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The role of mentoring and peer-to-peer support in sustaining teacher professional development

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Abstract

This paper presents a part of the RESPOND European Erasmus+-project on the mutually sustaining relationship between teacher professional development and overall school development. The focus is on one of four product results from the project, “The RESPOND Teacher Professional Development Support Guidelines” developed as a tool for understanding the roles of and interactions between different actors in school, with particular reference to the role of mentors for formal institutional support and peer-to-peer support for informal support between colleagues. The paper concludes with a reflection on the aims and the intended impact of the guidelines.

1. The RESPOND project

RESPOND (Sustaining the Professional Development within Schools as Professional Learning Environments) is an Erasmus+ KA220-SCH - Cooperation partnerships in school education project. The RESPOND partner organizations are the University of Florence, Italy (coordinating partner), the University Lucian Blaga of Sibiu, Romania, the University of Granada, Spain, the Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences, Norway, the Regional Educational Authority of Piemonte (USR – Rete Sostenibilità), Italy, and the Comprehensive School 21, Sibiu, Romania.

The point of departure for the RESPOND project is that there is a need to investigate and analyse the complex relationship between teacher professional development and overall school development and identify ways in which they can be mutually sustaining. The sustainability of a teacher professional profile is considered from the dual perspective of its ability to both demonstrate characteristics of durability, resilience, and transformability in the way these components develop throughout the teacher’s career and also correspond to global and local realities and learner needs in an increasingly complex, volatile, uncertain, interdependent, and interconnected world. RESPOND considers sustainable professional development at the level of individual teachers, the schools they teach in, and the educational systems in which they build their careers and proposes ways in each of these levels can be mutually sustaining.

RESPOND envisages four intersecting products:

1. The RESPOND Teacher Professional Profile/Electronic Portfolio (TPP/E-PT).

This tool defines a common teacher professional profile related to global competence – articulated in specific areas and types, levels, and indicators of competence – that is

elaborated and experimented internationally and can serve to promote self-evaluation processes concerning the development of teachers' competences and thereby enhance the sustainability of teacher professional and school development.

2. The RESPOND Teacher Professional Development Support Guidelines (TPD-SG).

This tool focuses on the roles of and interactions between different actors in school, with particular reference to mentors, newly qualified teachers, experienced teachers, and school leaders, and defines Mentor Support Guidelines (M-SG) for formal institutional support and Peer-to-Peer Support Guidelines (PP-SG) for informal support between colleagues.

3. The RESPOND Impact Evaluation Support Guidelines (IE-SG).

This tool focuses on the ability of schools to understand and promote the complex processes involved in ongoing teacher professional development and its relationship with school development. Particular emphasis is placed on identifying indicators of institutional impact and learning lessons for future development.

4. The RESPOND Promoting and Monitoring Sustainability Indexes (PMSI).

This tool proposes an overall sustainability development framework with particular emphasis on identifying factors that facilitate and impede the sustainability of professional and school development and how facilitating factors can be increased and impeding factors reduced. The sustainability development framework proposes both a common core related to the concept of sustainability in terms of ongoing professional development (Teacher Professional Development Sustainability Index – TPDSI) and school development (School Development Sustainability Index – SDSI) and how the framework and the indexes are relevant to diverse and specific situations.

One member of the partnership has overall responsibility for the various phases of elaboration and definition of each one of the projects, while other members are actively involved in generating ideas, discussing contents and field-based experimentation.

Each product is declined in terms of four dimensions, each of which is based on a guiding question which directs its development, values and attitudes concerning consciousness and awareness of the nature and importance of that dimension, and for which key action areas that should be the focus both of teacher professional and overall school development are identified.

This article focuses on the second product involving the definition of mentor support guidelines for formal institutional support and peer-to-peer support guidelines for informal support between colleagues. The leading organization with overall responsibility for this product was the Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences, Norway.

2. The RESPOND methodology

Each one of the members of the partnership is actively involved in the areas addressed by the project.

The target groups and relevant stakeholders involved at all levels of the activities implemented cover a wide range of professional profiles. These include teachers at ISCED levels 1 and 2, staff in faculties of education involved in initial and continuous teacher education programs, as well as those involved in the provision of continuing professional development, advisory groups, or individuals with this role in regional or national contexts, teacher professional associations, the inspectorate, senior management in schools and staff from all curricular areas.

On the basis of a common methodology established for each of the products at the outset of the RESPOND project, the mentor support and peer-to-peer support guidelines have been developed on the basis of a number of intersecting steps.

1. Transnational development of an initial framework for data collection on facilitating and impeding factors in defining and promoting the work of mentors and experienced peers in teacher professional development and school development and the building of work packages with relevant activities and outcomes proposed for each of the members of the partnership.

2. Individual country initial data collection based on literature research and previous professional learning experiences of the participants in order to identify factors that facilitate and impede development in particular situations that involve given action areas and specific actions for mentors and experienced peers and developing competences within the dimensions focussed on.

3. Transnational development of support guidelines based on identifying and implementing ways of increasing facilitating factors and decreasing impeding factors in each dimension.

4. Individual country main study data collection based on current ongoing professional learning experiences together with implementation and testing of support guidelines.

In this way, as with each of the products of the project, the development of the mentor and peer-to-peer support guidelines means that the networks of schools in each partner country actively participate in terms of being consulted in order to identify their needs and obtain their point of view while planning, informed of all decisions taken and the ongoing data collection and monitoring processes that take place, and involved as protagonists in all the activities conducted. Every effort is made to ensure a multilateral flow of exchanges from and to each partner country and its network of schools so that all the participating schools, teachers, classes, and learners can be a part of and gain benefit from the products of the project. Each of the activities ensures opportunities for all participants to provide feedback and feedforward at each one of these participation levels.

3. The four dimensions of the mentor support and peer-to-peer support guidelines

The four dimensions identified for the mentor support and peer-to-peer support guidelines and the corresponding guiding questions are:

1. Leadership for mentorship and peer-to-peer programmes.

How can the school develop good leadership, qualifications and structures for effective mentor support and peer-to-peer support guidelines?

2. Support for the transition from teacher education to the teaching profession.

How can mentor support and peer-to-peer support programmes support newly qualified teachers' transition to the professional practice of teachers?

3. Sustained support for teacher professional development.

How can peer-to-peer collaboration and continuing professional development strengthen teachers' competences and the practical application of their knowledge and skills?

4. Developing the school culture for professional development.

How can systems be established to promote sustained professional development and strengthen the development of a school culture and learning community?

Each of the of the guidelines' four dimensions are then declined in terms of action areas to be addressed as mentor and peer-to-peer support are implemented within the school as a professional learning environment.

1. Leadership for mentorship and peer-to-peer programs

- Identify the purpose and vision for mentorship and peer-to-peer programs.
- Integrate evidence-based management practice in systems and structures (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Hattie, 2023; Kvernbekk, 2016).
- Enhance teachers' professional competence by developing a school culture for action, reflection, and sharing of competence (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).
- Provide clear opportunities and strategies for career development and advancement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).
- Establish systems for training and qualification of professional mentors and peer-to-peer guides.

2. Support for transitions from teacher education to the teaching profession

- Implement sustainable mentorship programs.
- Design personalized mentoring plans for the mentees.

- Enhance social and academic membership and engagement in the learning community and strengthen cooperation between school and teacher education.
- Establish and distribute in-depth knowledge about school culture, the teaching profession, and transitions from teacher education to professional practice (Tiplic, Brandmo & Elstad, 2014).
- Cultivate professional flexibility and resilience.

3. Sustained support for teacher professional development

- Develop sustainable mechanisms for peer-to-peer support and ongoing learning opportunities for teachers (Darling-Hammond, et al, 2017).
- Stimulate active and engaged participation in school leadership.
- Create genuine practices for teacher collaboration and unity (Donohoo, 2018; Darling-Hammond, 2021; Marzano & Hefleblower, 2016).
- Encourage critical reflection and create systems for teacher feedback and appraisal.
- Develop awareness and understanding of current research and evidence on effective teaching practice (Dunn & Hattie, 2021; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Kvernbekk, 2016).
- Expect and encourage teachers to continuously build bridges between theory and practice throughout their careers.

4. Developing the school culture for professional development

- Promote collective ownership of the school's mission, values, and goals.
- Enhance a culture of continuous improvements.
- Create a structure and process for sustained professional learning and development at an organizational level.
- Integrate intuitive knowledge processes into management procedures.
- Implement mentorship and peer-to-peer programmes in school development plans and strategies.
- The values, attitudes and competences that should underpin action within these areas are articulated as follows.

The guidelines encompass a shared set of values, attitudes, and competences that permeate all facets of the outlined action areas and the associated work with these:

Values

- Authentic leadership and coaching.
- Trust building and empowerment.
- A culture of continuous improvements.
- Communication and cooperation.
- Recognition of teachers' role and impact.

Attitudes

- Responsibility.
- Awareness and empathy.
- Self-reflection and critical thinking.
- Adaptive and flexible practice.
- Openness to others' points of view.

Competences (as identified in the RESPOND Teacher Professional Profile/Electronic Portfolio)

- Global and Local Issues and Multiple Perspectives.
- Intercultural Communication and Interaction.
- Individual and Collective Wellbeing.
- Acting for Sustainability.

4. Declining action areas in terms of specific actions

Each of the action areas identified within the four dimensions of the guidelines are then declined in terms of specific actions.

Dimension 1: Leadership for mentorship and peer-to-peer programs

Action area 1: Identify the purpose and vision for mentorship and peer-to-peer programs.

- Clarify the reasons for building a mentorship and/or peer-to-peer program(s).
- Involve participants in the process of creating a strong vision.
- Communicate the vision for the program to all involved.
- Set measurable short-term targets and long-term goals for the mentorship program.
- Create a roadmap for the program's vision, including a plan for achieving the goals.
- Identify and support varying individual mentoring needs across specific learning goals, preferences, and professional needs.

Action area 2: Integrate evidence-based management practice in systems and structures.

- Ensure to keep updated on relevant research literature and policy documents.
- Stimulate cooperation with other institutions and establish opportunities for sharing experiences across schools and regions.
- Share experiences and practices within and between schools (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).
- Motivate continuous professional development and lifelong learning.
- Conduct observational- and evidence-based reflection on outcomes and impacts.

Action area 3: Enhance teachers' professional competence by developing a school culture for action, reflection and sharing of competence (Dunn & Hattie, 2021; Marzano & Hefleblower, 2016).

- Facilitate arenas for sharing and critical discussions of personal practice and experience, by promoting:
 - Knowledge acquisition – creation of new insights, skills, and relationships.
 - Knowledge sharing – dissemination of such learning within and among members of the organization.
 - Knowledge utilization - integration of learning to make it broadly availability, its generalization to new situations, and its practical application.
- Provide space for dialogue and reflection regarding teaching practice.
- Develop strategies for dealing with difficult situations supported by a professional repertoire of practice.

Action area 4: Enhance teachers’ professional competence by developing a school culture for action, reflection, and sharing of competence (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Marzano & Hefleblower, 2016).

- Establish model pathways/guidelines for teachers’ career advancement and link to opportunities for professional development.
- Encourage teachers to take on new responsibilities and leadership roles linked to their career advancement pathway.
- Supervise individual teachers to develop their own pathways for career advancement and facilitate its achievement through regular review and provision of necessary opportunities.

Action area 5: Provide clear opportunities and strategies for career development and advancement.

- Establish model pathways/guidelines for teachers’ career advancement and link to opportunities for professional development.
- Encourage teachers to take on new responsibilities and leadership roles linked to their career advancement pathway (Darling-Hammond et al, 2017).
- Supervise individual teachers to develop their own pathways for career advancement and facilitate its achievement through regular review and provision of necessary opportunities.

Action area 6: Establish systems for training and qualification of professional mentors and peer-to-peer guides.

- Identify if training of mentors will be through an individual school-based program or a common mentor education program (e.g., led by a Teacher Education Institution or professional training organization).
- Establish accredited training programs for mentors and peer-to-peer guides.
- Support experience-based reflection and learning for continued enhancement of mentors and guides.

Dimension 2: Support for the transition from teacher education to the teaching profession.

Action Area 1: Implement sustainable mentorship programs.

- Implement an induction phase where mentoring is prioritized in a systematic way during the first years of teaching, based on:
 - A co-designed plan between the mentor and the newly qualified teacher.
 - The encouragement of building personal skills and competence.
 - The promotion of new skills and competence.
 - A trustful relationship between the mentor and the mentee.

Action Area 2: Design personalized mentoring plans for the mentees.

- Assess the mentees' current competences. This can be done with reference to the self-assessment tool provided by the RESPOND Teacher Professional Profile/Electronic Portfolio.
- Identify the mentees' needs for professional development.
- Set development targets for mentees according to the schools' eco-systems.
- Facilitate a continuous meta-reflection on the process and outcome.

Action Area 3: Enhance social and academic membership and engagement in the learning community and strengthen cooperation between school and teacher education.

- Include and recognize the newly qualified teachers as important resources and contributors in the professional community.
- Establish forums for reflexive dialogue where newly qualified teachers can share their knowledge on issues such as new teaching methodologies, the use of technology in education, interdisciplinary perspectives, and action-based research-initiatives to strengthen the quality of teachers' own teaching.

Action Area 4: Establish and distribute in-depth knowledge about school culture, the teaching profession, and transitions from teacher education to professional practice.

- Create spaces for reflecting on connections between qualification in teacher education and further professional development in professional practice.
- Facilitate opportunities for collaboration and joint planning between newly qualified teachers and more experienced colleagues.

Action Area 5: Cultivate professional flexibility and resilience.

- Motivate newly qualified teachers to further develop and stay in the profession (Tiplic, Brandmo & Elstad, 2015).
- Provide and initiate programs where newly qualified teachers can further develop their competence.
- Reduce the experience of isolation by newly qualified teachers and increase their self-confidence and self-esteem.

Dimension 3: Sustained support for teacher professional development.

Action Area 1: Develop sustainable mechanisms for peer-to-peer support and ongoing learning opportunities for teachers.

- Equip the teachers with tools and methods for different forms of peer-to-peer support, including:
 - Observation of others, being observed, and mentoring each other – structure the school day to give teachers time for activities.
 - Joint problem solving: a problem for one teacher, is a problem for the whole school.
- Facilitate opportunities for the staff to meet and work with common issues regularly and encourage interdisciplinary collaboration (Marzano & Hefleblower, 2016).
- Reduce the teacher`s isolation through peer-coaching.
- Stimulate teacher collaboration to internalize new practices.

Action Area 2: Stimulate active and engaged participation in school leadership (Dunn & Hattie, 2021).

- Communicate clear expectations for individual and collective professional development (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).
- Prepare individual development plans for all teachers which follow the overarching school goals and have clear expectations for further advancement.
- Show interest and motivate teachers to focus on development, by:
 - Having an overview of all development projects and follow-up on the progress and results.
 - Creating a shared vision of the school goals and operationalize these visions to create ownership among the staff.
 - Being open to pilot and experience new learning innovations.
- Lead by example, by (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012):
 - Providing personal follow-up, showing concern and being responsive.
 - Encouraging openness to feedback and willingness to learn from mistakes.
 - Investing in personal growth, new knowledge, and self-development.

Action Area 3: Create genuine practices for teacher collaboration and unity (Marzano & Hefleblower, 2016).

- Develop a school culture where the staff trust each other, discuss challenges and successes, share experiences, observe, and reflect over each other`s practices, including (Donohoo, 2016; Donohoo, 2018; Dunn & Hattie, 2021).
 - Planning and problem-solving as a collaborative activity.
 - Regular meetings to discuss student work, plan lessons and discuss research.
 - Teachers take advantage of each other's knowledge and skills to create a coherent culture where the collective capabilities of the whole teaching staff are greater than the individuals (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

- Appreciate and value all staff for their unique experience, competence, and opinions by allowing all voices to be heard and supporting the work of each individual.
- Use reflective dialogues to develop and enhance teachers' meta-view on their own and collective practices.
- Support teachers in establishing good routines and structures for their own work, set limits for their roles and responsibilities, and develop teachers' resilience and adaptability to stay in the profession over time (Tiplic, Brandmo & Elstad, 2015).

Action Area 4: Encourage critical reflection and create systems for teacher feedback and appraisal (Dunn & Hattie, 2021).

- Dare to be critical of one's own and peers' practices – be able to reflect and understand this as an opportunity for continuing development.
- Understand teaching as a learning profession – all teachers should develop their skills and knowledge throughout their whole career.
- Share reflections regarding students' results from mapping surveys, standardized tests, and classroom observations as a basis for further planning and teaching and assess if current practices are achieving the desired outcomes (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).
- View feedback as a tool for teachers' improvement, not as an assessment to locate the weakest.
- Recognize professional learning as a part of the day-to-day practice.

Action Area 5: Develop awareness and understanding of current research and evidence on effective teaching practice (Dunn & Hattie, 2021; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Hattie, 2023; Kvernbekk, 2016)..

- Organize time and space for teachers to explore research literature by:
 - Making current research available (and makes it mandatory reading) as a foundation for staff meetings.
 - Reducing hours earmarked to teaching and giving more time to professional development (Darling-Hammond et al, 2017; Marzano & Hefleblower, 2016).
- Ensure access to research literature through:
 - Demonstrating how to search for relevant research literature.
 - Making printed copies of research available.
- Create a culture of talking about research findings.
- Provide time and space for critical reflections by teachers to identify their schools' challenges and assess how current research could support their specific situations, including (Dunn & Hattie, 2021):
 - Creating an understanding that effective teaching requires regular development and improvement, that experience alone is only part of that development, and that opportunities for professional development should be valued.

- Providing opportunities for critical discussions about relevant research and what can be an inspiration for the teachers' further development and their practices.

Action Area 6: Expect and encourage teachers to continuously build bridges between theory and practice throughout their careers (Dunn & Hattie, 2021; Marzano & Hefleblower, 2016).

- Support teachers to conduct practice-based research about student and teacher learning, testing new work methods and measuring the effect of innovative practices, by supporting (Darling-Hammond et al, 2017):
 - Lesson study (Marzano & Hefleblower, 2016).
 - Action research.
 - Publication of practice-based research work for other teachers and researchers to use.
 - Provision of necessary resources for teachers to conduct practice-based and design-based research.
- Apply current research and experience as a basis for constantly developing teaching practice and promote an openness towards testing new solutions, which can be strengthened by:
 - Instructional experimentation.
 - Trust and help seeking.
- Share and celebrate teachers' experiences with the rest of the teaching staff – both positive and negative.

Dimension 4: Developing the school culture for professional development.

Action Area 1: Promote collective ownership of the school's mission, values, and goals (Dunn & Hattie, 2021).

- Conduct a shared assessment and evaluation on the current status of the school -- which responds to the key questions: Where are we now? & Where do we want to go?
- Provide opportunities for cooperative dialogue and deliberation on the schools' mission, values, and goals.
- Encourage active participation in identifying forward looking improvements and/or targets for the school's development and in developing strategies to achieve them.
- Promote the responsibility of teachers (both individually and collectively) for the achievement of these targets and goals.
- Build strong collaboration with parents and guardians around the development of a holistic learning community.
- Strengthen and embed the school's role in wider society by establishing a strong network with external stakeholders and local actors.
- Establish processes for regular review and renewal of the school's vision and/or mission.

Action Area 2: Enhance a culture of continuous improvements.

- Pilot and test new approaches and alternative practices on a regular basis and evaluate outcomes in relation to professional contexts.
- Incentivize and reward innovative teaching practice.
- Promote creative approaches and recognize that valuable learning comes from both what worked well and what did not work.
- Provide opportunities for critical reflection and discussion on current teaching practices, habits and presumptions.
- Utilize research-based evidence to inform and enhance continuous improvements.

Action Area 3: Create a structure and process for sustained professional learning and development at an organizational level (Marzano & Hefleblower, 2016).

- Support processes for knowledge acquisition, sharing and utilization.
- Coordinate and routinely arrange opportunities for exchange, sharing and collaboration among staff and students.
- Provide defined and differentiated roles and responsibilities for school staff to implement and achieve collective initiatives.
- Ensure time is given to staff to work collectively as a professional learning community.
- Facilitate opportunities for school-based professional development.
- Promote competence development between colleagues through conversations and observation of professional practice.

Action Area 4: Integrate intuitive knowledge processes into management procedures.

- Establish structures for supportive leadership that facilitate organizational learning and development (Marzano & Hefleblower, 2016).
- Enhance opportunities for decentralized leadership and stronger engagement.
- Embed organizational learning within daily processes in order to acquire, share and utilize knowledge within and across the school.
- Integrate a systematic structure for review, reporting and feedback that supports collective knowledge generation.

Action Area 5: Implement mentorship and peer-to-peer programmes in school development plans and strategies.

- This implementation follows the guidelines provided for Dimension 2 and Dimension 3 respectively.

5. Conclusions

As with all the RESPOND project products, the principal aim of the mentor support and peer-to-peer support guidelines is to build a framework for developing action areas and specific actions to promote contexts and conditions that facilitate the interdependence

between professional development and school development and the sustainability of both. The tool provided by the guidelines aims to create a homogeneous scaffolding for teacher professional and school development and the avoidance of sectoral approaches which risk fragmentary and unsustainable outcomes. The four dimensions focussed on are key features of any teacher's professional profile and resonate with international priorities for teacher professional and school development.

The intended impact of the mentor support and peer-to-peer support guidelines is at the level of ongoing professional learning for all teachers, curriculum renewal and delivery to promote global learning and competence, and that of planning for overall school improvement. The levels of participation and dissemination foreseen mean that this product is a key part of the overall RESPOND project and can enable it to impact in terms of intersecting local, regional, national, and international levels by fostering a collegial professional culture throughout all the organisations that play a role in educational systems.

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