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

About this publication

Attribution

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I. Introduction

This report as part of an Erasmus+ funded project titled "Supervising Schools in the 21st Century: Digital Tools and Improvement Plans (SS21DTIP)" provides an overview of a series of twenty-three case studies on SSE practices in six Irish, six Greek, six Spanish and five Bulgarian 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.

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.

II. The case of Bulgaria

School profile characteristics

Five 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 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 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 1st and 12th 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 4th, 7th and 12th 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 with18 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 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.

<u>School 4</u> 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.

<u>School 5</u> is a large school with 908 students from 1st up to 12th 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 been4 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 of involvement).
- 1 school has extensive experience with school self-evaluation (in the framework of different projects and as a planned approach)
- 2 of the schools have no previous experience with school self-evaluation in a formal way.

Timeline

Research data was gathered in the period 20th - 27th of February 2019.

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 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.

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.

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 extend but mostly for teachers to the school as a whole.

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 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.

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

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.

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 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 form 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.

III. The case of Greece

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.

Understanding of SSE and improvement

Regarding Code 1, 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, isolated 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 exculpated and later on obligatory. In any case, it should no 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.

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.

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.

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 overweigh 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.

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.

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 co-operation, 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.

IV. The case of Spain (Extremadura)

School profile characteristics

number	School Type	Demographics	Enrolment	Number of teachers
1	State secondary	Rural area	569	83
2	State secondary	Rural area	92	24
3	State Primary	Urban area	397	17
4	State Primary	Rural area	155	19
5	State Primary	Urban area	414	32
6	State secondary	Urban area	1,260	108

Table 1: School profile characteristics

School	Number of SMT members interviewed	Number of staff interviewed
School 1	5	5
School 2	2	5
School 3	2	5
School 4	2	5
School 5	2	6
School 6	4	0
Table 2: number of interviews		

Schools 1 and 5 are managed by principals that were selected with projects which aimed to increase teachers' participation in educational programmes and improve teachers' teaching competence. Since then, both schools have taken part in programmes, such as "CPDEx (Teaching competencies in Extremadura), INNOVATED (Teaching with digital tools), *QUÉDATE* (STAY-

programme to fight early school leaving) *AYUDA ENTRE IGUALES* (to fight bullying) and ERASMUS KA1 projects.

School 2's teaching staff are mainly young and dynamic, ready for innovation and changes in the methodology to improve academic outcomes. The principal's Management project included the implementation of PBL (project based learning) methodology to introduce changes and improvement in school performance. The School is taking part in several programmes promoted by the educational administration such as a network of schools of peace and non-violence, an emotional intelligence programme, INNOVATED school network (Teaching with digital tools), QUÉDATE (It deals with early school leaving) *AYUDA ENTRE IGUALES* (to fight bullying) and an ERASMUS KA1.

School 3 develops a Bilingual English Project. It is an urban primary school, and most innovation at school takes place around this project.

There are two schools in the town, where School 4 is located, and this is the newest, in a new residential area while the other is in the centre of the town. This location is less attractive to families in general. In 2018/2019 the school has an enrolment of 155, both girls and boys. Four years ago, the SMT that resigned because of the many difficulties among teachers. The current principal presented a project to be selected three years ago, whose main objective was to increase enrolment, teachers' participation in educational programmes and improve leadership and management competence. Since then, the school has taken part in programmes, such as "CPDEx, INNOVATED, Proyect@ (Programme to develop high skills), QUÉDATE, AYUDA ENTRE IGUALES.

School 6's principal has a long experience as a principal and is involved in permanent teacher training. The school has taken part in programmes, such as "CPDEx", ERASMUS + KA1 and KA2 projects, "Día de Europa", "Sello Europeo de las Lenguas", ETwinning, "MUÉVETE" (It share school experiences and good practices) or *AYUDA ENTRE IGUALES* (to fight bullying).

Understanding of SSE and Improvement

For the schools in this case study, **school improvement** is understood as a process with two main phases, a diagnostic process to recognise hindering factors and a decision-making process to modify a current situation and introduce changes at the school.

School improvement for the purpose of increasing **academic performance** was a strong theme that emerged from the interview data.

> Increase in academic performance and better efficiency of the educational process

Participants understanding of School improvement also related to that of school improvement

being **a systematic process** that also involves **benchmarking against performance criteria**.

> A process to recognise mistakes to correct them and never make them again

As regards of the **understanding of SSE and its purpose**, in most cases, interviewees understood that the concept of SSE related to that of being an **evidenced-based process** that allows for comparisons with internal and external benchmarks.

Spanish schools, for the most part, view SSE as **a collaborative, systematic, process** to enhance an aspect of **teaching and learning**.

> It is a reflection on the entire teaching practice. Its purpose is to see how it is being done to help others, to guide others and see what we are doing, both as teachers, as a management team and as a school in general. Not only should we self-evaluate individually but also as a whole school. To sum up: modify, change and improve.

Participants' views relating to a collective understanding of SSE varied. However, in the majority of cases, there appears to be an **overarching understanding of SSE**

> Yes, there is a clear and collective idea that it is good to plan and improve
>
> Yes, in fact, we are having meetings and trying to improve

On the other hand, some participants were also of the view that in the **absence of clearly defined protocols** there is also a need to enhance their schools understanding of SSE by making the process **more procedural and systematic**.

> In our school, there is a collective idea of improvement, even if there is no improvement plan

The majority of participants are of the view that they **have participated in SSE**, either through the CPDEX programme ('30 teachers in a Project to self-evaluate teaching practice') or the **peer-reviewed initiative** referred to as MUÉVETE ('Job shadowing in other schools').

> Yes, in the "CPDEX" project that has involved the preparation of questionnaires to evaluate teaching capacity and "MUÉVETE" as well as, since we have observed in other schools and we have also been observed by others. There are courses in these projects

In these initiatives, participants referred to **various SSE tools** that were used in the process.

> Yes, I have had the experience of applying the SWOT matrix in another school.

The majority of participants are of the view that the **impact of SSE if/when implemented on a regular basis** in school would have a positive impact on school life in core areas such as **increasing collaboration among staff** and the use of SSE as a **roadmap for school improvement**.

> People would feel part of a group and improvement would be achieved as a whole

Participants were also cognisant of implementation challenges such as that of the **novel nature of self-reflection.**

> We usually see it as if someone will come to judge and tell us what we do wrong and it scares us, but it does not have to be so since it is to correct, strengthen the strong points and retake the weak so that they become strong points too.

The majority of interviewees were of the view that SSE **should be mandatory**.

> SSE is a useful strategy; it should be mandatory.

However, two interviewees were also of the view that, on the one hand, while SSE should be a mandatory process for school improvement, it should also be 'guided' and 'tools should be provided (by the Inspectorate)'.

Finally, in line with the co-existent perspective of internal and external evaluation, another interviewee was also of the view that 'it should be optional, with the General Inspection and Evaluation service being responsible for ultimately evaluating the processes and educational results'.

SSE as a whole school approach to school improvement

When asked about the **understanding of SSE as a whole school approach for school improvement**, a small minority of interviewees were of the view that 'In our school, **it exists as an approach**, but there **is no plan**'. Another participant stated that 'we are coordinated when we elaborate the annual reports, we are aware of the need for self-assessment, but there is **a lack of systematic work**'. However, where support is provided, one school was of the view that:

> The management team plans the school self-assessment, the whole educational community carries it out, including families. This approach has been guided by the CPDEX program, project Atlántida and also the program for school success of the Ministry of Education, a few years ago

Regarding the persons in charge of planning and development of the school improvement process, there appears to be **distributed responsibilities** for the leadership of SSE in some schools.

> The management team, the Pedagogical Coordination Committee and the departments. It is a gradual planning, with different levels of responsibility

On the other hand, a school relates to that of teachers contracts in bilingual schools having a debilitating effect on middle leadership practices. As stated by one participant, '**Being a bilingual school, teachers are not permanent, so the management team assumes that role**'.

As for the **participation** in school improvement planning, developing and evaluating processes, 'Most teachers participate in the development. The management team and the Guiding team plan all aspects that have to do improvement'. However, one interviewee was of the view that 'Parents and enterprises do not participate, although they should'.

Useful previous experiences were many and consisted of 'An Erasmus + project KA1 that required a need analysis'. The school plan and participation in CPDEX were also viewed positively.

> Yes, bilingual section and CPDEX. The experiences are included in the End of the year Report and in the different Annual Programs

The actual and potential contribution of SSE to school improvement was significant among schools. The evaluation of '**new standards required self-evaluation** of our **teaching practice** and this has **improved the objectiveness of final results**'. A **reduction** in the number of **behaviour issues** and better relations among all members of the community was also described.

> Some years ago, the school self-evaluated its disciplinary procedures and school behaviour rules, and after that, the number of behaviour issues and incidents decreased a lot
> The improvement of the results of the teaching and learning process as well as the improvement of relationships with other stakeholders

Modes of school data for school improvement mentioned are:

> The data is obtained from the results of student assessment, information from delegated mothers, departmental meetings, tutor meetings, evaluation sessions, faculty meetings, PCC, management team, school council, individual interviews with parents, etc. The data is obtained from anonymous questionnaires, forms (completed by all members of the educational community), meetings, messaging, direct observation, etc.

> Through observation, common sense, research and documentation, academic results, the study of the socioeconomic context, etc.

CPDEX plays a significant role in providing '**guidelines to self-evaluate teaching practice'.** Internal guidelines also exist.

> Internal guidelines are provided by the management team; but no external guidelines or training have been provided by the educational administration, there are no guidelines to evaluate

Some interviewees were of the view that 'we have no guidelines; sometimes the counselling teacher helps'. Indeed, unless a school was in the CPDEX program, guidelines for SSE are limited.

> The CPDEX program provided guidelines, but for the rest, no guidelines have been provided.

Answers vary regarding the existence of **a written plan for improvement**. In some schools, they write improvement measures either in a specific plan or in another document:

> Yes, it can be considered that the improvement plan is included in the Annual School Plan,

even if it is not written as an improvement plan. The annual report and the Annual School Plan are complementary in an SSE process.

On the other hand, some participants were of the view that no plan existed.

There is no such plan in our school as a concrete and institutionalised improvement plan

Capacity of educators to engage with SSE

The main **difficulties** for nearly all schools are the **lack of specific training and the lack of time** to carry out SSE. A couple of schools also mention the **instability of teaching staff** as a drawback.

A big proportion (around 50%) of teachers don't stay at the school longer than a school year

On the other hand, **obtaining data and teachers' lack of commitment** are also seen as difficulties in a couple of schools.

Also, defining the criteria, the procedures, and the purpose of the evaluation seems to be crucial for the smooth implementation of SSE.

The most difficult aspect would be to define qualitative and quantitative "fine-tuned" indicators and find out the correct process to extract data. On the other hand, we must not forget that SSE must have an impact on the improvement of learning.

Finally, according to managers and teachers, the **training to be provided** to fully engage and optimize SSE and improvement should focus on: practical tools to measure, definition of indicators, clear process to extract data, how to elaborate an improvement plan and last but not least what must be evaluated and for what purpose.

SSE as a tool for school improvement practice

Some teachers fear the results of SSE and foresee frustration.

Teachers might feel attacked by SSE; they can feel bad, and it can create tension among teachers

In two schools, conflicts among teachers are also feared. The extra workload is also mentioned as one possible undesired consequence.

For SSE to be a useful tool for school improvement practice, it is important to engage and to be supported by external stakeholders. For the majority of schools, members of the educational community, particularly parents, should participate.

We think that the educational community is always willing to participate. In fact, in all the improvement plans we have developed, they have participated. Of course, it is essential that they take part to achieve improvement.

As for the support provided by external stakeholders, the inspectors of education, the

educational administration and local authorities are mentioned in more schools as necessary collaborators. In fact, when considering the participation of school inspectors in school improvement process school staff mostly state that inspectors are currently engaged or support school improvement in one way or another, although this is seen as a new inspectorate practice.

SSE as a tool for improvement in teaching practice

Schools have implemented SSE to very different degrees and scopes, depending not only on regulations, but also on the experience and practice of the schools. Still, it can be affirmed that most schools regard SSE as a **beneficial strategy** for the improvement in teaching practice. Generally speaking, many of the answers provided are shared by schools, but others are specific examples of trending methodologies like Project Based Learning (PBL).

Benefits of SSE are related to improvement in 'student assessment tools', 'more peaceful class atmosphere', 'better lesson planning, changes in methodology, adapting curricula to 'students' needs'.

Whether SSE has influenced the way in which teachers reflect on their teaching practice, it depends, to a great extent, on the experience of the schools with SSE. In one school, the influence of SSE cannot be tested since it has not been implemented yet or so short ago that results cannot be evaluated. For the rest of the schools, answers are mostly positive. Generally speaking, SSE has influenced the way to reflect on teaching practice. In a couple of Spanish schools 'obtaining data' and 'using specific strategies and tools' are highlighted as new elements in their teaching reflection.

Also, improvements in teaching practice after the introduction of SSE have been observed in some schools:

> It improves the feedback to the students […] we can see an evolution of the teaching staff, especially the teamwork for the PBL classroom

Answers provided by three Spanish school staffs offer a positive view of SSE as a tool for improvement. Specific examples are related to 'Improvement of strategies and skills', 'listening to students' and 'school organisation'.

SSE as a tool for improvement in leading and management

School self-evaluation is considered as a beneficial tool for improvement in leading and management in Spanish schools. Although one school acknowledges either very limited or no experience at all in SSE as a whole school process, both SMT and Teachers' groups seem quite

optimistic about the benefits and improvements that SSE brings when implemented.

The main benefits of SSE for leadership and management appointed by the focus groups are related to the following areas:

School mission and vision

Schools in Spain find SSE useful to achieve a common understanding of schools' priorities and aims. For teachers in SP4, the improvement is shown in relationships between the SMT and the teachers and also it has helped both groups to have a common understanding of the school's mission.

Changes in the management style

The changes in the management style are related to collaboration, cooperation and the distribution of responsibilities.

Examples of how SSE contributes to a more participatory model can also be found.

> Management as distributed leadership, looking for teachers' participation in all decisions

Collaboration is a key factor for this change of management style. Some schools agree on the importance of sharing and working together, listening to other opinions and experiences. Some teachers feel that the SSE process has given them the chance to listen to each other and share their opinions:

> They (SMT) make you feel part of a team, they have encouraged participation, and we (teachers) are involved.
> They (SMT) are more willing to listen to our opinion.

Opportunity for reflecting and sharing opinions

SSE brings opportunities to reflect on school practice, and this is seen as a benefit for leading and management in some schools.

> The school organization is adjusted to what the school needs, in terms of schedules, meetings, coordination
> Management as distributed leadership, looking for teachers' participation in all decisions

As a structured framework, SSE provides schools with feedback and data. Schools value the importance of tools, which provide them with instruments and strategies to develop school improvement. In a couple of schools obtaining data after SSE processes are regarded as a benefit.

When asked if SSE has influenced the way leaders reflect on their practice as leaders, most participants seem to agree that it has. However, answers differ quite a lot from one school to another.

> Especially in parents' participation. Since SSE was introduced, enrolment has noticeably increased.
> Specific SSE questionnaires are used to obtain data.
> This way, teachers know what they are doing right and wrong.

V. The case of Ireland

School Profile Characteristics

Table 1 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
School 1	Primary, Co-educational	The school has a Christian ethos and is under the auspices of the Catholic Bishop of the local diocese.	Rural	210	- Nine mainstream teachers - Two learning support teachers - One resource teacher - Two Special Needs Assistants - One secretary - One caretaker	- Principal - Seven teachers
School 2	Primary, Co-educational	The school has a Christian ethos and caters for children from the Church of Ireland community	Urban	235	- Thirteen mainstream teachers - Five learning support teachers - Two Special Education Needs Assistants - One secretary - One caretaker	- Principal - Five teachers
School 3	Primary, Co-educational	The school has a Christian ethos and is under the auspices of the Catholic Bishop of the local diocese.	Rural	220	- Five mainstream teachers	- Principal - Deputy Principal - Five teachers

School 4	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	- Fourthy seven mainstream teachers - Nine ancillary staff	- Principal - Deputy Principal - Four teachers
School 5	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	- Twenty-eight mainstream teachers - Nine ancillary staff	- Principal - Deputy Principal - Six teachers
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	- Twenty four mainstream teachers - Six ancillary staff	- Principal - Deputy Principal - Three teachers

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 focused 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 it's 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 organisations.