



## **CHALLENGES AND SUPPORTS TOWARDS THE INTEGRATION OF SSE AND IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES IN EUROPEAN SCHOOLS - THE CASE OF IRELAND**

### **Abstract**

*This report as part of an Erasmus+ funded project titled “Supervising Schools in the 21st Century: Digital Tools and Improvement Plans (SS2IDTIP)” provides an overview of a series of six case studies on SSE practices in six Irish schools. The overarching objective of the Case Studies was to explore the extent to which the global regime of SSE has become a core part of the daily operations of school life. Within this, a number of themes that have an effect on the creation of a culture of SSE are explored (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). Findings suggest that, on the one hand, whilst teachers understanding of SSE are very much so in line with that government-mandated initiatives, as with all countries, issues abound, not so much in relation to the complexity of SSE or that of SSE being a collaborative process for school improvement but rather, that of ensuring that, the development of SSE regimes, should not detract from that of the ultimate purpose of SSE which is to improve teaching and learning and the ultimate objective for teachers which is to focus on providing a quality educational experience for all students.*

### **Key Words**

Evaluation, Improvement, Inspection, Data Informed Decision making, Governance

### **Introduction**

This report as part of an Erasmus+ funded project titled “Supervising Schools in the 21st Century: Digital Tools and Improvement Plans (SS2IDTIP)” provides an overview of a series of six case studies in Irish schools. The overarching objective of the Case Studies was to explore teachers and school principals’ perceptions of the Challenges



and supports towards the integration of SSE and improvement strategies in Irish schools. Following a review of the literature, a number of themes that have an effect on the creation of a culture of SSE were explored (*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 report begins by providing a summary profile of the six case study schools. Leading on from this, a summary analysis of the six themes emerging from the literature is described. Finally, a discussion and conclusion of research findings is described.

### **School Profile Characteristics**

Table I shows the school profile characteristics of each case study school that participated in the study.



	School Type	Ethos	Demographics	Student Enrolment	Number of Teachers	Interviews
<b>School 1</b>	Primary, Co-educational	The school has a Christian ethos and is under the auspices of the Catholic Bishop of the local diocese.	Rural	210	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Nine mainstream teachers</li> <li>- Two learning support teachers</li> <li>- One resource teacher</li> <li>- Two Special Needs Assistants</li> <li>- One secretary</li> <li>- One caretaker</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Principal</li> <li>- Seven teachers</li> </ul>
<b>School 2</b>	Primary, Co-educational	The school has a Christian ethos and caters for children from the Church of Ireland community	Urban	235	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Thirteen mainstream teachers</li> <li>- Five learning support teachers</li> <li>- Two Special Education Needs Assistants</li> <li>- One secretary</li> <li>- One caretaker</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Principal</li> <li>- Five teachers</li> </ul>
<b>School 3</b>	Primary, Co-educational	The school has a Christian ethos and is under the auspices of the Catholic Bishop of the local diocese.	Rural	220	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Five mainstream teachers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Principal</li> <li>- Deputy Principal</li> <li>- Five teachers</li> </ul>
<b>School 4</b>	Post Primary Secondary All Boys	The school has a Christian ethos and is under the auspices of the Catholic Bishop of the local diocese.	Urban	1,000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Fourty seven mainstream teachers</li> <li>- Nine ancillary staff</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Principal</li> <li>- Deputy Principal</li> <li>- Four teachers</li> </ul>
<b>School 5</b>	Post Primary Secondary Mixed	The school has a Christian ethos and is under the auspices of the Catholic Bishop of the local diocese.	Rural	188 Girls 189 Boys	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Twenty-eight mainstream teachers</li> <li>- Nine ancillary staff</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Principal</li> <li>- Deputy Principal</li> <li>- Six teachers</li> </ul>



School 6	Post Primary Education and Training Board Mixed	The local ETB is the school Patron with An Forus Pátrúnachta	Rural	220 Girls 120 Boys	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Twenty four mainstream teachers</li> <li>- Six ancillary staff</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Principal</li> <li>- Deputy Principal</li> <li>- Three teachers</li> </ul>
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## Understanding of SSE and Improvement

In all schools, participants *Understanding of school improvement and its purpose* related for the most part to that of **an overarching process to enhance teaching and learning**. According to one teacher, 'It is the process of monitoring school progress across a wide variety of subject and policy areas, including the input of staff, BOM'. Another teacher also stated that their understanding of school improvement and its purpose was to enhance 'all aspects of teaching and more importantly, further developing children's learning'.

The process of School improvement for all schools also involved the school community 'working together to make things better for the students. Other processes for school improvement also emerged, such as the **use of benchmarking criteria** to put in place mechanisms for school improvement. As stated by one teacher 'It is about assessing where the school is at presently with a view to making improvements'. Another teacher also stated that 'it about rating your school against objective criteria with a view to beginning the process of planning for improvement.

## Understanding of SSE and its purpose

In terms of teachers understanding of SSE and its purpose, in almost all schools, teachers understanding of SSE and its purpose is very much so in line with that of the inspectorate in Ireland where SSE is viewed as a **collaborative, reflective, evidence-based** process whose focus is on the enhancement of **teaching and learning**. According to one Principal: 'School self-evaluation is a collaborative, reflective process on the school's teaching and learning. Another principal also stated



that SSE 'is a cyclical 6-step process focussed on improving the effectiveness of the school'.

In terms of a **Collective Understanding of SSE**, participants in all case Study schools were of the view that this is the case. As stated by teachers in three of the case study schools: 'Yes. *We would like to think so*'; 'Yes, *we are all involved*'; 'We all know *what it is*'. Furthermore, in relation to participation in the SSE process, all participants, except for participants from a newly formed school (School 5) are of the view that **they have participated to some extent in the SSE.**

Yes- we are currently engaged in the process and have been since 2009, with a gap caused by the moratorium, though we did continue to bring about improvements, not necessarily through the SSE process.

In terms of the **impact of SSE when implemented** in schools, participants referred to areas such as **increased reflection on the quality of teaching and learning and a school-wide focus and enhanced collaboration among staff.**

It will give more of an opportunity for us to reflect on our teaching and the learning of the pupils and work together within the school and with home (where appropriate) for the benefit of the children and their learning.

It allows for school-wide focus which leads to improvement in the teaching and learning

It will help to unite groups of teachers in the school

Finally, the majority of interviewees were of the view that SSE is and **should remain** a mandatory process for school improvement. As stated by one participant: '*it is a useful strategy and should be obligatory*. Indeed, as stated by one participant '*I do not believe that teachers would fully engage with it otherwise*'.



## SSE as a whole school approach to school improvement

Most participants were of the view that *'There is a whole school approach to it'*. However, it was also noted that: ***'There is a whole school approach, but we also contribute in our specialist areas'***. Furthermore, another teacher also stated: ***'at times only certain teachers get involved in the areas targeted for a particular focus'***.

### Persons in charge of planning and development of the school improvement process

For all case study schools, the ***'principal is in charge'***. However, middle leaders also initiate the process according to some participants.

The principal is in overall charge, but post holders with responsibility for various subjects take the lead in those areas. For example, our DP leads on literacy and improvements there have come about as a result of evaluation and action led by her

There is an SSE team made up of teaching staff and management

### Participants in school improvement planning, development and evaluation

Almost all members of the school community, but primarily the **school principal, teachers** and the **Board of management** of the school are involved in improvement planning, development and evaluation. As stated by one participant: *'The whole staff is involved in SSE although it is led by an SSE team'*. Other members of the school community, such as parents and students, are involved, albeit to a **lesser extent** than the school principal and teachers.

### Past useful experiences in SSE and improvement from other practices in the school

A number of useful experiences were described, such as improvements in literacy standards.



Curriculum wise, old methods of teaching spelling, tables and handwriting are being seen in a positive light towards bringing about improvements necessary following neglect in recent years

Other useful experiences related to the creation of a culture of **professional collaborative interactions** and the usefulness of SSE **as a means of preparing for School Inspections.**

### Contribution of SSE to school improvement

The **actual** and **potential** contribution of SSE to school improvement was significant. Interviewees **were of the view that SSE:** *'Gives teachers a chance to reflect on practice and look at how they could do things differently'; 'allows all staff members to focus on one particular aspect of learning which provides a universal improvement and agreement throughout the school'.*

### School data for school improvement

Various forms of data are used in the SSE process such as: *'Standardised tests, teacher-designed tests, diagnostic tests, teacher and other staff observation, surveys to all stakeholders, children's work and observations'*. **Parental** and **student** surveys on a particular aspect of school quality are also used.

### Guidelines for school improvement planning and development

Almost all schools use inspectorate devised guidelines and framework for SSE referred to as: *'Looking at our school 2016 - A quality Framework for School Self-evaluation'*. SSE guidelines are also provided through an inspectorate devised website for SSE (<http://schoolself-evaluation.ie/>). Guidance is also provided through the School support services of the Department of Education, referred to as the PDST [The Professional Development Service for Teachers].

### A written plan for school improvement

Except for one school (School 5), all schools that participated in the study have a written plan for school improvement.



Yes, a short document outlining our priorities and strategies for bringing improvements about

Yes. This is stored in a central database and shared with all staff members who can contribute to it

Not yet, as we are a new school in our second year of operation

### Key areas for school improvement

In almost all schools, dominant areas for school improvement related to that of improvements in: **‘literacy and numeracy’**; **‘school attendance’**; **‘environmental awareness’**; **‘a healthy lifestyle’**

In our school, we have focused on the areas of literacy, oral Irish language and digital learning

We will develop a whole school approach to developing a positive growth mindset and focus on the well-being of pupils and staff

## The capacity of educators to engage with SSE

Have you been provided with training on how to carry out SSE and improvement such as setting targets, data analysis, development of SSE plans, etc?

Although all principals have **received some training on SSE**, they are also of the view that more training is required now that they are familiar with the overarching conception of SSE. As stated by one principal, ‘I’ve had some training, but would welcome more’.

What aspects of the SSE process do teachers find difficult in terms of capacity (time, training, data analysis, setting targets, collaboration, etc.)? How can these areas be improved?



The amount of time spent on SSE is an issue for all participants. According to one Principal, 'if teachers are not 100% convinced that it is a worthwhile exercise that will benefit teaching and learning, there will be resistance and it will become a laborious chore'. Another teacher stated: 'It is not that teachers do not understand SSE, Target setting, etc. it is that some teachers do not see the benefits to practice just yet'.

Other capacity related issues concerned the difficulty with target setting and finding common time to engage in SSE. As stated by one teacher: 'if its meant to be a collaborative, ongoing process and the average teacher is on a full-time table, it is almost impossible to engage with SSE fully'.

Finally, the lack of training for teachers on how to initiate data-informed decision-making processes is also an issue among teachers. As stated by one teacher: 'So we all get what it is about, and we all know the jargon, the six-step process, etc. It is how to how to set meaningful targets and how to develop a plan to improve targets'.

[What training is required for your school to fully engage and optimise SSE and improvement?](#)

How to set SMART [Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Timely] targets is an area that is weak among almost all participants. 'That's the part we struggle with, and it is only after we are halfway through the cycle that we realise that we needed to spend more time on setting targets and developing plans to meet the targets'.

## **Unintended Consequences of SSE**

Where SSE is already a part of the **school improvement practice** in schools, those interviewed also report that SSE among may teachers is usually associated with the extra workload and if SSE is not directly associated with trying to improve an aspect of teaching and learning it is considered nothing more than 'a bureaucratic process'. This ultimately affects the willingness of the school community to engage in SSE.



## The willingness of the school community to engage in SSE

All participants that were involved in the study were of the view that not only the management and teachers should be involved in SSE; there is also, with limitations, a need to involve other stakeholders such as parents and student. According to one participant, 'it is really important to involve parents and students but in a non-threatening way to teachers. However, another teacher also stated, 'not all parents want to get involved for various reasons such as their busy lives and also, their past experiences with their own education'. Another teacher also stated that 'there is this idea that all students want to be part of the student voice movement. Some do, but other students just want to come to school and learn and play'.

Finally, in terms of those external to the school, almost all schools were of the view that the inspectorate should be involved in some way with advising the school on their SSE. According to one participant, 'Look of course we know that they don't have much time and their job is, number one to inspect, but having an inspector advising a school on SSE is far more beneficial than having someone from the support services'. Another participant stated: 'We don't want them to train us or to develop our plan but definitely need them to advise us and also to tell us what has worked in other schools'.

## SSE as a tool for improvement in teaching practice

Many examples were provided on how SSE can be used as a tool for improvement in teaching practice such as: 'improvement in AFL [Assessment for Learning]'; 'ensuring that what we view as good quality teaching is in line with what inspectors think'; 'improvements in literacy and numeracy'; and 'trying to improve how to differentiate more as all of our classes are mixed ability'.

## SSE as a tool for improvement in leading and management

School self-evaluation is considered as a beneficial tool for **improvements in leadership and management**. For example, one Principal was of the view that SSE allows a school to have an agreed understanding of the 'priorities of the school and



how they can be improved'. This perspective is also in line with another principal who stated that: 'It allows for a clearer vision amongst the in school management team'.

The move towards a more **participatory model of** school leadership has also been described as being a result of SSE. As stated by one principal: 'it gives opportunities for distributed leadership and encourages younger teachers to get involved'. In parallel to the notion of distributed leadership, almost all schools were of the view that SSE fosters ownership and collaboration and requires a **whole school response** to SSE initiatives. This inevitably has allowed for increased opportunities for **collaboration among staff**. According to one principal, 'It has allowed all staff to work together collaboratively. It has given a voice to all. Everyone is working together for the benefit of the children and the school'. By association, this has also allowed for increased **reflection** by principals on their practice as school leaders. As stated by one principal: 'I think it encourages more self-evaluation and reflection. Teachers were also of the view that SSE has challenged teachers to become more reflective of their practice. According to one teacher, 'Teachers are being forced to think about what they are doing'.

Finally, another teacher also stated that: 'Teachers with new ideas now have a platform from which to share their reflections' which according to some principals, has resulted in middle leaders taking more responsibilities for school priorities than they would have in the absence of SSE. The following comments illustrate this point.

Yes, I feel that the middle management team are more empowered and are more confident to take the lead. Leadership is better distributed

Yes – it has resulted in an increased level of distributed leadership across the organisation