Schools for All

The overall goal of the SfA project was to develop, implement and evaluate a system of flexible support service provision for three pilot primary schools and school communities in Slovakia and based on its results to formulate proposals for systemic change in the provision of support services for all schools in Slovakia.

The rationale behind the project concept stemmed from the conviction that generally applicable solutions to meet the school staff needs in teaching diverse groups of pupils cannot be, in principle, achieved through some generic type of support. To be efficient and truly helpful it needs to be targeted and congruent with the internal environment of the given school. External support and internal capacities for development need to combine whole-school approach and tailor-made support services so that the designed and implemented intervention are, on the one hand, not just a drop in the ocean, and on the other, effectively address needs of individuals within the school context.

For this reason, the project aimed first to thoroughly map out the needs of the three involved primary schools in different parts of Slovakia and in their school communities to develop a meaningful offer of support services and test the selected ones in real environments. The variety of support services was not restricted and focused on the refinement of the school curriculum, on the application of innovative pedagogical methods and approaches, on decision-making processes within and towards the school, on forms of collaboration between employees, on school climate as well as on monitoring and evaluation of the educational processes and outcomes. The selection and participation on support services was encouraged but voluntary.

The Porticus grant covered a substantial part of the project (January 2018 – February 2022) except for the preparation phase and 1st phase of research in schools in the second half of 2017. In the fulfilment of the main goal of the project, we managed to:

1. select three applying schools to closely cooperate in the longer period of time (originally 3 years, extended to almost 5 years);

2. present the goals of the project, explain its stages and possible activities to school employees;

3. conduct thorough qualitative research and needs assessment among school managements, teachers, specialised and auxiliary employees, parents, pupils and school founders by using various methods (semi-structured interviews, focus groups, participatory observations, creative activities) and present the main findings to whole school teams;

4. participatorily develop action plans for consecutive school years to define goals, activities, and responsible micro-teams in the implementation of the selected priorities;

5. provide flexible support services in various formats according to the identified needs (teambuildings, workshops, seminars, webinars, school visits, coaching, methodical guidance);

6. conduct surveys of school climate in two schools engaging pupils from the second level of education (lower secondary education), their parents, teachers and specialised employees;

7. continually assess and adjust the provision of support services and implementation of activities from the action plans;

8. provide schools with material and technical support based on the identified needs and in the amount allowed by the allocated budget;

9. assess the overall implementation of the project by conducting qualitative evaluation interviews and focus groups;

10. summarise the gained experience and know-how in the development of the final analysis and 3 case studies;

11. formulate recommendations for the provision of systemic support to schools for policymakers and other stakeholders in education, present them at the expert webinar and other events.

In the scope of the project (even if prolonged) we did not manage to:

1. fully overcome lowered motivation and disengagement of some teachers resulting from long term neglect of the development of human resources at schools;

2. transfer the provided professional development of teachers and the effect of activities building trust, cooperation, inclusive school culture and participatory management into regular instruction with a measurable impact on pupils' performance and engagement in school life;

3. more actively engage parents, school communities and local stakeholders to participate on making the schools more open and inclusive.

Already in the project proposal it was indicated that human resource management has been neglected, underdeveloped, and underinvested for a long time at Slovak schools. While school founders usually focus on infrastructure, operation, administrative and financial control of schools, the school managements usually do not have sufficient skills and capacities to invest more time and effort in human resource development, participatory management, and systematic building of positive, constructive, and supportive school climate. As a result, many employees are dissatisfied, frustrated and face burnout vis-à-vis their limited capability to teach children with varied needs and often without sufficient internal and external support. Many of them reached the stage when they even refuse to receive help and continue with their routine work.

While being very well aware of this deficit at the incipient stage of the project, only after its start we fully recognised its magnitude and protraction to every aspect of school operation which was often marked by distrust, inefficient communication and unsatisfactory cooperation between different school units (first and second level grades, pedagogical and specialised employees, teachers and teacher assistants, school managements and the rest of employees, teachers and tutors in after-school clubs, managements and school canteens etc.), and by authoritative decision-making. Coupled with overwhelming duties of the school personnel, insufficient methodical guidance, material and technical support, and the lack of

skills to work with children with varied needs, this often developed a shared feeling of frustration and negativism.

An external provider of services entering such environment has a very difficult position, despite the support from the management and the school founder, to break the long-term routine and turn the "complain culture" into constructive cooperation, to build trust and provide a meaningful offer of support services. At the same time, this condition can be also seen as an opportunity to analyse the school environment from outside and provide careful and attentive but pointed feedback, guidance, and support.

Based on our experience with the three involved schools an intermediary step or phase is necessary before focusing on the individual needs of staff members and their teaching or other practice. As a result of this crucial finding from Year 1, we decided to postpone the provision of tailored methodical guidance and to focus more intensively in Year 2 on the whole staff to build trust, empower team members, enhance communication and cooperation and develop other soft skills which are conducive for quality management, including leadership, delegation of power and participatory decision-making. In other words, we first needed to consolidate the school teams and, in a way, comfort them, to continue with the activities directed at the development of professional skills and skills of pupils.

The period of one year certainly was not enough to compensate for a long-term neglect but already in Year 3 we observed considerable shifts in mindsets and school climates, achieved also due to the new appointments in school managements. These changes are presented in more detail in the case studies.

Regarding the second point it would be an understatement to say that there was no transfer of the obtained knowledge, skills, and values on the side of school managements, teachers, and specialised personnel into their work with pupils. To the contrary, an impressive anecdotal knowledge was collected and part of it included and quoted also in the case studies on how the implemented activities changed the perspective, opened new approaches and opportunities, activated the potential, and were positively reflected by pupils and parents. However, the initial ambition of the project was to measure this impact by standardized pre- and post-testing of pupils' knowledge and skills to determine at least partial impact of the sustained project efforts. This intention did materialise in the action plans for Year 2 which focused primarily on strengthening management and human resources. When it eventually came to developing the follow-up action plans for Year 3, they were to a much larger extent pupil-centred and contained the plans for initial measurements of basic literacies in the grades decided by teachers as well as a survey on school climate among teachers, pupils, and parents.

The questionnaires on school climate were administered for two schools and the findings processed into reports submitted for further use. The baseline testing of pupils' literacies was planned in the beginning of 2020, just few weeks before the pandemic started, when the schools were locked down for a long period of time and across two school years.. Given the situation, we abandoned the idea of measuring skills in quantitative terms as it would be organizationally unmanageable and, more importantly, methodologically invalid since major variables affecting pupils' knowledge, skills and overall well-being emerged during lockdowns and distance learning. Instead, we decided to assess the impact of project activities in qualitative terms by conducting interviews and focus groups with school staff which would

follow the major milestones of the project and would be congruent with the initial needs mapping.

Finally, the unfulfilled goal to reach out more to parents and local communities was also caused mainly by the pandemic. When the time would have come to offer activities for their active engagement it was impossible to organise any events. During the first two waves of the pandemic we intentionally did not overwhelm also the school staffs with some new offers as their duties, changing rules and general uncertainty dramatically increased. We administered a short online questionnaire on the needs during the lockdown and opportunities to help from our side which translated in sharing good practices and online tools among schools. Gradually we also began to offer online webinars run by external providers for interested teachers.

In conclusion, the pandemic was a major rupture in the implementation of the participatorily designed project activities with subsequent discontinuity in the provision of support services. This was reflected also in dedicated sections of the case studies where members of the school staffs expressed their views on the changed conditions and their own work and well-being after the schools were reopened again.

As a matter of fact, this does not at all mean the project did not have many positive effects, as testified by many of those directly engaged, but the measurable impact on the quality of instruction and pupils' performance would need to be further examined under more favourable and stable conditions. We still believe that tracking progress of individual pupils coming from a variety of social and cultural backgrounds, having different abilities and potential, can help schools become more inclusive, and teachers more willing and able to accommodate the learning needs of even more diverse population of children.

Due to the abruptly interrupted implementation of the project caused by the pandemic we proposed the changes in the timetable, activities and financing of the project. Prolongation was supported by school managements and teachers. Several services empowered them to take lead positions in their areas of work and initiated various small changes in the used methods of instruction and assessment of pupils as well as in a more participatory approach in the daily operation and strategic development of schools. In the pre-pandemic period, these processes were facilitated by various means, including in-depth assessment, teambuildings, participatory action planning, coaching, guidance and supervision, sharing of good practices between colleagues and with other schools, experts and practitioners. SfA invested significant time, resources and efforts to build upon these manifold activities which were suddenly interrupted leaving us with a lot of "unfinished business" (cancelled workshops, trainings, teaambuildings and study visits, unpresented results of the school climate survey, unfulfilled tasks from the school action plans, cancelled measurements of pupils' performance etc.).

On the other hand, the school lockdown created a precious opportunity to make use of the experiences from the largely improvised distance learning and online management of schools and to take them as lessons learned and sources of know-how for further development. We conceived one full school year as a reasonable period to at least partially catch up with the work done, continue with the implementation of some planned and newly designed activities, reflect on the experiences from the lockdown and utilize them for the improvement of education provision and school management. In the case studies the impact

of pandemic on school operation, the project and implemented activities is described in more detail.

Unspent financial resources, originally allocated especially for travel and lodging costs, were utilised to provide more education activities for school staffs, conduct the final evaluation research at all three schools and process the main findings into the case studies which were, along with the recommendations for education policy, presented to experts at an online webinar.

During the project various stakeholders were directly engaged in manifold activities. Their overview is provided in the section on Activities and quantification of the target groups reached is specified in the table below, cumulatively for the three participating schools.

Outreach of the project activities per stakeholder and project phase

	Targets	Preparatory and research phase	Service phase	Dissemination phase
school founders	15	3 (project presentation) 3 (interviews)	-	3 (case study delivery)
school managements	10	3 (project presentation) 7 (interviews)	7 x 2 (2 teambuildings) 3 (school visits) 3 (coaching) 4 (webinars)	8 (evaluation interviews) 8 (case study presentations)
teachers	30	100 (project presentation) 26 (interviews)	70 x 2 (2 teambuildings) 6 (school visits) 170 (workshops) 4 (trainings) 92 (survey) 44 (webinars)	28 (evaluation interviews) 100 (case study presentations)
specialised employees (e.g. special pedagogues, school psychologists)	10	8 (interviews)	5 x 2 (2 teambuildings) 1 (school visits) 10 (workshops) . 12 (webinars)	6 (evaluation interviews) 6 (case study presentations)
auxiliary employees (e.g. teacher assistants, tutors)	10	3 (interviews)	5 x 2 (2 teambuildings) 2 (school visits)	6 (evaluation interviews) 31 (4 evaluation focus groups) 7 (case study presentations)
other employees	9	2 (interviews)	5 x 2 (teambuildings)	4 (evaluation interviews)
pupils	500	100 (workshops)ň 100 (observations)	556 (survey)	-
parents	300	16 (interviews)	865 (survey)	-

			200 (school events)	
local community representatives (e. g. municipal employees, social workers)	**16**	5 (interviews)	3 (expert workshops)	-
stakeholders and policy makers in education	**50**	5 (consultation group)	5 x 2 (2 consultation group meetings) 25 (expert workshops)	15 (final expert webinar)
service provides	-	-	10 individuals 3 visited schools 5 profit and non-profit organisations	-
general public	-	-	250 (public lectures) 1000s (newsletters)	-

The project proposal counted with continuous **monitoring of progress throughout its implementation**. During the preparatory and research phases regular meetings were held between the project and financial manager and the research team. During the service provision phase the research team was replaced by the coordinator of support services for schools who was in direct and regular contact with all three schools and service providers. After the outbreak of the pandemic a simple questionnaire was circulated to school to map out the changed needs caused by lockdowns.

In the first two years of the project the consultation group convened to guide the implementing organisations in the selection of schools, methodological setup of the qualitative research and the development of action plans. By the end of the project some members of the consultation group and an external expert reviewed the draft versions of case studies and contributed with their reflections on the project outputs and implications for education policy at the expert webinar.

Evaluation was originally planned to be delivered by an external evaluator in the second half of the project. However, the main focus of such evaluation – on applied project interventions and their impact on school staffs' professional skills and pupils' performance in the selected areas – could not be meaningfully designed due to the abrupt and long-lasting interruption of service provision caused by lockdowns during two school years. The radically changed conditions did not allow us to link the applied actions to impacts in a meaningful and methodologically valid way. In other words, we could not causally measure the impact of activities and present them in quantitative terms.

Instead, we opted for final qualitative evaluation with the inputs from the members of the school community. Being aware of the limitations of such survey, we compensated for the subjective reflections of the interviewed individuals and micro-teams by covering relatively large samples at all three schools. This way we were able to formulate more general conclusions derived from personal reflections. Final evaluation along with the initial field

research and documentation of activities from the service phase served as the basis for writing up case studies and formulating policy recommendations.

Activities

Activity 1: Research Initial participatory research in schools took place from October 2017 until June 2018 (with the support of Porticus from January until June 2018). In the beginning the principal researcher recruited from CREC developed the qualitative methodology and delivered a training to the research team. Each school was then researched by one senior researcher and one research assistant. Additional researcher conducted interviews at two schools. Principal researcher and project manager monitored the whole process and supervised the researchers. Within this period, we engaged more than 100 respondents, among them school principals, teachers, special pedagogues, teacher assistants, non-pedagogical employees, representatives of school founders, and parents. In each school we conducted semi-structured individual interviews, focus groups and participatory observations with adults. In addition, two creative workshops for pupils were also organised at each school. Research activities counted together exceeded the planned scope of respondents' engagement. Due to the richness of the collected qualitative data, we decided not to conduct a quantitative survey. Robust findings on needs and expectations were processed according to the research methodology to three separate reports in Slovak language. Due to confidentiality reasons we decided not to share full reports with the school managements, but we anonymised and summarised the main findings. The summaries were then presented during the meetings with the whole staff at each participating school. More detailed account of the research phase of the project was provided in the first interim report submitted on 11 February 2019.

Activity 2: Support services for schools Service provision started in July 2018 according to the plan and based on the mapped needs from the research phase of the project. After the approval of priorities at school meetings we participatively developed draft plans of service provision for each school for the given school year. The plans were elaborated in more detail at teambuilding meetings with the school staff which we considered crucial to build trust and compensate at least partially the deficits of human resources management at schools in the past years.

For each school there were specified timelines, responsibilities and commitments attributed to individual staff members or micro-teams. Coordinator of support services established regular communication channels with contact persons at each school which were not necessarily members of the school management. This was meant to empower other employees to take initiative and responsibility for the fulfilment of the self-assigned tasks. The plans were considered as open and amendable documents with specified activities, timelines, commitments, and responsibilities. They were flexibly adjusted to the evolving needs of schools and the set aims of the project. The fulfilment of planned activities was monitored and assessed on a regular basis during school meetings and via other communication channels.

Originally, the service phase was planned for two consecutive school years until April 2020. After the prolongation of the project due to the pandemic and school lockdowns it was extended by one more school year.

The implemented actions included educational, training, coaching, mentorship, and consultation activities. Part of them were delivered by the project partners and for specific professional services we reached out to relevant subcontracted providers, both institutional and individual. Specific activities were aimed at building partnerships with other schools not directly involved in the project to share good practice in relevant areas. Educational activities focused on various topics, including integrated instruction, addressing special education needs of pupils, development of reading literacy, instruction of Slovak language as a second language for pupils with other mother tongue, respectful communication in schools, highly efficient learning, intercultural education, working with socially disadvantaged children, and participatory school management.

Involvement in the service provision activities was encouraged but remained voluntary. In the course of service provision significant increase of interest and participation was documented in all three schools.

Summary of services provided to schools:

2 teambuilding and action planning events for 2,5 days, 92 participants (all schools)

4-day training of Highly Effective Learning, 6 participants (all schools) - 1-day seminar of Highly Effective Learning, 13 participants (School C) - 4 whole day webinars Respect in the school, 4 days, 16 participants (all schools)

5 coaching hours, 3 online meetings for participative school management, 1 participant (School B) - 7 coaching hours for participative school management, 3 participants (School B) - 2 team workshops during teambuildings, 89 participants (School B)

Online consultations on the opportunities of applying the principles of circular economy in the school environment, 2 participants (School B)

Facilitation of teambuilding, 12 participants (School C)

Survey on school climate among pupils of the second level of education (556), their parents (865) and teachers (92) at Schools A and B

1-day workshop for pupils and seminar for teachers on the development of reading literacy, 100 participants (School C)

2 mentoring sessions on the tools for inclusive education, 4 hours for 10 teachers (School C) - 1 mentoring session on the root causes of school failure of Roma children, 4 hours for 10 teachers (School C)

Workshop on education of children with different mother tongue from the language of instruction, 1,5 hours, 10 participants (School A)

Seminar on the development of reading skills of pupils, 1,5 hours, 15 participants (School A)

3 sessions on the support and methodical guidance when working with pupils with special educational needs, 1,5 hours, 60 participants (School A)

Seminar on activation methods in instruction, 1,5 hours, 15 participants (School A)

Seminar on the experience with missionary work in excluded Roma communities, 1,5 hours, 13 participants (School C)

Seminar on integrated instruction, 1,5 hours, 10 participants (School A)

Seminar on the online educational tool Stories that Move, 1,5 hours, 15 participants (School A)

School visits: Brehy – mapping experiences and practices with integrated instruction and the work of the school development team, 3 participants (School A); Nitra – mapping the school model and experiences with the integration of pupils with special educational needs, 5 participants (School A); Poprad – mapping integrated instruction in practice, 5 participants (School C)

During lockdown some of the planned activities turned to online space. This applied to the coaching of the school management at School B and series of webinars for teachers and specialised employees from all three schools. Unfortunately, the beginning of the next school year 2020/2021 (originally planned to be dedicated to final project evaluation) was influenced by the second wave of the pandemic which further complicated implementation of rescheduled events despite the prolongation of the project. As a result, most of the activities eventually could not be organised.

Activity 3: Monitoring and evaluation of the service provision Monitoring and evaluation of the service provision was based on the adopted action plans and implemented through regular updates between the project team and contact persons or micro teams at schools. In the first two years of the project implementation valuable guidance was provided also by the consultation group. More detailed information on monitoring and evaluation was presented in the dedicated section above.

Activity 4: Dissemination of results At the end of the service provision period an impact assessment was implemented at all three schools through qualitative semi-structured interviews and focus groups covering all phases of project implementation. Altogether 52 individual interviews and 4 focus groups with 31 participants were conducted.

The collected evidence was processed into an analytical report and case studies on all three schools. The final output also formulates policy proposals for the systemic provision of support services to Slovak schools and an indicative quantification of the costs for providing such support in the entire education system.

First dissemination of results took place at the expert online webinar held on 24 February 2022. After the lifetime of the project, we presented the findings at meetings in each involved school and continued to utilise the gained knowledge and experience at various expert and public events. The findings from our cooperation were found particularly useful in the design of support measures within the Slovak Recovery and Resilience Plan as well as the preparation of a new national project focused on the development of leadership and managerial skills of school managements.

Key grant outputs (deliverables) achieved

1. **Outputs and completion dates Activity 1**: 3 comprehensive research reports were completed in May 2018 (in Slovak, shareable upon request). 3 summaries of anonymised research findings were processed and presented at schools in June 2018 (in Slovak). Partly due to confidentiality reasons but also in line with the goals set within evaluation activities we decided to postpone the development of 3 case studies, one for each school, until service provision is completed. We find it more appropriate and useful to develop and share case studies that would describe what journey each school underwent rather than simply share research findings at the beginning of such journey.

2. **Outputs and completion dates Activity 2**: For each school 3 priority areas were participatively adopted in June 2018 and based on them 3 school action plans were developed, including specifications of activities, planned services, timelines and responsibilities. These were further detailed during the teambuilding meetings which took place in October and November same year. The plans were conceived as open documents and were continuously adjusted. After interim assessment in June 2019 these were updated in autumn. New service offers were provided to schools for the ongoing school year in October 2019. Substantial information from the action plans and implemented activities at all three schools were summarised in the case studies.

3. **Outputs and completion dates Activity 3**: The reports from the school climate surveys in Schools A and B are available in Slovak and can be submitted upon request. The surveys were intended to serve as a baseline for systematic development of positive and inclusive school climate. However, the pandemic prevented implementation of the subsequent activities and after the end of school lockdowns it was questionable if they still reflected the changed conditions within the respective school environments. As a matter of fact, administration of new surveys of the same kind would be needed to serve as a valuable source for comparisons and planning in the post-pandemic period. As stated above, quantitative indicators to track progress in pupils' performance in the set areas was not eventually designed, mainly for methodological reasons as it would be incorrect and invalid to link the project interventions to potential impact on educational achievement. Instead, qualitative research was conducted in the end of the project with a large number of school staff members to provide useful insights on the overall development of the project and usefulness of particular activities.

4. **Outputs and completion dates Activity 4**: Final analysis, including policy recommendations, and 3 case studies were developed at the end of the project and presented at the expert webinar in February 2020. Given the feedback received from reviewers and other participants we plan to further amend the final output and use it as one of the sources for the continued effort to develop nationwide institutional network for the provision of support services to all schools. After the project implementation period when the pandemic situation allowed it we conducted visits to all three schools to present the results to their staffs.

Final remark

Schools for All project was in many respects a novelty for both the participating schools and the implementing organisations. Given its relatively long duration and large scope of activities it offered many opportunities for mutual learning and advancement of quality inclusive

education. Based on our rich experience and robust evidence from intensive cooperation with three primary schools for almost 5 years we present the following lessons learned:

1. Schools lack, request and seek targeted support services and accept them if they are based on mapping and understanding of their needs and environments in which they operate and if the provision of support is tailor-made, non-judgemental, and efficient.
2. The identified needs of teachers, specialised personnel and school managements are manifold but revolve around the quality of instruction, application of innovative methods and approaches, addressing varied needs of pupils, and effective communication, cooperation, management, and decision-making based on feedback and quality self assessment.
3. Provided external services need to balance individual needs of beneficiaries and the whole school approach so that any innovation is encouraged to be implemented in practice in a supportive environment. For this purpose, a systematic building of positive and constructive school climate is necessary.
4. School staffs generally and school managements particularly lack skills and experience related to longer-term strategic planning, short-term action planning, analysis of baseline conditions and desirable targets and outcomes as well as continuous assessment of achievements. For this they need guidance, supervision, and constructive feedback.
5. Transfer of good practices and innovations does not happen automatically and spontaneously but requires the development of framework for cooperation.
6. Upscaling of the support services requires qualified human resources and support structures above the school and local levels and sufficient financial resources for their delivery. In this regard the role of school founders, primarily municipalities, and regional state authorities in education is indispensable as is the support of networking and transfer of good practice.
7. Quantification of costs to provide similar type and scope of activities to individual schools is not overwhelming and can certainly pay the expenses back in the form of more quality and inclusive education.