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Cluster 'Teachers and Trainers'  
Report of a Peer Learning Activity:  
**Schools as learning communities for their teachers**  
The Hague, the Netherlands, 28 May to 1 June 2006

This note summarises the main policy conclusions of a Peer Learning Activity, in which experts from several European countries exchange ideas on policy and practice on a key topic in Teacher Education. The ideas contained herein do not constitute EU policy.

### **Countries taking part**

B (nl), CY, DE, EE, ES, IRL, ISL, NO, PT, TU.

### **Introduction**

1. This note summarises the discussions during the teachers and trainers Cluster Group's visit to the Netherlands from 28 May to 1 June 2006. The note aims to provide an overview of the policy-related questions raised during the visit, outline examples of effective practice that illustrate the policy questions, and identifies key areas where consensus was reached. At Annex A there are a series of questions which Cluster members may wish to consider in developing further their work to support schools as learning communities
2. The visit focused on how schools can be encouraged and supported to become learning communities including for their teaching staff. In keeping with the evolving peer learning methodology, representatives from ten countries used ideas in the background paper<sup>1</sup> and examples provided by the hosts as a basis for learning from each other in order that they could be better prepared to influence practical reforms to policies at home.
3. To prompt the discussions on policy-related issues concerning teachers' continuing professional development (CPD), the Dutch hosts<sup>2</sup> organised two school visits plus an extensive programme of speakers including contributions from school principals, school inspectors, the ministry of education, teacher education institutions and trainee teachers. In addition, presentations from the Turkish and Cypriot representatives provided contrasting examples of approaches which encouraged and supported schools' development. These presentations, introduced and chaired by members of the Cluster Group, provided a stimulus to discuss policy-related issues of interest to the hosts and the visiting participants. The examples in this note are

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<sup>1</sup> *Schools as learning communities for their teachers*, Marco Snoek, Netherlands (2006)

<sup>2</sup> Representatives greatly appreciated the considerable amount of time and effort that had gone into organising a very efficient and well-run PLA. They wished to express their gratitude for the generosity and expertise provided by the hosts and the guest speakers.

taken from these presentations, the school visits and the participants' discussions.

## **Background**

4. The objectives for the peer learning activities were set out in the invitation letter distributed by the Commission and confirmed by the planning group as being to:

- contribute to a more comprehensive and reciprocal understanding of member states policies in the field of teacher and trainer education;
- improve the efficiency and effectiveness of policies and strategies for teacher and trainer education; and
- help transfer effective policies and strategies for teacher and trainer education between countries and contexts.

## **The peer learning activity**

5. Following introductions from representatives, the PLA began by considering the experiences of the Dutch hosts under the broad heading of schools as learning communities. The early presentations explored ideas in the background paper, the Dutch system of encouraging school autonomy and the ways in which different parts of the education system interacted.

6. This set the context for further discussion and study. The hosts' system was described as being characterised by school autonomy and de-regulation within a ministerial framework which sets indicative teachers' pay scales, the main outcomes of the school curriculum and (as from August 2006) the competences required from individual teachers. These early presentations were followed by the contrasting experiences of the Turkish representative who emphasised that the transfer of responsibilities to schools needed to be accompanied by support in order that staff can prepare for the additional autonomy, and the Cypriot representative who emphasised that policies that stimulate schools to become learning communities need not be restricted to deregulated systems. In all the examples the need for the ministry to establish national vision for schools, set out the necessary conditions for schools to succeed, and introduce effective systems to ensure that the vision is understood and shared by all the schools' stakeholders was emphasised.

7. These early ideas on autonomy, central versus decentralised systems, support versus challenge, and the need to establish a clear vision and sense of direction for schools informed subsequent discussions. There was an early acknowledgement that most representatives thought their country should be preparing and supporting schools to become learning communities. There were differences between countries as to how the term 'learning community' should be interpreted – this had been clear from the background paper produced by the Dutch hosts<sup>3</sup>. And although the methods varied, the overall vision of a school system that focused on helping teachers and teams of teachers to be more effective through

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<sup>3</sup> This paper commented that "the issue of learning communities is discussed by a large number of authors using a variety of concepts: learning community, learning organisations, organisational learning, collaborative learning, team learning. In a large amount of research, conditions for learning communities have been identified, on the level of organisational conditions (ranging from the need for a shared vision and common agenda, to the availability of time and support systems), on the level of leadership, on the level of teachers' competences, etc."

supporting their own professional development was widely shared in principle.

8. During discussions over the four days, representatives identified many factors that could contribute to the development of schools as learning communities for their teachers. It became clear that policy teams in each country were working on similar issues with the same outcomes in mind. However, their approaches differed as they reflected national traditions, other developments relating to schools and the importance the state attached to setting the agenda for schools. Despite the different approaches, the potential impact of schools becoming stronger learning communities on students' achievement, on teachers' levels of motivation, on retention figures and on supporting school-level change were widely acknowledged.

9. Some of the factors that representatives considered initially to be pre-requisites for developing schools as learning communities for their teachers were later understood to affect the overall context within which schools worked, e.g. the level of autonomy provided to schools and the level of centralisation within an education system. In other words, school autonomy may be helpful but is not essential to the creation of a healthy learning community.

### **Conditions for creating learning communities for teachers in schools**

10. Participants clearly identified a number of conditions as being important for the successful development of a learning community. The following conditions and examples were discussed during the PLA:

#### Vision and planning

- the centre (ministry) needs to set out a clear vision of how it sees schools developing and the importance it attaches to teachers developing further their skills and competences. This vision should be shared with and understood by all the schools' stakeholders. e.g. school leaders, inspectors and education officials all understood and supported the policy objective of encouraging school autonomy within a decentralised Dutch system;
- all actors within the education arena are expected to play their part in developing and communicating this vision – it should not just be the *responsibility* of the centre;
- learning communities develop best when there are *systematic* opportunities for teachers to develop and learn. One-off activities have their place in tackling specific problems or issues but they are unlikely to lead to the development of a culture of learning;
- it is important to recognise that changing school cultures and systems takes *time*; consequently there is a need to systematically *build capacity* in the system rather than assuming that everything can be achieved easily and quickly; e.g. setting out a three or five year plan for teachers' continuing professional development which is linked to the school's objectives;
- it is often more effective for schools and central education departments to create the *conditions* which allow innovation to flourish, rather than to prescribe the ways in which new ideas have to be organised. e.g. highly prescribed CPD programmes developed by the central authorities which offer little opportunity for school leaders to reflect local circumstances and teachers' individual training needs

did not fit into the culture of the Dutch deregulated system and were less likely to succeed;

### Culture and change

- schools need help and support to review their own *culture* in order to examine the implicit and explicit messages that they give to teachers about their own learning and development;
- teachers, like many of their pupils, are more likely to succeed and change practice when their learning is a *co-operative* endeavour, and their learning takes place in teams;
- schools and, in some systems, individuals, should know the extent to which and the ways in which they are *accountable* for the development of their human resources. e.g. if a school leadership team is expected to provide development opportunities for teachers and other staff, this should be reflected in the inspection system and methodology of reporting;
- teachers should be presented with clear *reasons* and sufficient *motivation* for developing and improving their practice. If teachers are not helped to develop an intrinsic motivation to change, it is difficult to create schools as learning communities; e.g. a school principal who spoke about the advantages of employing external coaches to support teachers reported that 50% of the staff did not change their practice. However when the same teachers were offered peer support from their colleagues many more of them improved their practice.
- school leaders and education department officials should emphasise that learning communities are about teachers gaining *access to learning* and personal development. This approach is more likely to succeed in motivating teachers than focusing on improving their teaching;
- *peer support* activities such as coaching and mentoring are particularly effective methods of helping teachers to develop; e.g. new school leaders can be assigned an experienced head teacher to provide guidance, and trainee teachers and newly qualified teachers can work with experienced subject-based mentors;
- creating an environment of *trust*, which allows school leaders and teachers to be confident that mistakes are part of the learning process, encourages more risk-taking and therefore more innovative approaches.

### Support and motivation

- it is crucial to provide adequate *support* and training for the school leadership team (and not only head teachers); e.g. this could involve specific qualifications for aspiring head teachers and school leaders or school-based development programmes which assign increasing levels of responsibility to middle managers;
- it is vital to create an *environment* in which individuals and schools recognise the need for, and are motivated to, change; e.g. in the

Dutch system well-trained teaching assistants, rather than qualified teachers, are able to provide drop-in, self-study ICT sessions for pupils whose teachers are absent;

- throughout any system there is a need for school leaders and education department officials to set high *expectations* for teachers and their work with pupils; e.g. the Dutch school principals emphasised the importance of moving from teaching institutions to learning institutions in order that pupils can be helped to become autonomous learners who are less dependent on teachers;
- at school level there is a need to offer structured *support* to individual teachers and school leaders. Providing 'scaffolding' which supports individuals' learning and further development creates the environment in which teachers can build on their earlier successes; e.g. it is not a sufficient condition for success for school leaders to inform teachers of what needs to be achieved; rather, it is more effective to offer structured and progressively more challenging continuing professional development, based on individuals' needs.

#### Flexibility

- training schemes (whether national or school-based) which are based on an assumption that each teacher wishes to learn in the same way and learn the same thing are likely to be less successful than schemes which recognise that teachers have *different* developmental needs at different times, and these should be addressed e.g. the introduction of teacher competence profiles, which allow for different pathways to achieve improvements, should help to raise national expectations.
- change is more successful and long lasting if it recognises the value of *flexibility* – schools and individuals are different and any national system should accommodate a wide range of approaches.

11. Factors such as school and teacher autonomy, tradition, centralisation, responsibility for employment etc. all help to create the context within which schools work. The PLA participants recognised that, irrespective of the context, schools and their leaders need to be encouraged and supported to develop their staff further in order to create an environment and culture where learning is valued highly. The participants also noted the need to combine encouragement with accountability and the role that examination results, inspection systems, and regular and systematic student feedback played on improving school performance.

#### **Emerging policy questions and recommendations arising from this PLA**

12. Representatives were clear about their own systems' intentions and drivers for change; each clearly expressed how he/she saw the development of learning communities could be stimulated further in their own country. Towards the end of the PLA, representatives began to consider whether there were issues that were common to all European systems e.g. did every country ensure that each of the conditions listed above was fulfilled?

13. Discussions on the extent to which the conditions for successful learning communities were common to all European systems led to a series of questions:

- do all of the conditions in paragraph 10 have to be met continually?

- does it matter which condition is addressed by schools, school leaders, teachers or the ministry?
- are all conditions equally important?
- do some conditions need to be put in place before the others?

14. These questions led representatives to discuss whether the conditions listed above represented a consensus across the different traditions and systems. There was a significant level of agreement on these conditions and a recognition that most of them needed to be addressed before schools could take the next steps towards developing themselves as learning communities. Participants accepted the strongly held views of the Dutch presenters that changing the culture of schools is difficult and requires long-term commitment, and that school leaders need to focus on managing and motivating individual staff to improve performance.

15. There was agreement that, while each of the conditions could be addressed by a number of actors, better outcomes could be achieved by allocating specific responsibility to actors and making clear who was responsible and accountable for specific actions. There was a recognition that some parts of the emerging picture of schools as learning communities was fuzzy. However other parts were clear and more could be done to help to articulate a clear definition at European level.

16. Throughout the PLA individual sessions referred to the importance of monitoring improvements and learning, including the importance of encouraging and valuing regular student feedback, the role that inspectors and advisors could play in evaluating and encouraging school improvement, the value of organised and systematic peer support and classroom observation. Each aspect of monitoring is a valuable part of the bigger picture of supporting teachers' learning which focuses on pupil achievement. e.g. in the Dutch system school leaders, inspectors, education officials and teacher education departments all saw schools as being responsible for improving students' results and understood that their own role was to support teachers.

### **Next steps**

17. During the PLA the question was left unresolved of whether all the conditions in paragraph 10 need to be addressed before schools could be helped to become learning communities. However representatives were clear that these were the key issues which, over time, had to be considered. There was no discussion as to whether some of these conditions were more important than others.

**Questions to consider in order to support further development of schools as learning communities**

- to what extent is your country's vision for schools shared and understood by all?
- are schools, teachers and school leaders in your country encouraged or required to plan CPD for 3 or 5 years ahead? if such plans exist, are they supported by all concerned, and used to improve practice? Can this situation be developed?
- what steps will your country take to create conditions that allow more innovation in learning to flourish in schools?
- what support is available in your country to help school communities to review their culture?
- to what extent is learning by teachers a cooperative endeavour in schools in your country?
- by what means are teachers in your country encouraged to continuously develop their teaching and learning skills?
- to what extent are mentors available to guide beginning teachers and beginning school leaders?
- is adequate support available to school leaders in your country?
- by what means are school leaders encouraged to set high expectations for teachers and pupils in your country?
- to what extent are structured CPD opportunities available to each teacher in your country?
- to what extent are CPD plans individualised, and directly related to teachers' training needs, in your country?
- to what extent is regular feedback from school students sought and acted upon in schools in your country?
- to what extent are schools and their leaders encouraged and supported to develop their staff further in your country?
- to what extent do your country's systems of accountability include references to schools as learning communities?
- is the wider community (including teacher education) involved in supporting schools to become learning communities?
- to what extent is it clear in your country who is responsible and accountable for ensuring the conditions of success needed to develop schools as learning communities are introduced, supported and monitored?