



Co-funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union

SOFIA UNIVERSITY  
ST. KLIMENTI OHRIDSKI



# CHALLENGES AND SUPPORT TOWARD THE INTEGRATION OF SCHOOL SELF-EVALUATION AND IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES IN EUROPEAN SCHOOLS: THE CASE OF BULGARIA

## INTRODUCTION

### **Objectives of the study**

This study aimed to identify the main challenges and supports toward the integration of school self-evaluation and improvement strategies in Bulgarian schools.

### **Methodology**

To collect research data, an interview schedule was designed by the international research project team. The interview schedule was developed from on a review of international literature on Evaluation as well as a review of existing literature in each of the partner countries. Interviews were conducted with principals, and deputy principals and focus groups were conducted with the teachers in every school from the sample. The questions in the interview schedule were grouped into 6 codes, related to particular *research variables*: understanding of SSE and improvement, SSE as a whole school approach to school improvement, capacity of educators to engage with SSE, SSE as a tool for school improvement practice, SSE as a tool for improvement in teaching practice, SSE as a tool for improvement in leading and management. The final set of questions were added in order to address country-specific issues.

### **Sample**

5 schools in Sofia-city district, all of them funded by the municipality, were included in the case study:

- 4 comprehensive schools (1-12 grade)
- 1 primary school (1-7 grade)

The total number of respondents is 41, of which 27 are teachers and 14 are management staff (5 principals and 9 deputy principals). All principals are experienced one having more than 10 years as school directors, and 4 out of 5 are females. Deputy



Co-funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union

SOFIA UNIVERSITY  
ST. KLIMENTI OHRIDSKI



principals vary at age and management experience, and 7 out of 9 are females. The teachers have diverse teaching experience (between 1 and 30 years) and professional status (5 are head teachers, 9 are senior teachers).

### *School profiles*

School 1 is a large school – above 1200 students, both boys and girls, providing education between 1st and 12th grade. There are 82 teachers currently employed in the school. It is in a middle-class neighbourhood, has a highly positive image and is widely recognized for embedding ICT in education.. It is also a preferred school for secondary education in ICT and arts and consistently receives high results in national exams. It has no drop-out rates, has a student population of 25 students with special needs and 20 students with a low socio-economic situation (SES) and 11 with a social stipend.

The schools does not have a written policy for SSE. The school mission statement emphasises the school's efforts to build happy students, future leaders in society and of their own life.

Interviews in School 1 were conducted with 1 principal and 3 deputy principals. 6 teachers also participated in a focus group.

School 2 is a comprehensive school with students between 1<sup>st</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade. It has approximately 800 students, both girls and boys. The school is located outside of the city centre, near a Roma minority neighbourhood, with average results in national exams in 4<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade. 15% of the children are at risk of school drop-out.

The school does not have a policy for SSE. The school mission statement emphasises the school's efforts for quality education and building positive relationships with parents and institutions.

Interviews were conducted with 1 principal and 1 deputy principal. 6 teachers also participated in a focus group.

School 3 is a primary school with 830 students and 60 teachers. There are no drop-outs, no minorities, mostly middle and upper-class families. It is a good neighbourhood with 18 children who have special educational needs.

The school mission is centered on achieving and sustaining a high quality of education, which means that students are developed as citizens of modern society, with



Co-funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union

SOFIA UNIVERSITY  
ST. KLIMENTI OHRIDSKI



knowledge and skills for life-long learning, social competencies, and proper social behaviour.

Interviews were conducted with 1 principal and 2 deputy principals. 4 teachers participated in the focus group.

School 4 is a large school with 1278 students, both male and female. It has 101 teachers. The school is located in one of the largest neighbourhoods, It is a middle class area with a lot of young families. Students have average results in national exams, no minority children. There are a lot of single-parent families. The school has 23 students with special needs and 9 students are on free meals.

The School mission is focused on supporting the efforts of each child for personal development and serves as a warrant of quality education.

Interviews were conducted with 1 principal, and 2 deputy principals. 5 teachers also participated in a focus group.

School 5 is a large school with 908 students from 1<sup>st</sup> up to 12<sup>th</sup> grade, both boys and girls. It has 78 teachers and is located in a large suburb with lower, and some middle-class families, 10% of the student population are from the Roma minority, 5-6% of parents are with low education (elementary or primary), 2% of the children are from Chinese and 1% from Arab backgrounds., 10-15% of the children are without proper parental care;. There has been 4 drop-outs for the past school year.

The School mission states that the school strives to be a competitive one and to provide quality education for all its students, along with a variety of extracurricular activities and additional education in foreign languages and culture.

Interviews were conducted with 1 principal and 1 deputy principal, and 6 teachers participated in the focus group.

*Experience of the schools with SSE and improvement:*

- 3 of the schools have participated in the Erasmus+ Polycentric inspection project and have experience with school self-evaluation (on parental involvement).
- 1 school has extensive experience with school self-evaluation (in the framework of different projects and as a planned approach)



Co-funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union

SOFIA UNIVERSITY  
ST. KLIMENTI KHRISTOSKI



- 2 of the schools have no previous experience with school self-evaluation in a formal way.

### **Timeline**

Research data was gathered in the period 20<sup>th</sup> - 27<sup>th</sup> of February 2019.

## **CASE STUDY FINDINGS**

### **Code 1: Understanding of SSE and improvement**

**Teachers** mostly refer to improvement of school material settings, methods of instruction, ICT in education, parental involvement, improvement of organisational climate and school image and it is difficult for them to think of improvement as a process. In 2 schools, teachers have some understanding of whole school improvement as a path to quality of education considering students' results. SSE is considered mostly in the area of teachers' self-evaluation and self-evaluation reports of Methodological units in different subject fields. SSE is perceived as a process of revealing weaknesses, compared with others. In general, teachers think of SSE areas of schooling, not as a whole school SSE approach.

In four schools there is hardly any common understanding of SSE. The other school has a lot of experience in SSE in different projects, so teachers have a common understanding and a more holistic approach toward SSE. Most of the teachers believe that SSE should not be obligatory but rather voluntary. Otherwise, it will become formal and useless.

**Management teams** see improvement as receiving feedback and setting priorities, although it is perceived more as improvement of school material environment, school image, communication with external bodies and with parents, improvement of school curricula – more practical education, evaluation of students. Most school management teams understand SSE as a part of developing School strategy and school year plan and as an analysis of what is accomplished.

Most principals and management team members do not see a common understanding of SSE in their school, although they state that SSE is done regarding various schooling aspects, depending on school needs. In only one school, the principal, along with teachers, firmly stated that there is a common understanding of SSE in their



Co-funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union

SOFIA UNIVERSITY  
ST. KLIMENTI OHRIDSKI



school due to the rich experience of the school with SSE as part of different projects. Principals, unlike teachers, mostly believe that SSE should be obligatory, although it is extremely important in what way it will be implemented – timeframe, training, evaluation tools and support should be provided to schools.

Parents and students are also seen as an integral part of SSE and improvement, although some of the principals consider parents' opinion as “risky” and somewhat subjective.

## **Code 2: SSE as a whole school approach to school improvement**

**Teachers** in all schools consider that the management team and school principal should oversee SSE. Teachers have different opinions regarding participation in the SSE. Nearly half of them believe that all school staff participates in the SSE process through different commissions, methodological units and participation in the development of the School strategy and school year plan. The other half also mention parents and students as participating in SSE related surveys which schools implement on different topics. Still, when talking about SSE, teachers do not perceive it as a systematic process of whole-school evaluation but instead include a variety of activities in the broad understanding of the term.

There are no formal guidelines specific to SSE in the researched schools, according to teachers. Some teachers are especially critical about the expected implementation of obligatory SSE and believe that relevant guidelines and tools should be provided by the Ministry of education or by the Regional departments of education. Still, some of them share that they receive support regarding their work from the experts in Regional departments of education, but not about whole SSE.

Data gathering in schools is somewhat organised in different fields – students' achievements, goals and results, students' extracurricular activities, etc. Data gathering is done by different persons or teams, mostly related to the specific needs of the school. Some of this data is used as a type of school evaluation when the school year plan and strategy are developed. Still, data is not explicitly gathered for SSE, but mostly due to requests from higher bodies.



Co-funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union

SOFIA UNIVERSITY  
ST. KLIMENTI OHRIDSKI



There is no formal, written plan for school improvement in the schools from the sample. Schools consider the Schools development strategy to be such a plan as it states strategic goals and resources for their achievement. As SSE is not yet obligatory, schools have made some preparations but are still waiting to see what the new regulation will require.

Core areas of school improvement include the material environment, ICT in education, staff training and development and school image. In only 2 schools, teachers explicitly state that core areas of school improvement include students' achievements and working with students with special needs. In one school, teachers also mention new methods of teaching.

Opinions of **school management team members** do not differ significantly from those of the teachers. Except for one school, the management staff believe there is no visible common understanding of SSE in their schools. Nevertheless, when talking of SSE, school principals mostly refer to separate activities in different fields instead of to a whole systematic process.

Like teachers, management staff think that SSE and improvements planning are the responsibility of school principals and deputy principals. Still, most schools' managers share the belief that there are more stakeholders involved in the implementation of different self-evaluation activities.

Data gathering includes reports and analysis of different school activities like students' achievements, extracurricular activities, discipline issues, etc.

Improvement areas include school discipline, parental involvement and mostly material improvement of school settings.

There are no formal guidelines for SSE and improvement planning, and Regional departments of education provide support to some extent but mostly for teachers to the school as a whole.

### **Code 3: Capacity of educators to engage with SSE**

Except for one school, **teachers** state they have not been provided with specific training about SSE and improvement. In only one school, a team of teachers preparing SSE according to the suspended regulations participated in training about SSE criteria and procedures, but they were mostly disappointed by it. Most teachers believe that



Co-funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union

SOFIA UNIVERSITY  
ST. KLIMENTI KHORITELSKI



they need training which will prepare them for SSE in a proper way. Curricula they need are related to SSE criteria, procedures and survey techniques, and data analysis.

At the same time, there is no common understanding of whether SSE should be done with criteria identical for all schools or each school should create their own. It seems that in some schools, teachers want the same criteria for all schools while in other schools they think that each school should create its criteria and self-evaluation procedures as they will fit the school needs better.

When it comes to difficulties in SSE, teachers mostly answered in a theoretical way as an obligatory whole SSE has not been implemented yet. Even in schools who participated in the polycentric inspection project, teachers do not refer to their experience with SSE on parental involvement since they see this activity as a project and/or temporarily activity. The main difficulties that teachers mention is related to data gathering and data analysis, creating SSE criteria and evaluation tools, lack of time and resources for proper SEE.

**Management teams** see the necessity for SSE training so that teachers can be prepared to implement whatever SSE requirements are required to be put in place. Principals hadn't provided such training because the regulations were suspended, and they wait to see the new ones.

Managers state some difficulties regarding SSE such as lack of time and resources and therefore – the formalization of the process. They also believe that for teachers, it is difficult to “step back” and look objectively on their work or to evaluate the school as a complex organization.

#### **Code 4: SSE as a tool for school improvement practice**

In 2 of the school's **teachers** are a little bit worried about the effect, SSE would have upon the school image and with the possibility that SSE can portray the school negatively. Another unintended consequence could be the formalization of the process if it is not implemented properly according to school needs.

Except for the school with much experience with self-evaluation, in other schools, teachers consider that there is no clear willingness for engagement with SSE. The requirements are still vague and uncertain, and this prevents them from thinking about SSE in a systematic way. In 2 schools there was a common opinion that the



school community doesn't have any interest in the process and that there will be resistance at first, but then, as usual, teachers will, cope with the expectations.

In two of the schools, including a high profile one, teachers are adamant that parents should not be part of SSE as they are too subjective in their assessments, do not have a professional understanding of teachers' and schools' work and cannot make valid judgments in the SSE process. In the other three schools, parents are valuable participants in the process, along with the municipality, Regional Departments of Education (RDE), the National Inspectorate of education and maybe some NGOs.

School inspectors from the RDE do not participate directly in the SSE process and usually do not provide specific support unless explicitly asked by the school, mostly regarding the development of school strategy and yearly school plans. Inspectors do not participate in the development or provide feedback for the strategy and year plan. Teachers have different opinions about the inspectors' role and support they provide. For some of them, inspectors cooperate and help teachers to improve. According to other teachers, inspectors are more in control and do formal checks rather than providing critical support to teachers. In general, inspectors are not seen as part of the school improvement process, but it is expected it will happen after the new inspection system starts functioning.

As a whole, **school managers** see mostly positive effects of SSE. As unintended consequences, they are also worried about the reaction of parents, especially if they should be engaged in the process in a more extensive manner. Additional worries are the expected tension SSE will create in the school community, especially if the timeframe is too short or the requirements – too hard to achieve.

Except for the school with extensive experience in self-evaluation, the other principals feel that the school community is not willing to engage with SSE. Reasons for this, they see in teacher's workload and lack of experience with self-evaluation practices. Parents are considered an integral part of SSE, along with students and other stakeholders such as the municipality.

School inspectors are seen differently by school management teams, much like the teachers see them. Some school principals feel that inspectors mostly control and make recommendations, but do not support their implementation later on. According



Co-funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union

SOFIA UNIVERSITY  
ST. KLIMENTI KHRISTOSKI



to other principals, inspectors provide support if asked, so it is up to the school to interact with them in a more effective manner.

### **Code 5: SSE as a tool for improvement in teaching practice**

Most **teachers** believe that SSE has the potential to positively influence their work and the way they reflect on it. It should be noted that most teachers refer to self-evaluation of their own work when they talk about the positive effects of SSE, rather than that of a whole school self-evaluation. Benefits and improvement teachers see in their assessment methods and teaching methods. Self-evaluation gives them the opportunity to sit back and see themselves from an outside perspective, along with time to reflect on the work they have done and the possible areas for improvement.

Teachers also relate self-evaluation to their professional development and life-long learning in the context of their work. Even here, there is no common understanding and thinking of whole school self-evaluation as they mostly refer to the specifics of evaluating their own work.

**Managers** generally agree with teachers about positives of SSE on teaching practice, although they also think of the evaluation of the work of teachers rather than as a whole SSE.

### **Code 6: SSE as a tool for improvement in leading and management**

**Teachers** are somewhat careful when answering these questions. Still, they believe SSE is useful and beneficial for managerial work in the school as it shows weaknesses and gives ideas for future measures for improvement. As SSE is not yet an official practice in Bulgarian schools, it is difficult for teachers to provide relevant answers regarding improvements in management practice.

**School management teams** also refer to a future implementation of SSE and believe it will positively change their management practice. They are more specific, and state that that SSE will provide a clear overview of areas of schooling that need improvement and hopefully will help them improve as leaders.

### **Final questions**

**Teachers** expectations regarding SSE are that it will become compulsory although most of them hope this will not happen or at least – if implemented, it will be



Co-funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union

SOFIA UNIVERSITY  
ST. KLIMENTI OHRIDSKI



relevant to school needs and capacity to do it. They cannot provide answers to how SSE can be improved as it has not yet been implemented in most schools. It is also difficult for them to identify who are suitable persons to guide them through the SSE process.

**School principals** also believe that SSE will become obligatory but accept the fact much more calmly than teachers. They are also worried that if compulsory, SSE will become a formal procedure, much less beneficial for school but at the same time recognize its importance and hope that resistance will be short-term, and teachers will see the benefits of SSE.

Regarding suitable persons to guide them through SSE some school principals refer to the experts in the Regional Departments of Education and inspectors from the National Inspectorate of education, but others do not provide specific answers to this question.

When asked about improvements in current SSE, principals are much more specific, although it has not been implemented in most Bulgarian schools. As regards, improvements in SSE, principals are of the view that it is important to receive support and guidelines from the Regional Departments of Education, including different stakeholders in the evaluation process and a follow-up by the experts about the implementation of SSE measures.

## CONCLUSIONS

It is evident from the case study findings that previous experience with SSE of the schools leads to more clear and shared understanding and vision regarding SSE and school improvement as a concept, process and importance for schools in comparison to schools without such experience.