extent, it is a task for the headmaster of the school. As an example, we can observe the situation in the Slovak Republic, our neighbouring country, where the situation is fundamentally different. There, each novice teacher is officially assigned a teacher mentor (called “introducing teacher”) who provide guidance to novice teacher for at least three months. However, this time often extends to even 2 years. Headmasters of Slovak schools have full autonomy in developing adaptation programs whose content is fully under their control. Other countries (e.g. Finland or Germany) have different requirements regarding time for the adaptation of novice teachers. Particular steps are also the responsibility of each school and its management (Wiegerová et al., 2015). The experience with the programs offering support for the novice teachers in America are presented in the study by Smith and Ingersoll (2004). These scholars declare that the presence of teacher mentors from the same subject field has a positive impact on novice teachers, as does participation in collective programs for novice teachers.

The need to discuss the problems of novice teachers has been a recurring problem in the Czech Republic (e.g. Pířová, 1999, Podlahová, 2004 Lazarová, 2010) and it was also the starting point for the intention to create a project that would help novice teachers in the adaptation process and at the same time it would create a platform for teachers mentors. The project, presented in this paper, reflects the current needs of teachers in the Zlín region in the Czech Republic.

2. From Novice Teacher to Teacher Mentor (Supporting Strategies for Education of Teachers in the Zlín Region)

The project functions in concordance with the Strategic Plan of Education and Development of the School System in the Czech Republic, which supports the improvement of quality of education, new methods of school evaluation and also innovations in the educational process. The target group includes novice teachers at primary and secondary schools, as well as in kindergartens. Part of the target group are also the teachers who can be perceived as advanced beginners, competent teachers and teachers experts who could become good mentors for the novice teachers.

2.1 Instructional Modules of the Project

The support for teachers is provided in the form of instructional modules. Each module is a self-contained course for a particular target group of teachers. Each module is for 10-20 teachers who can

participate in the learning process for free, as long as the module is part of the project. Each module includes 90 hours of contact instruction and 40 hours of individual teacher's reflective tasks.

1. *Support During the Adaptation of Novice Teachers in the School Environment*: This module offers assistance to novice teachers during their adaptation process in the school environment. It instructs novice teachers about cooperation strategies between other teachers in the teaching staff, cooperation with parents, and cooperation with teacher mentors. Target group: novice teachers at preschools and primary schools.

2. *Support of Teamwork among Teachers on the Teaching Staff*: This instructional module offers knowledge on team leadership, cooperation and self-reflection regarding one's attitude towards working in a team. Major focus will be on the activating teaching methods and self-reflective techniques. Target group: teacher mentors.

3. *Support of the Project Methods and Cooperative Teaching at Preschools, Primary Schools and Secondary Schools in the Zlín Region*: This instructional module introduces teachers to innovative instructional methods and forms. It focuses on project methods and cooperative teaching. It provides examples of the main features and principles of project and cooperative teaching and their application. It also suggests appropriate forms of assessment and self-assessment of children and pupils. Practical output of the module is teacher's lesson plan that uses the project method. Target group: primary school teachers.

4. *Specific Instructional Modes in One-room Schools*: This instructional module introduces participants to the organization of the teaching process in one-room schools. It shows examples of traditional instructional methods, which include both teacher's presentation of the subject matter and independent pupils' learning. However, it also includes less traditional instructional modes, such as streaming and individualization, which - in accordance with principles of inclusive pedagogy - does not stream pupils by age or by any other characteristics. Target group: teachers at primary one-room schools.

5. *Using Pupils' Portfolios*: The aim of this module is to acquaint participants with pupils' portfolios and to instruct them how to use it in presentation of qualitative outcomes of the learning process. This is in accordance with the holistic teacher professionalization model. Participants will also be motivated to work with pupils' portfolios and also to do research with it. Target group: primary and secondary school teachers in the Zlín region, and teachers at one-room schools.

6. *Reflective Techniques in Teacher's Practice. Self-regulation*: This module focuses on usage of reflective techniques. Participants acquire general knowledge regarding reflecting on their own instructional strategies and methods. With the help of practical exercises and role playing, the participants acquire fundamental experience with selected reflective techniques. Target group: novice teachers at primary and secondary schools.

7. *Evaluation and Self-evaluation Strategies of Teachers at Preschools, Primary and Secondary Schools in the Zlín Region*: This instructional module caters for the needs of teachers in the Zlín region regarding evaluation and self-evaluation of schools. It offers information on the recent trends in school evaluation, especially on self-evaluation of schools. Target group: teachers at preschools, primary and secondary schools in the Zlín region, and teachers at one-room school.

8. *Support in Presentation of Teaching Experiences in a Foreign Language:* This module is practically oriented and it focuses on practicing the skills that are necessary for effective presentation. The main focus is on practical training of individual skills; theoretical knowledge concerning the presentation will be minimal. Participants will be able to observe their own progress regarding the changes in their attitudes, knowledge and skills. They would later be able to use these skills when training their pupils. Target group: teachers at preschools, primary and secondary schools in the Zlín region, and teachers at one-room schools.

9. *School Networking and Training of Supervising Teachers to Support the Teaching Practice of Tomas Bata University Students:* This module offers a possibility to improve the competences of those teacher mentors who participate in training of the new generation of teachers. Target group: teacher mentors who cooperate with faculty as supervising teachers.

10. *Training of a Teacher Mentor:* This module focuses on creating a concept of mentor's work at preschools and primary schools. It demonstrates strategies that support quality work of a teacher mentor at school. The module also shows the possibilities of creation and subsequent coordination of adaptation programme for novice teachers. Target group: teacher mentors for preschools and primary school.

11. *Analysis of Teacher's Work with Ill Children:* This module offers an overview of the most common children's illnesses, health risk factors and illness prevention. It also presents skills on how to work with ill children at schools, how to create positive environment for them and, if necessary, how to provide first aid in life-threatening situations. Target group: teachers at preschools, primary and secondary schools in the Zlín region.

12. *Methods of Processing Data from Self-evaluation of Schools:* This module caters for the needs of teachers in the Zlín region regarding analysis of data from self-evaluation of schools. It offers supportive strategies aiming at effective statistic data processing. The aim of this module is also to create a platform for cooperation between schools and teachers in the Zlín region who deal with the self-evaluation and development. It offers a chance of competence development for teachers, but also a chance to implement innovations in the self-evaluation processes. Target group: teachers at preschools, primary and secondary schools in the Zlín region and teachers at one-room schools.

13. *Preparing a High-quality Instructional Project:* This module provides an opportunity to clarify the basic steps in preparation and application of the project theory and integrated thematic education. It also enables participants to prepare lesson plans for their courses. Target group: novice teachers at primary schools

14. *Acquiring Strategies for Improving Teachers' Memory Skills:* This module offers professional knowledge regarding memory functions in connection with conditions for effective mental work. Participants learn a range of techniques that improve the learning of various types of material. Target group: novice teachers at preschools, primary and secondary schools in the Zlín region.

15. *Dealing with Children with Learning Disabilities:* This module focuses on introducing the participants to diagnostics, prevention, compensation and re-education of pupils with learning disabilities. Participating novice teachers will acquire skills in dealing with children with specific learning disabilities. The experienced teachers/mentors will refresh their already acquired skills, which

they are to provide for novice teachers. Participants will also learn of the newest trends in dealing with children with specific disabilities. Target group: novice teachers, experienced teachers and teacher mentors at primary schools.

16. Schools' Strategies in Cooperating with Parents: This module offers both traditional and modern strategies in cooperation between the school and families. These strategies have originated abroad but have also been tried out in the Czech Republic with very good results. Target groups: novice teachers of preschools and primary schools.

(Wiegerová, Gavora, & Navrátilová, 2016)

2. 2 Current Stage of the Project

After three years of implementation, the project has reached a stage when coherent cooperation with school institutions in Zlín region was established. Initial distrust of schools in establishing the cooperation with university had been eliminated after the first positive references given by the participants who were satisfied with the modules they enrolled in and who later enrolled in other modules as well. In 2015, instructional materials were created for all modules and professional education was launched (Wiegerová et al., 2015). In 2016, we have continued to put instructional modules in practice, including the module focusing on support of teamwork among teachers on teaching staff. The content and evaluation of this module is described in detail in chapter 3 of the paper.

3. Evaluation of the Project Modules

In this part of the text, we would like to present the evaluation of the particular modules which had been put into practice so far. There is a unified evaluation questionnaire for all modules, which underwent several changes in the course of the project duration. The first proposition was based on scaled questionnaire with 10 items focused mostly on evaluating the quality of lecturer's work and of the module's content. However, this model of evaluation proved to be ineffective, as it failed to provide sufficient space for participants' open statements which proved to be crucial for assessing the quality and especially for offering feedback to lecturers. The questionnaire was therefore altered. The second version contained 10 open questions. Here is an example of participants' assessment: *"Everything I've learned, I began to use at work in communicating with colleagues, parents, friends."*

As an addition to the unified form of evaluation questionnaire, the author and module's main lecturer also had a possibility to include the information about the quality of their module as a reaction to participant's criticism, reflecting participant's focus. This shall be illustrated by the following examples from the modules that focused on the development of teacher mentors.

3. 1 Evaluation of the Module: Support during the Adaptation of Novice Teachers in the School Environment

There were 15 participants in this module which ran as one of the first modules in 2014; they were preschool teachers and elementary school teachers. Two thirds of the participants belonged to the target group – they were novice teachers. They have been working as teachers for a year or two and they

appreciated information on how to work with the so-called introducing teachers. Nevertheless, this module was available also to advanced teachers and experienced mentors. All participants appreciated the possibility to share the cooperation strategies in interaction with other participants in a small working group.

Evaluation of this module is primarily based on the analysis of teachers' journals which they were asked to keep. They have been keeping these journals during and also after completion of all instructional modules. During autumn 2016 we are to put into practice specially requested modules. These modules are specific, focusing on a particular problem – for example the instructional modes in one-room schools. The evaluation is based on qualitative analysis of data material from the journals and this analysis shall bring interesting findings about the perception of different positions – novice teacher and teacher mentor – as one of the participant explains: *“It is good to know what new things are being done for teachers. At schools we are often in a situation when we help a young colleague who is a novice in teaching. We want to know what problems they face and with which they need help most of all.”*

3. 2 Evaluation of the Module: Support of Teamwork among Teachers on Teaching Staff

All 10 participants in this module were women, 6 of them work as school principals and they described themselves as teacher mentors. Therefore there was a group of participants who had not yet held the position of a mentor at their school but the heterogeneity of this group proved to be a very valuable source of shared experiences for all participants. The content of the instructional module is always adjusted to the actual needs of the participants. In general, it aims to develop some areas for effective teamwork as understanding the team roles, improving the conflict-solving skills etc.

A progressive evaluation system is applied during the realization of this instructional module. Evaluation runs in three stages – the evaluation at the beginning of the course is then followed by a continuous assessment with final evaluation at the end of the learning process. We work mostly with participants' written statements which reflect the perceptions of the roles at their school or of their attendance and interactions with other teachers in the module. The final evaluation once the learning process in the modules is over, is the most detailed one and it is focused on these aspects:

- Quality evaluation of the module

This part of evaluation offers important feedback to the lecturers as well as the whole project team. In case of this module, the participants appreciated the adequate number of teachers involved in the courses and also the offer of supportive materials from which they can derive the knowledge even after the sessions are over.

- Evaluation of participants' individual development

As one of the participants states: *“Personally, I don't mean to stunt. A teacher can't stagnate at some level.”* Or other reflection: *“There are teachers who don't continue to study and they're convinced they are just perfect. They never develop the knowledge they gained twenty years ago and they resist all changes.”* The satisfaction and knowing that to broaden their horizons by participating in the modules was the right decision for them also occurred in the reflections.

- Reflection on the question: What would my advice, as a team coordinator, be towards novice teachers at this position in school environment?

Each participant created an extensive list of advice concerning the communication recommendations in the school environment. Besides that, the participants with more experience on the position of a mentor proposed concrete advice based on their own working experience, while novice teachers focused on expressing how they felt in the position of inexperienced team members. These teachers described their need for empathy, appreciation, motivation and obtaining *“only such advice from the more experienced colleagues they asked for.”*

4. Conclusion

The described project, as well as the data obtained during the evaluation, is only of limited scope because at the moment we are presenting the project that has been implemented only in schools in one region of the Czech Republic. However, our experience shows that this way of support brings appropriate opportunity for schools, rather than a limitless range of offers in the field of mentoring. Some of the participants got involved because their colleagues, with whom they cooperated elsewhere, suggested they do so. Other teachers exchanged contacts when participating in instructional modules. In addition to the officially planned networking of schools in the region, an informal networking among the teachers commenced. Teachers' discussions on the topics presented in the modules also took place once the classes finished.

The project promoting the importance of teacher mentors and associated competencies has been on offer for teachers in the Zlín region for almost three years now and its final stage is approaching. The project team is reviewing all activities. When looking back at the initial distrust of schools towards a project organized by the university, we can conclude by saying that now we have a functioning network of cooperating schools and regular participants in the modules. Some of these participants were even chosen to become potential mentors for the novice teachers – students who complete the studies in one of our programmes. Our cooperation with schools is currently active and it would be counterproductive to stop it when the project finishes. In the nearest future we therefore await an overall evaluation of the implemented project and we are pondering about other strategies to continue the support of mentoring in schools in the Zlín region.

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