

## CROSS-SCHOOL MENTORING AS A FACILITATOR OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL SCHOOLS IN LATVIA

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**Abstract:** The ongoing changes in nowadays society fully influence education especially the sustainability of rural schools, and, vice versa, education has a very important meaning in the support and facilitation of a sustainable development as the acquisition of new information and experience exchange process among individuals, generations and particular parts of society in a certain field and other types of organizations, including rural schools. The authors of the article have been carrying out the researches on the fluctuation of educational environment of rural schools for several years as well as the seminar has been experimentally approbated as a form of cross-school mentoring for the facilitation of viability and sustainability of Latvian rural schools in the future perspective. The cross-school mentoring is one of many types of mentoring which the authors of the article has theoretically justified as well as experimentally approbated and evaluated its meaning under way of experimental researches. During mentoring process the authors of the article motivated the participants of seminars to look upon their own rural schools and to evaluate them as a rural self-developing educational environmental system, as whole community's opened educational environment, as a learning organization. The newly obtained information about rural schools in Latvia and abroad, made participants to search new initiatives of their own developmental ways, based on their and other Latvian and foreign rural schools' experience. The main results and conclusions of the researches are published.

**Keywords:** cross-school mentoring, educational environment, sustainable development, rural school.

### Introduction

The preservation of educational environment of rural schools is one of the most significant tasks for provision of sustainable education in Latvia. The sustainable development of rural schools can in great extent provide also the sustainability of rural cultural environment.

In the last four years the empirical researches of the authors of the article prove that nowadays in the conditions of economic crisis the part of schools try to find new innovative solutions of their own development, thus becoming the opened educational environment of the whole rural community. Rural schools carry out new additional functions, self-complicate, thereby becoming multi-functional and multi-structural educational environment.

At the same time there are such rural schools that in spite of existing threats wait solutions for their own developmental problems from 'above' or completely do not believe in any attempt to survive effectively thus they are relatively passive and inert. As a result such rural schools are closed each year in Latvia.

The authors of the article consider that the results of theoretical and empirical researches must be maximally available for all rural schools in Latvia that is why the meaning of cross-school mentoring in Latvian educational environment has become very notable.

The *aim of this article* is to publicize the results of researches that are acquired by evaluating prepared and organized seminars with the aim to exchange experience between seminar lecturers / mentors and rural schools in the context of sustainability.

### Materials and methods

Empirical researches are based on the ecological approach in the research of educational environment. There can be distinguished the directions of theoretical researches that serve as the theoretical and methodological base in our experimental researches.

1. The ongoing changes in educational environment of rural schools of the 21st century, including the diversity of educational models of rural schools in Latvia and abroad (Dappen, Isernhagen, 2002; Howley, Harmon, 2000; Katane, 2005; Miller, 1995; Галковская, Раудсик, 2008; Дмитриева, 2004; etc.).
2. Education for sustainable development (Grabovska, Vereba, 2010; The UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD 2005-2014) The First Two Years, 2007; etc.).
3. Rural school as an educational environment of community (Akanke, 2007; Gjeltén, 1982; Jarvis, 2001; Katane, 2005; Kerensky, 1989; Roga, 2008; Митина, 2004; etc.).
4. Rural school as a learning organization (Brandt, 2003; Dāvidsone, 2008; Fullan, 1993; Gephart, Marsick, Van Buren, Spiro, 1996; Senge, 1990; etc.).
5. Cross-school mentoring in the school as a learning organization (Cranwell-Ward, 2004; Gay, 1995; Donaldson, Ensher, Grant-Vallone, 2000, Feiman-Nemser, 1996; Friedman, Arena et.al. 2004; Head, Reiman, Thies-Sprinthall, 1992; Pyatt, 2002 etc.).

The authors of the article have used the scientific theoretical practical seminar *Rural Schools as the Fluctuation of Educational Environment in Latvia and Abroad of the 21st Century* as the form of the cross-school mentoring that was organised in October and November, 2011 with the aim to provide the exchange of innovative working experience among rural schools that promotes and facilitates further self-development and sustainability of rural schools in Latvia.

The seminars were organized in two regions of Latvia – Latgale and Zemgale, involving 17 Latvian rural schools (5 secondary schools and 12 basic schools) with 111 experts (teachers, administration staff of rural schools and coordinators of educational work of rural schools of Regional Educational boards) that represent Livanu, Riebinu, Vecumnieku, Tervetes districts.

There were included significant results of theoretical and empirical researches on rural schools as educational environmental systems in the content of mentoring seminars.

Each seminar consisted of two main parts (theoretical and practical parts):

- the theoretical part is very informative as it, firstly, is connected with the aspects of functioning of rural schools abroad, for example, educational environmental models of foreign rural schools, tendencies that enter the educational field of rural schools abroad, etc. and, secondly, it is related with the historical facts of development of the term *rural school* in Latvia, tendencies, educational environmental models of Latvian rural schools nowadays and other aspects;
- but the practical part refers to the efficient input of experts, first of all, in the modelling of the visions of the future sustainable development of rural schools based on Walt Disney's model (according to O'Connor, Seymour, 1994) where Walt Disney future visions or developmental scenarios defined as the dreamer, the spoiler, the realist and according to these roles the future development visions are divided into: optimistic, pessimistic and realistically possible vision, secondly, the participants of the seminars revealed the guarantee of prestige and success of Latvian rural schools. What is more, the experts presented their future developmental visions, thus sharing their ideas with other experts.

There was included the results of empirical researches of the authors in the context of mentoring about educational environmental models of Latvian rural schools. In the conditions of nowadays changes many rural schools search solutions of viability problems, thus there is a diversity of educational environmental models of rural schools. As a result of analysis and evaluation, the authors of the article have divided educational environmental models of rural schools in four main groups:

1. *Traditional educational environmental models* offer the most widespread educational environmental models such as a basic or secondary rural school. These are rural schools which functioning responds to the Educational Law of Latvian Republic, the school's functions correspond to pupils' audience accordingly to basic or secondary school's educational programs. The school's operation is without any changes because, firstly, *the school's administration does not see any danger for school's existence and sustainability in future*, there is enough number of pupils and set of forms

that have not substantially changed in the last years, that is why the rural school does not want to change anything in its every day work because the basic audience is saved – schoolchildren and youngsters, secondly, the *school's administration and all personnel perceive danger of school's existence and its sustainability in future* because the number of pupils and forms have decreased or it has been always a situation that the amount of pupils and forms were very low. Therefore the school as an environmental system is not opened to changes from inside - („from the bottom”), but waits for favourable reforms from outside - („from the top”).

2. *Educational environmental models of structural reorganization* include multi-structural educational environment. It is related to comprehensive schools that as a result of the optimization in the time of the reform in 2009/2010 school year have become the component of the multi-structural educational environment or substructure:

- have become a multi-structural educational environmental center that has got one or more branch offices;
- have lost their independence and were joined to some rural secondary school or basic school in such way becoming the branch office of this particular school.

3. *Multi-functional and multi-structural educational environmental models within the framework of one school* encompass rural schools that offer multi-divisional educational environment for all rural community because the rural schools are social-cultural environments which offer the formal and non-formal education in the aspect of life-long and wide-long learning. By broadening target audience and functions in the aspect of a person's age period 'down' – preschool and school age children and 'up' – adult formal and non-formal education, rural schools as an educational environment system form new substructures.

4. *Combined (mixed) educational environmental models* include the features of a multi-structural and multi-functional educational environmental model. The rural school as a multi-structural educational center or as a branch office broadens its functions and increases its target audience by offering a wide range of formal and non-formal educational programmes.

The research on educational environmental models of Latvian rural schools reflects that educational environment is changing and will be undergoing several changes in the rural areas of Latvia even next years because reorganization and closure of schools are still in the realization process. It becomes diverse in structure allowing to attract investments and broaden the educational facilities for native inhabitants of a particular rural district. Unfortunately, no one can foresee how long a certain rural school will function, as changes are rapid and unpredictable.

There are used such **research methods** for the experimental approbation of cross-school mentoring: questionnairing as data acquisition method with the aim to receive the feedback of the organized seminars and Kendall's W Test as data procession method.

## Results and discussion

• **Results.** The questionnaire was prepared before the seminars that consists of seven evaluation criteria that had to be assessed in the scale from 1 (a very low assessment) to 10 (a very high assessment) by participants in the end of seminars.

Summarizing the results of evaluation criteria of mentoring seminars, the authors of the article have summed and systemized them in the table 1 according to the sequence of seminars. (Table 1).

The statistical analysis of evaluation criteria of the questionnaire shows that the participants of seminars very highly evaluated:

- the mentor competence as a lecturer in the topic of the seminar (Evaluation  $\sum$  of all five seminars = 956 points);
- the topicality of the topic of the seminar in the context of viability, fluctuation and sustainability the rural schools' environment (Evaluation  $\sum$  of all five seminars = 938 points);
- the meaning and motivating character of the seminar for creative and innovative thinking and pedagogical activity to facilitate viability and promotion of prestige of rural school (Evaluation  $\sum$  of all five seminars = 892 points).

Table 1.

## The Evaluation of Meaning of Mentoring Seminars in the Point of View of Participants

N	Evaluation Criteria	Sem. 1	Sem. 2	Sem. 3	Sem. 4	Sem. 5	All seminars
		N	N	N	N	N	In total: N
		29 respondents	12 respondents	27 respondents	19 respondents	24 respondents	<b>111 respondents</b>
		Evaluation Max $\Sigma$ 290	Evaluation Max $\Sigma$ 120	Evaluation Max $\Sigma$ 270	Evaluation Max $\Sigma$ 190	Evaluation Max $\Sigma$ 240	In total: Evaluation <b>Max <math>\Sigma</math> 1110</b>
		Evaluation $\Sigma$	Evaluation $\Sigma$	Evaluation $\Sigma$	Evaluation $\Sigma$	Evaluation $\Sigma$	In total: Evaluation $\Sigma$
1.	The topicality of the topic of the seminar in the context of viability, fluctuation and sustainability the rural schools' environment.	238	101	238	152	209	<b>938</b>
2.	The meaning and motivating character of the seminar for creative and innovative thinking and pedagogical activity to facilitate viability and promotion of prestige of rural school.	205	100	229	139	219	<b>892</b>
3.	The novelty of gained information regarding foreign rural schools.	210	101	214	146	209	<b>880</b>
4.	The novelty of gained information regarding Latvian rural schools.	208	96	219	141	206	<b>870</b>
5.	Seminar as a form of cross-schools' mentoring that promotes exchange of experience and assessment of rural schools.	210	94	220	140	201	<b>865</b>
6.	The meaning of cross-school mentoring seminar in the facilitation of rural school as a learning organization.	205	96	214	140	203	<b>858</b>
7.	Mentor competence as a lecturer in the topic of the seminar.	231	107	244	158	216	<b>956</b>

In order to find out how the assessments of all participants of five seminars match in seven evaluation criteria of the questionnaire, the secondary processing was done, using Kendall's W Test, SPSS software programme. The following data was obtained. (Table 2)

Table 2.

Kendall's W Test Statistic

N	5	
Kendall's W	0.533	
Chi-Square	15.985	
df	6	
Asymp. Sig.	0.014	

To sum up, Kendall's concordance coefficient ( $W = 0,533$ ) approaches more „1” than „0”,

- $\chi^2 = 15,985 > \chi^2_{0,05; 6} = 12,59$ ,
- but  $p - \text{value} = 0,000 < \alpha = 0,05$ ,

meaning that there is statistically important concordance among all participants of five mentoring seminars.

• **Discussion.** As cross-school mentoring is the last phase of the research, it gained a very important place for encouraging and motivating rural schools, to search and work out creatively development strategies, concepts, programmes as well as innovative educational environment's models, therefore the authors of the article give a short insight in the theoretical justification of experimental researches.

Since the early 1980s, when mentoring burst onto the educational scene as part of a broad movement aimed at improving education, policymakers and educational leaders have pinned high hopes *on mentoring as a vehicle for reforming teaching and teacher education* (Feiman-Nemser, 1996).

F.A. Head, A.J.Reiman and L. Thies-Sprinthall (Head, Reiman, Thies-Sprinthall, 1992) believe that mentoring can make a difference for teachers, but it needs to be real mentoring complete with its complexity in process and function.

The historical research on the term *mentor* shows that it is derived from the Greek word meaning “to advise” and comes from the Indo-European root *men* meaning “to think.” The term is generally traced back to Homer's *The Odyssey*, in which Odysseus left Mentor, his trusted friend, in charge of his household and the education of his young son, Telemachus, when he left to fight in the Trojan War.

More importantly, however, “the role of mentor was filled when Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom, intellect, and invention assumed the form of Mentor to give counsel and advice to Telemachus. In taking the shape of Mentor, Athena provided her guidance and wisdom to ensure that the young man had the proper education and understanding that were necessary for him to grow into the leader that he was expected to be.” (Friedman et al, 2004)

Nowadays the mentor plays a very significant role in the process of mentoring, thus the authors of the article give several examples of the term *mentoring*:

- Mentoring is the process of serving as a mentor, someone who facilitates and assists another's development. The process includes modelling because the mentor must be able to model the messages and suggestions being taught to the beginning teacher (Gay, 1995).
- Mentoring is a term generally used to describe a relationship between a less experienced individual, called a mentee or protégé, and a more experienced individual known as a mentor. Traditionally, mentoring is viewed as a dyadic, face-to-face, long-term relationship between a supervisory adult and a novice student that fosters the mentee's professional, academic, or personal development (Donaldson, Ensher, Grant-Vallone, 2000).

- Mentoring is a voluntary and reciprocal interpersonal relationship in which an individual with acknowledged expertise shares his or her experience and learning with another (less experienced) person. Mentoring relationships are typically long term and are based on trust and mutual respect. The mentoring relationship goes beyond the role of professional advisor to focus on both the personal and professional growth of the individual (Friedman, Arena, 2004).

It can be concluded that mentoring is the process of support to a particular individual who needs a professional and educational guidance and supervision in order to develop its own personality thus broadening experience and knowledge.

There are myriad benefits associated with mentoring, and they are as unique as the people involved in the mentoring relationships. Yet some general benefits exist. In terms of these *benefits*, mentoring: allows for increased self-awareness and self-discipline; provides an expanded personal network; offers a proven method to share ideas, try new skills and take risks; enhances the capacity to translate values and strategies into productive actions; improves awareness of personal biases, assumptions and areas for improvement; increases technical and professional expertise; creates a culture of acceptance and inclusion; reinforces cultural norms and values; allows mentees to have a smoother transition into the workforce to further professional career development; renews mentors' enthusiasm for their role as expert (A Booklet Benefits of Mentoring, 2007).

There exist different *types of mentoring*, for example (Cranwell-Ward, 2004; Pyatt, 2002):

- *Peer mentoring* is set up between people of equal level or status in organization. Potential benefits from peer mentoring are different for example: making mentoring available in a wider audience, developing skills of individuals, giving people the opportunity to find out about other areas of the organization on a more formal basis etc.
- *Cross-company mentoring* involves a reciprocal arrangement whereby managers from one organization set up mentoring relationships with managers in another, instead of mentors and mentees both being from the same organization. Unlike peer mentoring, cross-company mentoring seems to require a significant level of formality to be taken seriously. Choosing which company to pair with needs careful thought: if the culture and environment are too different, the participants may see no value. Pairing with an organization from the same sector, but which is not an outright competitor, would be the ideal.
- Another venture into alternative ways in which to set up a mentoring scheme is the idea of *group mentoring*. This can be useful where the supply of mentors is a problem. Group mentoring can also be the „scheme of choice”, when there is an appropriate group of potential mentees who would benefit from the same kind of mentoring form, the same mentor. This would be particularly likely with members of the same work, for example, and where there was a specific objective as an outcome for the mentoring.
- *Cross-school mentoring* that is used for different educational reasons, for instance, training and implementing a peer mentoring strategy.

Thus mentoring is very useful in sphere of education because it gives theory and practice, it helps to improve and develop organizational culture of any educational establishment, thus enhancing communication, giving better understanding of its vision and mission for teaching and administration staff of the schools.

## Conclusions

1. Cross-school mentoring has several cooperation forms, namely, cooperation among: 1) mentor and one school's representatives (teachers); 2) several schools' representatives; 3) mentor and more schools' representatives, who share and exchange experience, gaining new and necessary information for schools' development.
2. Cross-school mentoring provides sharing with knowledge, experience, support provision to representatives of schools in particular questions that are opened for professional development as well as broadening view that guarantee team work for facilitation sustainable development of schools.

3. One of cross-school mentoring forms is a seminar that is purposefully planned, content-structured and evaluated, by mentor/mentors cooperation with representatives of schools but mostly with school managers.
4. Cross-school mentoring's seminars have many advantages and some disadvantages. For example, **advantages** are: the participation of the majority of representatives of the particular school; the knowledge acquisition in the concrete issue; the possibility to share experience with the representatives of other schools and learn new practical things in the connection with the topic of the seminar; the solving of particular problems and questions; the use of evaluation skills; the facilitation of the cross-school cooperation and getting into the contact with other representatives of the seminar and as a result of this cooperation the collaboration cross-schools nets are formed. If mentors are researchers, the newest results of researches and scientific cognition are delivered to the participants of the seminar that is a form of mentoring. The main **disadvantages** of the cross-school seminars are: the barrier of communication, shyness and timidity of participants to take part in conversations; an inability to overcome a psychological barrier, exchange experience and viewpoints on the subject; a mutual competition among schools of one district and the neutral, unmotivated attitude towards the work of the seminars.
5. On the whole, the evaluation of all seven criteria of participants of seminars is very high and high because they are above average indicators. The participants of seminars highly evaluated:
  - the mentor competence as a lecturer in the topic of the seminar;
  - the topicality of the topic of the seminar in the context of viability, fluctuation and sustainability the rural schools' environment;
  - the meaning and motivating character of the seminar for creative and innovative thinking and pedagogical activity to facilitate viability and promotion of prestige of rural school.

The results of the Kendall's W Test prove that there is statistically important concordance among all participants of five mentoring seminars.

6. The evaluation of participants of seminars allows concluding that mentoring seminars have a very significant meaning in the facilitation of sustainable development of rural schools as it involves considerable number of participants of rural schools, reveals recent novelties of the topic, educates people on the place and provides practice.

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