The 28<sup>th</sup> International Scientific Conference "Educational Research and School Practice"

# THE STATE PROBLEMS AND NEEDS OF THE MODERN EDUCATION COMMUNITY

**BOOK OF PROCEEDINGS** 

Editors
Jelena STEVANOVIĆ
Dragana GUNDOGAN
Branislav RANĐELOVIĆ









#### Institute for Educational Research, Belgrade, Serbia

28<sup>th</sup> International Scientific Conference "Educational Research and School Practice"

# The State, Problems, and Needs of the Modern Education Community

December 9<sup>th</sup>, 2022 Belgrade

#### **BOOK OF PROCEEDINGS**

#### **Editors**

Jelena STEVANOVIĆ Dragana GUNDOGAN Branislav RANĐELOVIĆ

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# THE TEACHER AS THE INITIATOR OF CHANGE: TURNING A BORING TOPIC INTO AN ENGAGING LESSON<sup>33</sup>

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#### Introduction

according to experts in the field of reform initiatives (Fullan, 2007; Guskey, 2003), when studying the process of introducing changes into the teaching practice, the key factors to consider include teacher motivation and initiative, horizontal learning, and learning with the support of colleagues, along with the relationship between teachers and facilitators. For this process to be truly successful, teachers need to be motivated to ensure that the change takes root in the teaching practice (Malinić, Đerić & Šefer, 2018). Teachers differ in their desire to innovate the practice. Some show no interest in innovation and change, others want to learn and improve but wonder how, and finally, there are the ones who readily adopt innovative practices, demonstrate eagerness, and take action (Van Eekelen, Vermunt& Boshuizen, 2006). The present study explored the process of introducing changes into the teaching practice and focused on teachers motivated to move beyond traditional teaching methods and cooperate with their colleagues with the aim of offering a different learning experience to their students. In our study, teachers adopted an interdisciplinary approach to a topic covered in class. Such an approach is based on processes of correlation and integration

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and is not commonly used in teaching (Stanišić, 2015), which makes it innovative and challenging.

An interdisciplinary approach allows students to integrate and connect information from different sources, thus acquiring complete, permanent, and functional knowledge. This further enables them to transfer what they have learned from one branch of science to another. The most complex model of content correlation and integration is the *Partnership model*, which proposes that two or more teachers are present in class at the same time and equally participate in the process of imparting knowledge (Cone, Werner& Cone, 2009). It is characterized by teamwork and cooperation between teachers who work together at every point, from choosing topics to planning lessons and teaching classes.

#### Method

As a part of a wider research project, the researchers conducted an explanatory qualitative case study on a sample of teachers at an experimental school. The case study allowed for reflexive contemplation of the process of change (Yin, 1994), which is one of the key characteristics of this methodological approach (Vilig, 2013). The researchers focused on observing the process of change in the real context, over a specific time period, relying on different sources and adopting different perspectives.

Research Aim. The aim of the present study was to analyze the process of developing an innovative practice as undergone by the teacher initiating the change. The researchers observed the three points of change in the teaching practice, including 1) the formulation of the idea; 2) taking initiative with the aim of forming a collaborative relationship with colleagues; and 3) reflection on the innovative class taught with the application of an interdisciplinary approach (Graph 1).

The teacher formulates the idea and defines the desired change in the practice

Teachers plan a new change

Teachers reflexively conteplate the practice

**Graph 1:** Points of Change in the Teaching Practice

*Participants.* The sample comprised three teachers (who taught Serbian, Russian, and Music) working at a public elementary school in Belgrade.

Research Materials. In this study, data obtained from different sources were integrated in order to better understand and explain the phenomenon at hand (Yin, 1994). The primary source of analysis comprised transcripts of conversations between the teachers and the researchers that took place in meetings held before and after class observation. The researchers used a guide with questions whose purpose was to encourage the teachers to engage in a reflexive conversation with the researchers. The additional research materials used for analyzing and discussing the obtained results included the teachers' preparation for teaching a class based on inter-subject content correlation and the notes the researchers took after class observation. The researchers independently wrote down their impressions and observations regarding various segments of the class.

Data Processing and Analysis. An inductive qualitative content analysis was conducted (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). After the initial coding, the codes were grouped into categories based on their similarities and differences.

#### Analysis and discussion

The analysis yielded six response categories (Table 1), presented through three key points of change in the practice.

Table 1. Categories Obtained via an Inductive Content Analysis

#### Categories

- The topic as the driver of change
- The teacher as the initiator and organizer
- The selection of collaborators
- Communication between collaborators
- Teachers' reflection on lesson quality
- The importance of support from colleagues

The first point of change pertained to formulating the idea and defining the desired change in the practice. It encompassed two response categories corresponding to the questions of a) how the topic inspired the teacher to think about redefining the usual teaching method, and b) how the teacher initiated the change in the practice. The teacher decided to teach the topic of the traditional Russian holiday of *Maslenica* in an innovative way, in cooperation with local institutions. The teacher was strongly motivated by the interest her students showed in the Russian culture and customs. Furthermore, she wanted to find an exciting way to connect an otherwise "boring topic covered in unengaging texts with a plethora of information" with students' own experiences and motivate them to learn the lesson and get better grades.

....and this is an opportunity for them to get good grades in a highly creative way. Namely, instead of reading the text as usual and then translating it and learning new words, they get to see how the holiday is celebrated in practice and soak up as much information as they can along the way... (the Russian teacher)

With this idea as the starting point, the teacher conceived an experimental lesson (ogledni čas) that would allow for inter-subject content correlation and follow the principles of project-based learning. In the education practice, one of the purposes of an experimental lesson (ogledni čas) is to allow teachers to share their experiences with their colleagues and show what it is like to apply a different, more innovative approach to the realization of a teaching unit. Hence, the teacher took some practical steps, predominantly in terms of choosing her collaborators in this endeavor.

The initiation of the change in the practice through collaboration with colleagues constituted *the second point of change*. This point involved a consideration of criteria

for the selection of collaborators (the desire to cooperate with certain colleagues, the principle of similarity between subject content/topics, and the characteristics of the subject itself), along with modes of communication during the process of implementing the change (face-to-face communication at school or online).

...then I remembered that the Serbian teacher mentioned that she would love us to work together on a project. So, I thought to myself that I should ask her as well, since there is a similar holiday in Serbia called Poklade... So, we worked on that and I thought to myself that it would be good to reach out to the Music teacher as well, since they were going to sing those songs... (the Russian teacher)

The third point of change pertained to the teachers' reflection on various elements of lesson preparation and realization. The teachers contemplated the advantages and shortcomings of lesson realization as well as emotional experiences associated with the process of change implementation. They emphasized that they were satisfied with the dynamics of the lesson. Their students were dedicated to the realization of their tasks and the innovative approach allowed for the inclusion of students of different abilities and discipline and achievement levels. The difficulties they faced included inadequate space, and unfavorable weather conditions (high ambient temperature). The teachers noticed that the change in the approach led to an increase in students' motivation to invest extra efforts and improve their teamwork skills, while certain students took the initiative in the preparation of materials for the lesson.

*They became enterprising...* (the Serbian teacher)

Different points of change implementation and realization were accompanied by different emotions. The teachers reported feeling joyful, satisfied, happy, and excited, but also nervous, fearful, and uneasy.

The teachers' reflection particularly focused on the importance of collaboration and support from colleagues in the process of practice innovation. For the teachers, it was important that their colleagues "validated" the quality of their lessons. They expected their colleagues to act as critical friends and provide constructive feedback including suggestions for further improvement.

The examination of the additional research materials led to a more in-depth observation of different phases in the preparation and realization of experimental lessons

(ogledni čas). The prerequisites to inter-subject content correlation included the idea that caused the change and propelled the teachers into action as well as the existence of a common goal. Subject content was linked to students' life experience, which helped them produce tangible results. The teachers planned group activities that involved students of different abilities and achievement and discipline levels, which likely contributed to the development of teamwork skills. Likewise, students showed great interest in the innovative approach to learning and enjoyed participating in a class that did not follow the usual pattern. All of these elements indicate that the experimental lesson (ogledni čas) was based on an interdisciplinary approach (Tres, Tres& Fray, 2004).

However, the teachers failed to reflect on the reasons why the experimental lesson (ogledni čas) was not based on the principles of project-based learning, as originally envisioned by the teacher who initiated the change. First and foremost, lesson preparation did not entail the formulation of the project goal, that is, the research problem/question that would be at the core of teachers' and students' activities. Studies have shown that difficulties in formulating the research question constitute one of the main obstacles in the preparation and realization stages of project-based learning (Chin, 2002; Chin & Kayalvizhi, 2002; Chin & Chia, 2004; Ševa & Đerić, 2019). Likewise, most of the activities were initiated by the teacher, which clashes with the concept of project-based learning, where the role of the teacher is to guide, monitor, and support students, that is, facilitate their work on selecting project topics, questions, and activities (Đerić, Malinić & Đević, 2021).

#### Conclusion

Waning satisfaction with the classic approach to teaching led to the idea to innovate the teaching practice. The idea was successfully implemented by applying the correlation-integration approach to the subjects of Russian, Serbian, and Music in subject teaching. The teachers were motivated to test the new solution, that is, adopt an interdisciplinary approach to teaching. This innovative solution helped them achieve lesson goals and the expected outcomes. The teachers demonstrated high levels of motivation to innovate the practice, which initiated horizontal learning and support from colleagues. It further empowered them to reflexively contemplate their own practice, which is a necessary prerequisite for its further improvement (Graph 1). Therefore, the three-point process of

change presented in this paper encouraged the teachers to introduce new activities into their practice with the help of facilitators, as demonstrated in another paper (Malinić, Stanišić & Đerić, 2021).

**Keywords:** interdisciplinary approach, introducing changes into the practice, horizontal learning, teachers as initiators, case study.

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