

# Collaborative Learning as Networking. How Does It Work in Practice?

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*The article addresses the question of sustainability of the results of various school projects. Slovenian schools have a long standing tradition of project collaboration within networks. Regardless of the added value that networking brings to schools, we have been often witnessing the shutdown of networks in practice. It usually happens when the project is no longer supported by systemic, especially financial measures. The GIVE&GET model, developed in the PROMISE project, brings the key emphasis on mutual networking, which can be autonomously managed and directed without a major role of the third party. It offers an insight into how to keep the existing networks functioning to ensure the mutual sharing of various project outcomes.*

*Keywords: professional development, teachers' collaboration, networking*

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## Introduction

Due to the increasing complexity of the educational environment, the need for interprofessional collaborative learning, in which teams of teachers from different disciplines or other professionals work to achieve common goals, is increasingly highlighted (Lakerveld, 2019). Muijs (2015) finds that the most important goal is to improve schools, namely, to empower them for change and better education (safe and stimulating learning environment, quality knowledge, developed competencies). Interprofessional collaborative learning can be effectively achieved through networking between schools (inter-organizational cooperation and networking), as within the school (among the subject groups). Theoretically, there are many reasons that networking between schools is a way to improve the work of schools and to reform the school system (Muijs, et al., 2011).

‘Teachers have a demanding role in supporting student learning in the 21st century. They support the learning process, listen to students and their needs, provide appropriate strategies, tools, skills and resources to make learning hap-

pen. But on the other side teachers also need to be flexible to every changing environment, including society, technology and the world in which we live. We often find ourselves in different positions, sometimes moulding to these positions and other needing greater flexibility of training.’ (Sachs, 2007, p. 9)

According to Sachs (2007), Grundy and Robison (2003) identify three interconnected purposes of CPD: extension, growth and renewal. Extension is through introducing new knowledge or skills to a teachers’ repertoire, growth is by the development of greater levels of expertise and renewal is achieved through transformation and change of knowledge and practice.

Sachs (2007) identifies three metaphors to describe current approaches to the continuing professional development of teachers which reflect Grundy and Robison’s stated purposes: retooling, remodelling and revitalising. Continuing Professional Development as revitalizing is to be found through professional development networks.

### **The story of the PROMISE project in Slovenia**

The PROMISE project addresses pedagogical dilemmas of contemporary education. Teachers who are working in complex circumstances are facing challenges which need to be discussed, reflected and faced. In such a process teachers need to meet other professionals either from their own environment or beyond. They need to cross boundaries between different fields of education, different systems, different learning environments, different professions, different roles. The purpose of the project is to expand the process of professional learning and exceed the boundaries.

Morris, Chrispeals and Burke (2003 in Sachs, 2007) argue that two linked processes of CPD can create opportunities for teacher learning and transformation. They claim that external teacher networks that focus predominately on enhancing teachers’ pedagogical knowledge and collaborative and leadership skills in a content area when linked with internal school reform networks and projects can provide the transformative power to alter professional development and teacher learning in powerful and sustainable ways.

Slovenian schools have a long standing tradition of working in networks. Regardless of the added value that networking brings to schools, we have been often witnessing the shutdown of networks in practice. Usually, this happens on completion of the project or in case when it is no longer supported by systemic, espe-

cially financial measures. Therefore, the question of how to keep the existing networks functioning and what is the role of management is becoming more and more common.

If we want to ensure the sustainability of the results of various projects, we need to establish networking and exchange between schools according to the principles of self-regulation. Schools need to be empowered for self-supportive partnerships between schools which would be based on their trust that crossing boundaries between schools brings new quality to their professional growth and learning.

In the PROMISE project we focused upon crossing boundaries through networking between schools. We agreed to develop different approaches to dissemination of knowledge and project results (networking) between schools, to test different approaches with partner schools from different regions on a give-and-get basis, to evaluate the approaches and the networking and to establish a database of schools to facilitate networking between schools. To be able to fulfil all the above we had to empower schools in the content and process aspects.

We set three phases during the course of the project:

Year 1: introductory phase

- Establishing cooperation between schools: In the cooperation process, each team presents itself to the partner team.
- Production of vignettes / case studies designed to encourage reflection on various dilemmas, discussion and overcoming of limiting beliefs, and thinking about solutions; content: aspect of inclusion for all (students and teachers) – experience of teams from different projects
- Training of teams – carried out by NEIS (topics: process management, learning protocols, introduction of changes, moderation)

Year 2: developmental phase

- Designing, Implementation, monitoring and modification of the GIVE AND GET model. The model represents approaches by which partners effectively exchange knowledge... between two or more partners according to the Give and Get principle. Each of the partners in the process of cooperation presents their activities (knowledge, experience, project results) to others using various protocols, approaches, tools.

Year 3: final phase

- Evaluation of the model

- Presentation of project results – closing conference
- Possibility to participate in the PROMISE Learning Event

### **The story on a school level – Give and Get model**

According to Lofthouse and Thomas (2015) collaboration for the development of their own teaching practices allows teachers to engage in more informed decision-making and to construct a shared understanding of the nature of the desired learning outcomes and how they might be achieved in their own contexts.

In the initial phase of the project, we invited three schools, represented by school teams, to take part in the PROMISE project. We asked each of them to find a partner school who would be willing to get involved in a partnership and collaboration for the next three years. Together we involved 6 schools (4 primary and 2 secondary) who joined our first meeting.

We agreed to work together in the creation and testing of a self-supportive model, which enables learning through networking and collaboration between schools. It is based on the principle give-and-get. Each partner needs to offer some knowledge, skills or practices that were developed in their school to be able to get whatever was offered by their partner and seems of interest to them. The model assumes that in cooperation the exchange of practices, joint problem solving and mutual support are established. Partners need to set clearly defined goals and activities, and recognize mutual benefits.

The Give&Get model includes following steps:

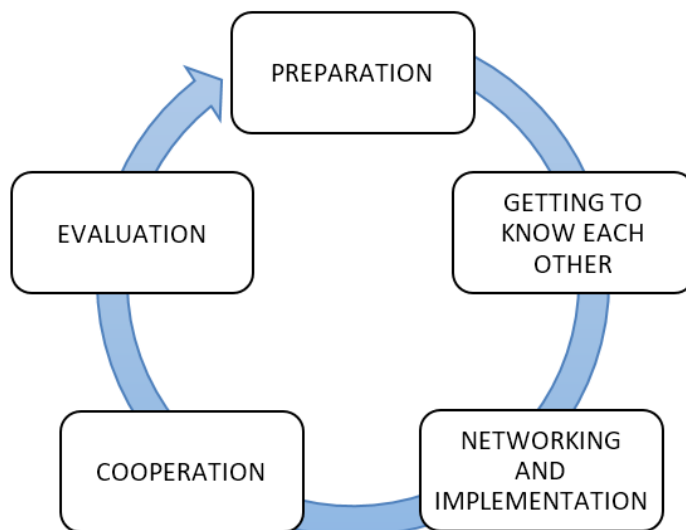
1. The preparation step is a reflection of each partner school on their own strengths, needs and abilities. This encompasses questions such as: How do we present ourselves as a school? What are we interested in? What can we offer to others? What are we good at? How could we empower our team for collaboration?
2. Getting to know our partners consists of presentation of the project ideas to another school and setting up a partnership. They could think about questions such as: How do we get to know each other best? How to prepare a meeting with another team?
3. The networking and implementation entails action, mutual presentation of activities of both teams, creative approaches in the presentation of topics, implementation of workshops and other collaborating activities.

4. The cooperation step involves mutual planning and looking forward to future collaborating activities, thinking about questions such as: What will be our next steps? For example, upgrading further cooperation through observations, peer support, teacher exchange, work shadowing, etc.)
5. The evaluation step raises questions as: How to set up an effective self-evaluation for the team? What did we get? What did we give? What did it bring us? What do we want for the future?

We developed all the steps together with schools during a two-day learning event where they made a plan for their future collaboration and school activities. We introduced and tried out several tools and approaches, which could be useful in different steps of the model (Open space, World Café, Storytelling, 4-MAT, Vignettes, etc..)

In the second year, partner schools established their partnerships, bonded and started the networking. Ideas for future collaboration were launched by the end of second year when several school visits had already taken place. We held a meeting where partner schools presented their collaboration and reflected upon their challenges.

The last year, 2021 has been devoted to evaluation and planning of new partnerships based on lessons learned from the year one and two.



*Picture 1: A five-step Give and Get model*

### **Partnerships of schools – What is in it for them?**

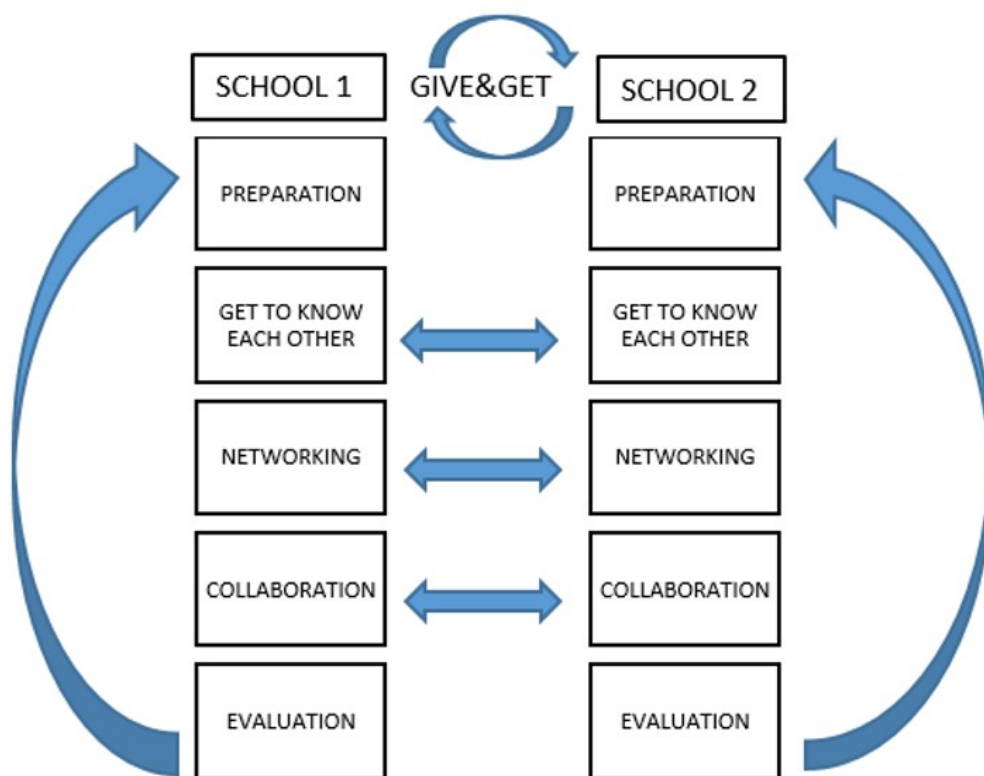
Partner schools presented their learning experiences in their collaboration and networking. They chose different creative approaches to present themselves and break the ice between the teams. They have chosen a rich variety of topics, like working with gifted and talented students, formative assessment, collegial observation, learning walks (open doors to colleagues), common planning of subject teachers from different schools (Chemistry, Biology, Physics, Languages), collaboration between vocational and grammar schools – open doors for students, etc.

They mostly started in a playful and non-formal way to develop mutual trust and motivation. After the initial step several activities took place, planned on monthly basis. Their activities were interrupted by the lock down when schools were closed. They reported that teachers, students and parents gained a lot from their common activities and that they miss each other. They all planned also further collaboration after the end of the project.

An example of collaboration plan between two partner schools in school year 2019/20:

<b>Date</b>	<b>Host</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Impact</b>	<b>Added value</b>
9.10.2019	Primary School D.T.	Be creative and learn through Art Erasmus+	Participants experience new approaches to teaching	Links are being forged between the E + project manager and those interested in such projects
5.11.2019	Primary School V.V.	Parents meetings – Family e-rules	Invited teachers and some parents from guest school	exploring the possibility of collaboration and joint organization of major lectures for both schools together
14.11.2019	Primary school V.V.	Meeting of teachers from subject groups of both schools	Exchange of experiences, dilemmas ideas	Linking of subject teachers
November 2019	Primary School D.T.	New media in democratic society, Erasmus+	Survey for students on web use / media awareness	Sharing the experiences of another project
January 2020	Both schools School counselling services	Career orientation – school visits to secondary schools	Bonding of students	Exchange of ideas in the field of career orientation
11.2.2020	Primary School D.T.	Parents meeting: Protect your child on internet	Invited teachers and some parents from guest school	Exploring the possibility of organising common bigger events for both schools

Table 1: Planned activities in collaboration of two primary schools



Picture 2: Collaboration between schools Give and Get model

## Conclusions

So far, the implementation of the project has shown that the participants – teachers and principals, have recognized the added value of the GIVE&GET model, where the key emphasis is on mutual networking, which can be autonomously managed and directed without a major role of the third party (external factor).

Throughout the implementation of the GIVE&GET model, we systematically monitored activities and processes in schools as part of the formative evaluation. A summative evaluation is not yet possible as the project is not finished.

The key findings, which are presented below, were based on a qualitative approach, in which we obtained feedback at evaluation meetings with teachers and principals on:

1. attitude to the idea of the model,



2. motivation to take part and
3. the practice of project management at school in mutual conditions. networking.

The attitude of principals and teachers towards the model referred to a cognitive aspect such as e.g. beliefs and affections, which determines how important participants find the networking, and an affective aspect that determines how teachers feel about networking and how enthusiastic they are (LELENET, 2019). Motivation was related to the reasons for cooperation such as. expectation of the principal, awareness of the importance of networking, cooperation with other experts, etc. The third element was related to the principal's practice of running the school, in terms of collaborating, encouraging and directing networking.

The feedback showed that teachers and principals expressed strong positive beliefs about the important added value of networking and a strong willingness to take part in the activities of the GIVE&GET model. Teachers and principals also showed enthusiasm for the work in their reflections and showed a positive feeling. This was seen mainly in workshops and mutual meetings at partner schools in the second and third steps of the model (Getting to know our partners and Networking and implementation). In the area of motivation, teachers highlighted the awareness of the importance of networking and the desire to work with colleagues and professionals from another school. We did not perceive a controlled orientation in the reflections, i.e. engaging in networking on the request or instruction of the principal. Independent motivation or the absence of controlled orientation shown by teachers is an important factor in the fact that teachers will persist in their activities, even when something goes wrong or barriers to networking will appear (LELENET, 2019). In school management practices, we recognized that principals strongly supported their teachers in the single steps of implementing the model, encouraging various forms of learning among teachers. In leadership, they focused on monitoring and improving pedagogical processes in teachers.

A positive attitude towards networking, independent motivation and the concept of shared pedagogical leadership are one of the conditions for the networks to live on their own. The second part of the conditions is an online platform that will allow the exchange of information between schools. Therefore, in the next phase of the implementation of the model, we plan to set up an online platform, which will enable the expansion of the GIVE&GET model among a lar-

ger number of schools. This would mean that schools that want to share their experience and knowledge will contribute to the database with what they can offer to other schools (GIVE) and look for what they want to get from other schools (GET).

However, the question stays whether a national institution will be needed for the initial incentive to include schools in the GIVE&GET model, and who will manage the platform?

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