



CHALLENGES AND SUPPORTS TOWARDS THE INTEGRATION OF SCHOOL SELF EVALUATION AND IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES IN EUROPEAN SCHOOLS: THE CASE OF GREECE

SECTION I: SCHOOL PROFILE & CHARACTERISTICS

School number	School Type	Demographics	Enrolment	Number of teachers
1	State secondary	Rural area	87	13
2	State Primary	Semi-urban area	166	19
3	State Primary	Rural area	138	17
4	State Primary	Semi-urban area	168	17
5	State Secondary	Urban area	320	60
6	State Secondary	Semi-urban area	188	23

Table 1: School profiles

School Nr. 1 has a strong pro-European orientation with participation in plenty of scientific and educational EU initiatives while they often visit schools abroad. The new premises were finished in 2006. It is a modern building with a sufficient number of classrooms, laboratories of IT, arts, physics and chemistry, library, auditorium, teachers' rooms which have contributed significantly to the upgrading of the overall school performance.



School Nr. 2 was established in 1924 for the children of the Greek refugees from the coastal city of Artaki in NW Turkey. For almost a decade, the school functioned in wooden cottages, and the present building was founded in 1932. During WWII, it was commandeered by Germans; later on, it hosted again the elementary school as well as the breadline of the church. Since the mid-'40s, it has been maintained and modernised several times thanks to donations from Greek immigrants in the USA. Its students often participate in cultural trips or short visits to be acquainted with Greek history in depth. Due to its rich history, the teachers' board has taken plenty of initiatives in cooperation with local cultural clubs and associations to implement school projects which give prominence to the local history, the refugee past of the locals and their tolerance.

School Nr. 3 was established in 1855, and its mission is to promote volunteerism and social integration of less privileged students. They have 118 local students and 20 refugee students from Syria who live in the area. Infrastructure is sufficient with general education classrooms, IT laboratory, library, internal & open-air sports facilities, teachers' offices, special events hall and dining room.

School Nr. 4 has students from middle-class families, including a small number of Indians and Pakistanis from low-income families working in the nearby industries. The mission of the school is to keep alive the local culture, i.e. history, customs and tradition of the elderly people who were Greek refugees from Minor Asia and Turkey (1920-1960). Due to the history of their families, students are sensitive to refugees' and immigrants' issues, and they are very active in initiatives promoting tolerance, solidarity and volunteerism. In 2008, a Museum of School Memories was established in the school, and it is still enriched with new displays.

School Nr. 5 accepts students talented in fine arts who have to take exams in music and in singing in order to be admitted. They often organise wide-ranging cultural events that are hosted on their premises which include classrooms of general education, laboratories of IT, arts, physics and chemistry, auditorium, teachers' rooms etc.



School Nr. 6 accepts students from the city and the nearby villages. The infrastructure is very good, and the school has a good reputation regarding the academic achievements of its graduates. It has all kinds of school laboratories, internal and open-air sports facilities while they often participate in social and cultural activities of the wider local community. The school is one of the few schools with a positive attitude to SSE, and it has participated successfully in past pilot SSE programs.

SECTION 2: UNDERSTANDING OF SSE AND IMPROVEMENT

Regarding Code I, first of all, the school improvement (SI) is connected to human resources. To be more specific, SI depends on good relations & cooperation between the principal and the teachers as well as among the teachers, on the in-service training provided by the state, on the teachers' self-improvement and professional development too. The mutual trust between teachers and students, the frequent evaluation and the many multiple developments without discriminations. Also, the SI has to do with the general level of school infrastructure and equipment, the upgrading of the curriculum, the updating of the books and other means of teaching, the introduction of new technologies in the learning process, the participation in extra-curricular activities and basically, SI has to do with funding and the level of response to the new social, economic and political challenges (e.g. single-parent families, economic crisis, multi-cultural societies, refugees' influx) affecting educational community. Support by special units (e.g. social workers), flexibility in the use of teaching material and freedom in school planning are requested for an effective SI which will eventually lead to an advanced quality school work.

Furthermore, teachers define SSE as a continuous effort based on cooperation, solidarity among main stakeholders (educators, parents, students), as a process of detecting problems and fields of improvement, as a process of setting goals with subsequent monitor and evaluation of results; SSE will eventually lead to knowing the strengths and weaknesses of the school unit for the sake of SI and with students as the main beneficiaries. dHowever, isolate voices are crying that "it is much ado about



nothing" or "SSE is nothing but a myth used by the system for our entrapment" or "it's just a matter of accountability to the wider society, to the school factors and to the stakeholders".

Also, the collective understanding of SSE, it is believed that there is a notion of collective planning/programming of school year activities taking place during the beginning/mid-year/final meetings of teachers' board & principal in each school unit. Teachers' tasks in General Lyceums force them to go hand in hand while in Junior High School the relations are looser. When teachers have to work in 3-4 schools at the same time, SSE planning is negatively affected. There is an unclear idea of SSE due to its cursory and incomplete implementation four years ago.

In addition, the majority of the teachers has participated in an SSE process either in the pilot phase (2012-13) or in the regular (2014-15) which was institutional and incomplete because the relevant circular was withdrawn in the middle of the school year by the newly elected government (2015). There was stress and hesitation and no actual benefits, possibly because it was obligatory and abruptly introduced.

Teachers believe that the impact of the SSE will be negative because the new legal framework is unclear, cursory and not welcomed by the educational community. As they say *"It is additional school work with no guidance or instructions on how to be carried out effectively"* or *"Too demanding, much ado about nothing"* or *"No concrete benefit for the teachers"*. If the procedures are improved, then, SSE will possibly bring along some improved teaching methods, innovative activities, changes in teachers' mentality regarding cooperative actions. In the beginning, there will be some reactions due to the lack of an SSE culture in schools; the training courses should be adapted to the local conditions. It will be additional work for the Principals who will possibly diminish the teachers' participation in the SSE process. Hopefully, the teachers will finally banish their prejudice against SSE due to the past negative experience of many bad inspectors.

Overall, the prospect of SSE has divided teachers' opinions. Half of them believe that SSE would rather be optional to be excused and later on obligatory. In any case, it should not be connected to penalties or with productivity indicators; SSE results should be used only for designing improvement measures. The majority said that SSE could be fair and obligatory only if all teachers shared the same level of in-service



training, of premises, equipment etc. Half of them believe that if SSE is appropriately implemented, then it will offer multiple benefits to the schools.

SECTION 3: SSE AS A WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH TO SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

As far as Code 2 is concerned, there has been no official approach of SSE in Greek schools. However, it is often implemented informally, not systematically, often individually and mainly with a subjective, personal way of evaluation. The common goals set by the state have to do with the teaching material (quantity and time span) as well as some special projects (e.g. thematic week, creative days, etc.).

In Greek state schools, no specific person is in charge of planning and developing school schemes; the principal and the teachers' board share responsibility practically and according to the new inactive circular. However, there is a lack of systematic support or guidance, and thus, there is a deficit of collective culture for planning and evaluation.

The school principal, the teachers' board, the Center of Advisory Support, the Educational Coordinators, the School Projects Officers, the local authorities, the parents' association and the church participate in the school improvement planning, developing and evaluating the process.

Regarding past useful experience resulting from previous school practices which could help the school with SSE, they mentioned the incomplete process which took place four years ago and the informal experience from the school teachers' regular meetings. The positive impact of that disappointing process was the creation of a basic culture of cooperation within the school community.

In any case, SSE could contribute to improvements in schools in the following ways: all stakeholders will be involved actively and will share responsibility; there will be communication, dialogue, research, exchange of experience/good policies between the teachers' board and the local authorities as well as within teachers' board; goals set which will be monitored, revised and evaluated; fields to be improved will be located



and problems will be solved in a scientific, better-organized way. Eventually, SSE will lead to an increase in human and economic resources as well.

School data used for planning school improvement derives from observation and optimum use of qualitative and quantitative indicators. They take into consideration the existing infrastructure, the available support units, the wider students' socio-economic background, the cultural diversity etc. Additionally, data derived from the digital basis of the ministry of education, the student's portfolio, the local authorities and various discussions on the progress of students and of the school work in general.

Teachers are responsible for allocation of proper guidelines which could be adapted to his/her school reality like a teachers' **yspecialty** handbook, the circulars issued by the ministry, the products of teachers' cooperation and the teachers' flexibility. Regarding the SI plans on external relations, they are informal and aim at improving the relations among school, family and the wider local community. Enough teachers talk about schools being not autonomous.

Schools do not have a written plan for school improvement. The one closer to an SI plan, is the programming made at the beginning of the school year, written in the teachers' board Minute Book with duties assigned to each teacher (e.g. vice directors, heads of laboratories) and a rough programming of activities (specific annual projects, anniversaries, special events etc) repeated on a yearly basis.

The core areas of school improvement are considered to be the infrastructure, the teaching methods, the teachers' professional development, the updating of the educational material, the autonomy of the school unit, the improvement of relations among the members of the teachers' board, the equal opportunities for all and the pursuit of students' happiness.

SECTION 4: CAPACITY OF EDUCATORS TO ENGAGE WITH SSE

Findings related to Code 3 show that educators have not been provided with any training on how to carry out SSE and improvement; their knowledge comes from



personal experience, some seminars as well as university degree and post graduate studies.

Regarding the aspects of the SSE process which is a difficult concept for teachers, the majority of respondents refer to a lack of sufficient time, on the fact that enough teachers have to work for 4 or more different schools, the frequent changes in personnel, the lack of relevant experience, the lack of in-service training, guidance or culture of cooperation, the hesitation and even more refusal. Interviewees propose the creation of the core group, which will train and support the other members of the teachers' board.

The training for schools to fully engage and optimize SSE and improvement requires the existence of active support units, the coverage of all necessary stages (planning, programming, monitor, feedback, revision, evaluation), the culture of cooperation, the prospect of practical application, the incorporation of good policies in future plans, the provision of seminars, the extra support of young teachers, the supply of modern material, tools and equipment responding to the current educational needs. However, some educators were hesitant to answer this question.

SECTION 5: SSE AS A TOOL FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PRACTICE

Referred to Code 4 and the consequences with the introduction of SSE in Greek schools, the negative predictions seem to outweigh the positive ones. To be more specific:

Negatives: the slowdown of a teachers' career (level+salary), extreme competition, lack of trust among colleagues, stress, distrust, work overload, schools' categorisation/"labelling". Worries about SSE being implemented as a cursory, bureaucratic approach. It was also mentioned that "*with this rush to implement SSE, we cannot see the forest for the trees!*"

Positives: self-improvement, educational work of better quality, coordinated school life, a culture of cooperation, collegiality, shared responsibility, collective assignment of duties, optimum school function.



Also, there is a dispersed feeling that the school community is not willing to engage in SSE. Teachers are reserved to SSE approach due to past negative, incomplete experience. It is believed that “*public schools will obtain the mentality of the private ones where the satisfaction of the customer is the pervasive factor*”, admitting that “*the unknown is stressful*”. They recognize the importance of SSE, but they do not want it to be connected to econometric factors. Teachers request advisory support by experts, meritocracy in the selection of their evaluators, clear guidance and finally SSE and evaluation of the educators/educational work. They are reserved about the parents' involvement. However, they think that the full adoption of SSE is a matter of time.

The external stakeholders involved in or responsible for the SSE are mainly units of the ministry of education like the Institute of Educational Policy, the Regional Centers of Educational Support, the Centers for Sustainable Development etc. Also, the **parent's** association, local authorities and the local union/clubs/associations are welcomed only if their involvement is advisory and not intrusive. The schools networking could be a good way of exchanging good policies and thus restrain the SSE as an internal process within the wider school community.

The participation/support by the school inspector in the school improvement process is provided for in the new, inactive law; teachers say “*it must be substantial*” and there are serious doubts about its feasibility due to a large number of remote school units per inspector.

SECTION 6: SSE AS A TOOL FOR IMPROVEMENT IN TEACHING PRACTICE

Interpretation of the findings of Code 5 shows that multiple benefits of SEE are expected for teachers, like improved teaching, moral satisfaction, emotional safety and feeling of goals' achievement, enquiry of new methods, cooperation, shared responsibility, solidarity, feedback, self-improvement through exchange of ideas and methods, active involvement in allocation of educational needs and in the whole changing process.



In addition, the vast majority of the interviewees believe that SSE will seriously influence the way that teachers reflect on their practice, and there will be changes in the ways of cooperation, in the adoption of good practices and in increased self-evaluation; the transition will not be easy because of the long-established working methods and attitudes.

It is expected that there will be an improvement in teaching practice when SSE is introduced, provided that it will be combined with relevant training.

SECTION 7: SSE AS A TOOL FOR IMPROVEMENT IN LEADING AND MANAGEMENT

As for Code 6 which examines the role of SSE in leadership and management, the main benefits of SSE include participatory approaches, moral satisfaction, reflection, solid-ground requests to the HQ, reasons for claiming additional funding, maintenance of good relations, feeling of achievement and efficiency, experience in crisis management and increased school autonomy.

Further on, the SSE will influence the way that leaders reflect on their practice, and most likely, they will form a more participatory model of management. They will also be better organized, keener on being improved will seek for innovations and will restrict their uncertainty; finally, it all depends on the goal of SSE and the leader's quality of character. One interviewee cited an extract from an ancient work stating that principals should always keep in mind that "*they rule on humans, they rule by the law, and they will not rule for ever*" (Agathon, 450-400 b.C.)

Finally, all interviewees expect that the introduction of SSE will improve the leadership and management practice in Greek schools. For better results, SSE should involve the main stakeholders (students, principal, teachers' board & parents association).

REFLECTION ON SSE AND IMPROVEMENT PLANS

In total, the present system of improvement in schools does not depend on SSE; it is connected with the choices and priorities of the state which has to decide on the



wished kind of schools and citizens. It has to do with the appropriate staffing of schools, the economic incentives, the training support, the creation of a culture of cooperation, the targeted activities, the problem-solving approaches and finally with the systematisation and restrictions of SSE approaches.

Other issues being raised during the interview were the need for administrative staff in schools, for modern premises and equipment, for advisory bodies, for counseling experts, for additional training, for salary increase and finally the need of the school community for a period of no changes in the institutional framework of primary and secondary education.

Regarding the suitable persons/offices to guide teachers for a more effective SEE, interviewees have mentioned the local and regional support units of the ministry of education (Regional Centers of Educational Support, Centers for Sustainable Development, Centers of Advisory Support), the Principal, the teachers' board, the local authorities and the **parent's** association.

The expectations regarding the future of SSE are positive under the condition that it will be preceded by specialised training for the gradual change and improvement of the relevant school culture. The introduction process of SSE will be hard and long-lasting, but it is necessary and further on essential. If it is properly implemented, there will be only positive effects. The only fear is that if the evaluators are not selected based on merit, SSE will not be trustworthy, and school will be in danger of unfair labelling.