

# Increasing Quality in the Education of Pupils and the Development of Key Competencies, Educational Areas and Literacies

Since January 2017 the Faculty of Education (Charles University) has become a beneficiary of EU funding from the European Social Fund (ESF) under Priority Axis 3: Equal access to high-quality pre-school, primary and secondary education. Together with Masaryk University, the University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice and the Technical University of Liberec, the Faculty of Education successfully entered the initial phase of the project Increasing quality in the education of pupils and the development of key competencies, educational areas and literacies.

In comparison to the previous participation of universities in ESF projects, this project has a different specification. It is based on the reflective model of future teacher education – a model that emphasizes action research and systematic reflection on teaching practice as a key factor in increasing the professional competence of teachers. In this way it represents an innovative approach to enhancing quality in education.

## 1. Main aims of the project

The aim of the project is to focus not only on improving the professional competencies of teachers and students training to be teachers but especially building a supportive and sharing platform, in which positive changes for all of the project actors (educators, academic staff, students training to be teachers) can be achieved. This brings a great challenge in the way that it changes the form of cooperation between practice (teachers) and academic research (represented by university teachers). The participation and cooperation is based on sharing professional experience and providing mutual professional feedback rather than educating and training teachers.

It is expected that the benefit of the project will result in two levels

- 1) *Support for increasing the competencies of all project participants.* Teachers will improve their didactic, educational-psychological, mentoring and research competencies. They will be able to reflect better on what is happening in their classes and apply

empirically-based knowledge to improve the quality of education of pupils. Academic staff will be better informed about the actual needs and situation in schools. The subject 'didactics' will have the chance to link subject teaching to educational-psychological knowledge. The network created within diverse departments and universities will be of use even in the future. Undergraduate students in teacher education programmes will gain practical experience. They will improve their planning skills and abilities to implement and evaluate educational content through their engagement in action research. Employees of non-profit organizations will also become part of the network.

- 2) *Improving the quality of education of pupils in key competences.* The aim of increasing the efficiency of primary and secondary education is in line with the project proposal on the development of basic literacies (reading, mathematical, information), civic and social competencies and technical fields and natural science. Within these thematic objectives national and school curricula will be analyzed and reviewed and effective methodological approaches summarized. It is also intended to introduce, create and pilot new teaching strategies and approaches. On the basis of the findings, examples of good practice and video recordings of new approaches will be prepared. New teaching strategies and materials will be published

online on the web pages of the project and in electronic media and also by official publishers. The project results and findings will also be used as study material for professionals in education and students (future teachers) in higher education.

## 2. Key project activities

### 2.1 Cooperation of the subject 'didactics' with specialists from departments of psychology, general didactics, psychodidactics and special pedagogy

An important part of the project is to establish close cooperation between distinct university departments to share research findings, theoretical background and conceptual terminology across specializations with educators in the Community of Practice platform. The activity of close cooperation is essential for any other key activity of the project so it takes place throughout all stages of the project.

### 2.2 Community of Practice for increasing quality in the education of pupils and the development of key competencies, educational areas and literacies

As already mentioned, the main activity of the project is to create a mutual platform for sharing experience among teachers, academic staff and represen-

tatives of non-profit organizations, and also other possible partners (school directors, future teachers). What is termed the Community of Practice is intended to take place on a regular basis, thus setting up long-term mutual cooperation. Throughout the three-year project this key activity will take place for 25 months.

The support of educators and the progress of their teaching competences is organized into two types of cooperation groups:

**Horizontal groups.** In the horizontal form teachers, academic staff and representatives of NPOs work together in separate groups according to specific and thematic objectives (for instance a reading literacy group, mathematical literacy group, etc.).

**Vertical groups.** In vertical groups project participants meet, share experience and generate and discuss teaching strategies and methods together in a diverse community across literacies according to participants' interest in selected thematic curriculum.

The content of this key activity is realized in three thematic blocks: a focus on the curriculum, a focus on teaching and a focus on the actors in the educational process.

### **2.3 Mentoring in Community of Practice**

The main aim of this key activity is to train and enhance the mentoring skills of primary/secondary school teachers to

become leaders – supervisor teachers of students in teacher education programmes or beginner teachers.

### **2.4 Action research of students in primary and secondary schools**

Academic lecturers and teacher practitioners will be selected from the Community of Practice and together they will work as mentors of students in teaching education programmes. The students will first be introduced to the theoretical background and concepts of action research. After this introduction, the students, in cooperation with their mentors, identify the topic of an action research project in the context of a specific class. The students then propose a hypothesis and prepare an intervention plan. The action research will be analysed and the efficiency of the intervention programme evaluated. The results and findings will be shared with the wider team.

### **2.5 Conference of Community of Practice as an effective factor in enhancing the quality of primary and secondary education – linking theory and practice**

A conference open to all of those interested in cooperating will be used for introduction and dissemination of the project findings and results.

### 3. Target groups

There are two target groups: teachers (160) and higher education students (70).

The project targets primary and secondary school teachers. When the total number of schools is considered, not more than 10% can be upper secondary schools. Additionally, in order to foster the establishment of new cooperative relationships between universities and schools a maximum of 30% can be what are termed Faculty teacher training schools. Teachers (160) are expected to form the Community of Practice in which they could work closely with the academic staff in terms of sharing the experience, creating and piloting methodology materials and teaching strategies expected to improve the key competences of pupils in basic literacies and to encourage the interest of the pupils in technology and natural science. They are the key players in order to connect theory, research and practice.

The second already-mentioned target group is a group of students (future teachers) from the participating universities. In line with the aim and specific objectives of the project, the participants will be chosen from among the students following Teacher Education programmes: the Teaching at primary level in basic schools Master's study programme and the Training Teachers of General Subjects at Lower and Higher Secondary Schools Follow-up Master's study programme.

### 4. Current status of the project

With the beginning of 2018, the second year of the project has just started.

By the end of April 2017, the initial phase of the key activity of the Community of Practice was successfully completed. The project team was set up on the basis of cooperation between universities and departments. On the horizontal level individual teams introduced thematic objectives as a framework for possible cooperation with practising teachers. These topics were published on the web pages of the project. Next, schools and teachers suitable for possible cooperation were searched for and contacted.

On May 17th the first Community of Practice meeting, with over 220 participants, was held. The management team and representatives of NPOs as well as working teams were introduced, as were the thematic objectives and topics for cooperation. The emphasis was placed on the issue of the curriculum. So, together, the Community of Practice on the horizontal as well as the vertical level discussed the form, benefits and deficiencies of the national curriculum with respect to specific objectives (literacies, technology and natural science). For the next two-day meeting, held in September, the opening lecture introduced the participants to the issue of portfolios and their role in a reflective approach to teaching. In the programme that followed teachers were encouraged to become engaged in close cooperation in working

teams according to their professional interests. In thematic workshops university teachers, together with practising teachers, started to review and share their experiences of the didactic approaches, materials and instructional strategies used for the development of pupils' key competences in selected areas of reading literacy, mathematical literacy and so on. Additionally, school curricula were analyzed and discussed.

The next two meetings were held in November and January. The trajectory of the thematic block moved from a focus on the curriculum to a focus on teaching. On the vertical level the participants had the opportunity to attend a lecture on formative evaluation and, on the basis of their choice, they participated in one of the workshops focusing on interdisciplinary teaching. On the horizontal level, working teams based on the previous analysis and reviews started the process of creating and piloting appropriate methodological strategies, didactic mate-

rial and instructional approaches that, it was hypothesized, would enhance the quality of education in the selected area.

At present the last two meetings of the Community of Practice are about to be planned, with their focus being on the actors in the teaching process. The initial phase of the following key activity, Mentoring, is going to start in the Community of Practice.

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