Teacher collaboration in Slovene primary schools: Why and how to encourage »vertical« collaboration

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Abstract

In the paper the reasons for promoting collaboration among teachers in Slovene primary schools are presented. The school system in Slovenia has gone through a major reform, so new ways of collaboration among teachers are required. In the paper I discuss possible difficulties regarding »vertical« collaboration in the context of school culture. The possible problems arising from dynamics of teacher cultures are discussed. Furthermore, my current research on teacher subcultures is described. Finally, some suggestions on how to cope with problems mentioned above are introduced.

Keywords: teacher collaboration, school culture, teacher culture, primary teachers, lower secondary teachers

1. Teacher collaboration

The teaching profession is undergoing great changes in a rapidly changing world. The spectre of demands upon teachers, teacher roles, and teacher competencies is widening. To be successful in the teaching profession, good knowledge of the subject taught and mastering didactic methods are not enough. There are other teacher competencies expected of today’s teachers, as described in Razdevšek Pučko (2004) who summarized several lists of teacher competencies: use of adequate teaching methods and approaches according to social, cultural and ethnical diversity in the classroom, encouraging self-directed, self-regulated and lifelong learning, use of ICT in the classroom and in the teacher’s own professional work, conflict management, developing teacher’s professionalism (professional reflection and learning), teamwork (team teaching) and collaboration with other teachers, cooperation with school management, parents and others.

Collaboration with other teachers is thus acknowledged as one of the core competencies. In her study, Razdevšek Pučko (2004) asked headmasters about their expectations of teachers’ competencies, and their answers are similar to those above. The interesting point, however, is that they emphasise teachers’ communication and organizational skills, and teamwork – the highest number of headmasters would require these competencies from their teachers when choosing the candidates for the job.

Thus far, I have described teacher collaboration in the light of teacher competencies. In the following part of the paper, I will consider teacher collaboration within a framework of broader literature on school culture. A number of writers in Slovenia have considered teacher collaboration mostly in the sense of the shift from individualism to collaboration (for example Erčulj, 2000, Jančan, 2004, Polak, 2004, Resman, 2005). Why should teachers prefer working with each other to working alone? The answers of the authors are summarised as:

a. the demands of the new compulsory education program;
b. better quality of teaching and instruction (effectiveness, better organization of work, better outcomes for students);
c. professional development of teachers and mutual professional support;
d. higher collegiality, motivation and moral support;
e. whole school cooperative ethos and culture.

Before I describe teacher collaboration as a part of school culture in more detail, a short explanation of organizational structure of Slovene compulsory education is presented. This is done with intention to better understand the argument concerning vertical collaboration and the description of my current research presented later.

2. A short description of organizational structure of Slovene compulsory education

In Slovenia, compulsory education consists of primary and lower secondary education, lasts 9 years and pupils are from 6 to 14 years old. In the last ten years, there has been a considerable change in the compulsory education system. This change is being implemented gradually, so some schools are already completely following the new system of education, while others still have some elements of the old system. By the end of the academic year 2008/09, the latter schools will have completed the whole nine-year cycle.

The most obvious change was to prolong the education from eight to nine years, however, there were other significant changes, for example, changes concerning assessment and grading, changes in the number of hours of certain subjects, curriculum changes, different forms of internal and external differentiation etc. For the present discussion, the most important change is the structural change of implementation of instruction (Figure 1). Before the reform, it was divided in two parts: first four years as primary education, with one classroom teacher in one classroom all through the school year, the second four years as secondary education, meaning subject teachers for different subjects in different classrooms and cabinets. The change in the structure is now such that there are three periods each lasting three years. In the first three-year period there is a primary classroom teacher, in the second period there is a combination of primary and subject teachers (with gradual increase of the hours that the subject teachers spend in the classroom). In the third period there are only subject teachers present in the classroom while the pupils move from one subject classroom to another.
Figure 1. Change of primary school system from two-level to three-level structure.
Legend: PE = primary education, LSE = lower secondary education, 1st T = first three-year period, 2nd T = second three-year period, 3rd T = third three-year period.

The essential reason for employing the second period as a combined model of primary and lower secondary education was to reduce the pupils’ stress and tensions correlated with the quick and sharp transition from primary to lower secondary level (Bela knjiga, 1995). So, a primary teacher teaches all the subjects in the fourth year except foreign languages and subjects like sports, arts, music etc., which can be taught by subject teachers, but no more than two subjects and in the fifth year no more than three subjects. In the sixth year the instruction is done by subject teachers only. The law allows primary teachers to practise it as well, but that is rare in schools.

For my argument it is important to stress two things. First, there are differences between primary and subject teachers in their education. Teachers in Slovene primary school are educated in different institutions. Primary teachers get their qualification from one of the faculties of education, while future subject teachers can either go to a faculty of education or to some other, subject specific faculty, which offers a basic teacher education programme.

Second, the previous system allowed for a more individualized instruction, teaching profession thus as isolated and solitary. The changes with the new structural organization of primary education are such that require more collaboration among teachers. With the description of the structural change we can expect that, especially in the second three-year period, at least some primary and subject teachers will meet each other more often than before. In the previous system there was a clear division between the first and the second educational period, and the teachers strongly identified with either the primary or the lower secondary period. This identification was based on their professional formation, being

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certified for teaching at either the primary level or the lower secondary level. However, now there are three periods and the question of what will teachers identify with arises.

3. School culture as a theoretical frame to examine teacher collaboration

School culture is defined in the frame of the organizational culture which Schein defines as:

“A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.” (p.12, 1992)

Luise Stoll (1999) emphasises the notion of the basic beliefs and assumptions that “operate outside of awareness” (Schein, 1992, p.12). The nature of culture is captured in simple phrases such as “taken for granted”, “the way we do things around here” and “the lens through which the world is viewed” (Stoll, 1999). The basic function of culture is providing meaning, stability and coherence for its members, this is also called the structuring of the environment (Bečaj, 2000). It is generally viewed as a static and unmovable force but it is also a dynamic in its responding to internal and external changes.

Different factors shape school culture: the history, the people in it, the internal and the external context. School culture is influenced by the wider society’s conception of what is the purpose of education, by local or national educational policies, the school leadership, teachers, pupils in the school and their social background (Stoll, 1999).

Culture and structure are closely related, or as Stoll (1999) puts it, they are interdependent. Structures like time, space, roles and responsibilities “are relatively easy to manipulate and are visible, but for these structures to effect change, it is also necessary to attend to the underlying culture” (p. 40). The existing norms may hinder the implementation of change that is done only in the realm of the structure. On the other hand, structures influence culture in such a way that may facilitate or act as a barrier to certain changes. Stoll (1999) gives an example of desirable collegiality between teachers in schools which on the other hand have timetables that do not allow them to meet during the day. Collaboration does not just happen, it is through structures that cultures can be modified.

Even though we mostly consider school culture as a holistic concept, there may exist several subcultures: pupil culture, teacher culture, leadership culture, support staff culture, parent culture. For the present discussion, the teacher culture is most interesting. A. Hargreaves (in Stoll, 1999) defines four teaching cultures:

- individualism (autonomy, isolation and insulation prevail, blame and support are avoided)
- collaboration (teachers choose, spontaneously and voluntarily, to work with each other, in more or less formal and rigorous forms and activities)
- contrived collegiality (teachers’ collaborative activities are compulsorily imposed)
- balkanisation (small collaborative workgroups form, there is neither whole school work nor complete isolation).

Several authors have identified the differences between teacher cultures. Riksaasen (1994) gives a report on the socialization of kindergarten and primary teachers. Oolbekkink-Marchand, van Driel and Verloop (2006) were studying the perspectives on self-regulated learning of secondary and university teachers. Both studies have demonstrated the importance
of recognizing teachers’ own perspectives, beliefs, and intentions in the light of teacher professional development.

Stoll (1999) gives a short description of the differences between primary and secondary schools. The main characteristics of primary school culture are care and control, and when pupils leave, they have a feeling of leaving a family. The secondary school culture is influenced by their larger size, department structures and by the very fundamental nature of teachers’ academic orientation and the fragmented individualism that pupils experience in moving from one subject teacher to another.

The primary and lower secondary teacher cultures in Slovenia have not been researched directly, comparatively and systematically. There are many studies that identify the differences between primary and lower secondary subject teachers, but they have some other concept in the centre of the research. One of them, for example, has indicated that primary teachers feel the highest level of autonomy among three groups of teachers: primary, lower secondary and secondary teachers (Marentič Požarnik, Kalin, Šteh, Valenčič Zuljan, 2005). This finding is explained in the light of greater and better in-service training programs for primary teachers and greater emphasis on external testing and assessment on the higher levels of educational system.

In Slovenia, the structure of “osnovna šola” is such that the teacher subcultures inevitably meet. Especially the second three-year period is subject to the combining of the two cultures. This is not unproblematic. Different mindsets, different beliefs and norms, different mutual perception – these all may have much influence on the relationships between the two cultures (for a more detailed account on the causes of tensions in the primary school staff room see Nias, 1989). The differences in the beliefs and assumptions about students, learning, development, assessment etc., which teachers have in different subcultures, may lead to several problems:

- unwillingness to collaborate – teachers do not seek their colleagues even when they are in need, they prefer the isolated nature of the classroom environment, when there is an opportunity to collaborate they actively avoid it;
- contrived collaboration – a compulsory, administratively imposed form of collaboration, fixed in time and place, teachers feel coerced to conform, there is not much space for professional development, reflection etc.;
- rivalry and competition between the subcultures – the members of subcultures feel threatened by the other group, there is tension between the two groups, especially when there are scarce resources or power struggles.

4. A short account of the current research

In my own study, the principal research question is: What is the relationship between subcultures in Slovene primary schools? From the main question, others have evolved. How has the school reform (the structural change) affected the relationship between subcultures? How do teachers respond to the more and more demanding call for more collaboration? What is going on in the second three-year period in relation to teacher subcultures?

The study is still under way and a detailed research report will be published when it is finished. For the purposes of the paper I summarized some basic information of the research.

In the study, the main focus is on teacher culture, teachers’ basic assumptions and beliefs,
which are difficult to measure and cannot be assessed directly, because they are mostly
unconscious and context dependent (Kagan, 1992, Schein, 1992). My intention was to get the
first person, non-biased, unpredicted account of what is going on, which would be impossible
to do with questionnaires including items, formulated by the researcher, especially because
not much research in this respect has been done. That is the reason I chose the qualitative
methodological approach, with the interview as the most important tool of data collection. To
make the answers even more spontaneous, diverse and contextualized, I chose the group
format. In this way the participants relax quickly, talking among themselves using their
vocabulary and their meaning. The “teacher context” is higher in a group of teachers than in
the paper-pencil situation with the researcher, and the discussion between teachers should
elicit (at least it is more likely to) responses that allow indirect investigation of the beliefs.

Focus group interviews (Flick, 2002) are used to collect data. The question guide was made
on the basis of previous interviews with two teachers, two school counsellors, and the
questionnaire developed by Mrevlje (2003). Before the implementation of the interviews, the
interview scheme consisted of ten broad themes, but because of time restraints it was reduced
to four themes during the first interview.

The participants of the study are primary and lower secondary teachers. Up to now, three
focus groups have already been implemented and I have scheduled an appointment with two
more groups this month. The groups are homogeneous according to teacher subculture: thus,
two groups with primary and one with lower secondary teachers have been made. By other
respects they are heterogeneous: the teachers vary in age, length of experience in teaching.
Unfortunately, I have only been able to include female teachers in my study, and this reflects
the gender situation in Slovene primary schools. I also tried to make groups of teachers from
different schools, but this is a great organizational challenge, so I have one “mixed school”
group, while in other groups there are teachers from the same school. This must be taken into
account later when interpreting the results, because some internal factors deriving from a
specific culture of a specific school may have influenced the behaviour of the participating
teachers.

There were 5 to 8 participants in the focus group interviews, lasting from one hour to an hour
and a half. Verbatim transcription of the interviews is the difficult part, and determining the
voices from the tape recorder is especially demanding. Coding is done on the grounded theory
premises (Flick, 2002, Willig, 2001) – open coding is followed by determining relations
between codes and pattern searching, as described in Miles and Huberman (1994). Coding
and further analysis steps are done using Atlas-ti, a software program for qualitative analysis.
Writing summaries, memos and several re-readings or re-listenings of the interviews is an
essential part of the analysis. Several hypotheses are already emerging, but as the collecting
and analyzing of data is still going on, no general conclusions are yet formed.

At present, there are some hypotheses showing a direction in which to think about the answers
to the research questions. Although it has been four years since every school in Slovenia
started with the new educational program, and nine years since the first schools started the
new program, there is still a very strong division between primary and lower secondary levels.
The teachers do not yet think of the school structure as partitioned in three periods. The
prevalent conception is still the two-part structure of the primary school. However, with the
change of the system the teacher subsystems seem to function as follows:

- the first three-year period: the teachers are more interconnected, there is a lot of
  collaboration and teamwork
the second three-year period: there are tensions and rivalry between the primary and the subject teachers, the teachers do not form a unified group
- the third three-year period: the subject teachers are more connected within the subject areas.

Before moving on to suggestions, I would like to stress some problems and issues arising from the chosen methodology. The most difficult part is the recruiting of participants (impact on sampling, homogenous, heterogeneous groups). As this was my first encounter with group interviewing, there are issues on moderating worth mentioning: non-constant moderating skills (with each new group, better moderating skills) and the moderator as researcher in one person. The last factor is also connected with further steps in the study; this is one person data analysis (coding reliability, interpretation influences...). The generalization of data is also worth considering.

5. Vertical collaboration

As mentioned above, in Slovenia there is single structure primary and lower secondary education, unified in an institution called »osnovna šola«. Most of the collaborative work is done on the horizontal level, by which I mean that teachers who teach the same-aged children are working together. This is a very important way of collaboration. However, there is also another, much less used way of teacher collaboration. That is vertical collaboration, by which I mean that teachers of children of different age groups work together. In this way of collaboration we can see vertical collaboration as a bridge connecting two different teacher cultures. Especially in the second three-year period where teachers of different levels meet, vertical collaboration could be the means to overcome the above mentioned difficulties concerning relationships between teacher cultures, the difficulties which threaten the intended gradualism of transition. The need for more vertical collaboration has also been expressed a few times by the teachers in my study.

What could be the positive effects of vertical collaboration:
- teachers get to know each other’s work, their views, experiences, (Erčulj, 2000)
- developing curricula at the children’s benefit (as stated in Bela knjiga (1995) before, the isolated teacher academic orientation lowered transferability of the educational contents)
- teachers exchange expectancies among each other (which do exist and are mostly unspoken)
- other advantages of collaborative work in general: professional development of teachers, cooperative learning, reflective practice, etc.

Some suggestions on how to encourage vertical collaboration are proposed. First, it is very important to know, what are the content and the context of the teaching practice in different grades. Here, teachers could make good use of peer teaching. Secondly, shared planning of educational process could enhance the continuity of the contents taught and the transferability of knowledge. The former is also improved by cross-curricular connections. Moreover, supervision or other form of active reflection on teachers’ work could play a great role in recognizing the differences in teachers’ assumptions and beliefs.

Nevertheless, when the needs for vertical collaboration are recognized and the activities are planned, we have to be aware of structural restrains. The teachers have to be provided with enough time and space to meet and work with each other. Their perceived workload in the
times of reform is very high so this also impedes their willingness to collaborate.

It is important however, to emphasise that vertical collaboration itself does not magically solve all the above mentioned problems. It can be seen as one of the means how to promote collaborative school culture in general. The recognition of the beliefs and intentions which underlie teaching practice is essential, because this can help us to improve the professional preparation and development of teachers.

References