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Innovative School - Illusion or Possibility

Abstract

Over some years we tried to make conditions conducive to creativity in four schools. We tried to make them more according to human needs. At first teachers were confused and asked that we tell them what to do. We didn't. We gave them the chance to make their own life in their school. It was a very slow process. Changes started in two schools after two years, but not in the other schools. Why? What are the conditions needed for human creativity to play out its own fantastic dance?

Introduction

The Innovative school was the research topic in two Croatian and two Slovenian schools. The intention was to create conditions for teachers, parents, and pupils to be more innovative in their approach to their own school. The first step was to give a chance to the teachers to create their own school. There are many different ways that people can be creative in a school, but in reality, schools are not very creative places. Many people believe that schools are places where creativity is systematically threatened. In schools creative individuals are not accepted. Many creative men and women do not finish school and they were considered a problem in school.

However, creativity is the most important characteristic in human beings and a school that is not oriented to creativity is not a human school. In real life we can see many people who do not try to be creative. It appears that some people are creative and some are not, but that is not true. This is the result of schooling, which drives creative people to give up. If we want to give back a human dimension to school we have to reaffirm creativity.

Usually we think in terms of the creativity of the children, but this is impossible to consider apart from a teacher's creativity. The parents' creativity is also important. They are all connected. The school exists because of children and a teacher who is not creative will not give a chance to a child to be creative. The same is true of parents. We believe that the best point to start is with the teachers, but which way? That is the question.

Review of the Literature

Today many initiatives exist around the world, which try to answer this question. In Minnesota, USA was born the "Charter School Movement" in 1991. Charter schools are autonomous public schools, run by teachers, parents and community groups. They are the result of a belief that teachers, parents and community members could provide the best way of schooling. A National Study of Charter Schools concludes that most charter schools are small (about 150 students), they have similar racial and ethnic distribution as all public schools. "Charters start from the inspiration of individual educators, groups of parents, community leaders, or teachers with a dream. They want something different for children. Many parents with students in charter schools were dissatisfied with their experience in other public schools."² The number of charter schools is growing and approximately 700 charters were in 23 states, but fewer than one in twenty have closed voluntarily. All these schools are

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²A National Study of Charter Schools, Second-Year Report Executive Summary, Internet p.8.

different but all of them try to attract parents and students by focusing on academics, a supportive environment and having a flexible approach to educational programming.

This very interesting approach is based on three important points:

- Teachers, parents and community initiatives.
- Orientation to human needs.
- School operation without pressures from outside.

What we cannot see here are the pupils. They do not have the possibility to have an impact on school life. Adults usually have different needs than children and usually their first attempt is to influence academics.

Kurt Singer³ in Germany started getting involved in public schools as a critic. In a church he found a book in which believers wrote their requests of God. One girl wrote, "Dear God, Please make me get a good grade in mathematics so that my mother doesn't leave me." He concludes that existing schools are very dangerous for children because they attack and threaten their very lives. He suggests that new schools be built around citizens' initiatives. These schools must have the following characteristics:

- Healthy interpersonal relationships between students and teachers.
- Orientation to the whole person.
- Learning without fear.
- Methods oriented to children's needs.
- Cooperation between teachers, students and parents.
- Education of educators.

In his article, Singer made excellent criticisms of actual schools and put forth many ideas for humanizing schools for children. Although, he does not speak of the feelings and needs of the teachers. He believes that teachers are ready to change the school because of the children. But are they?

On the other side, William Glasser⁴ believes that a motivation for change comes more from inside than from outside, the most motivating factor being human needs. His coworkers, Diane Gossen and Judy Anderson⁵ understand the process of change as being a slow and hard event. The steps of this process are knowledge about changes, personal changes, leadership changes, conflict resolution culture, curriculum changes, and permanent changes.

This is a very complex approach and we are thinking that it can give results.

The Research Problem

In the previously our research, we saw that the process of change in a school is very hard and painful. A school is a building, curriculum, organization, but firstly, it is made of people - teachers, students, and parents. We found that neuroses developed in the teachers that were not in agreement with the changes. This showed us that the process of change is an internal

³Singer K. (1981) *Masstabe für eine Humane Schule*, Fisher Taschenbuch Verlag, Frankfurt am Main.

⁴Glasser, W. (1991) *Dobra škola, Didakta, Radovljica*.

⁵Goosed, D/ Anderson, J. (1996) *Stvaranje uvjeta za kvalitetne škole*, Alinea, Zagreb.

event and that people can only accept the changes that they help to create. Therefore, we tried to find the conditions in which people were willing to enter into the creative process. We believe that teachers are the most important factor in the process of change. When they decide to be free and start to create, they can help pupils and parents. Together they can create a school that is appropriate to human needs.

Methodology

The Samples were two Croatian (H1 and H2) and two Slovenian schools (S1 and S2). Negotiations were undertaken with the schools' project leaders, Dora Gobec in Slovenia and Milan Matijević in Croatia. The teachers' involvement was voluntary. In the beginning about 180 teachers participated, although, three years later the number was smaller.

The Procedure was to first, develop the teacher education program. The themes of the first year were human needs, self-concept, individual growth and educational problems in the school. Topics for the second year were the learning process, teaching methods and the teacher-student relationship. Third year's topics were human creativity, creative learning and methods for improving creativity.

Methods that we used were participant observation, document analysis (teachers' letters and reports) and videotaping. The author of this text facilitated the teacher education program and communicated with teachers by letters, telephone and school visits.

Results and Discussion

The Independent variables in this research were *the teacher education program, the social impact* and *the disturbances*. We had under control only the first independent variable. We tried to influence social impact and to reduce disturbances, but there was a lot that was beyond our control.

The Teacher education program was concerned, first of all, with the quality of the teacher's life. Through lectures, seminars, workshops and letters we tried to engage teachers in considering themselves. In the very beginning they were confused and asked why are we talking about ourselves and how is this connected to an innovative school. Most of the reactions were positive, like the following:

"Usually we are thinking about others: our children, children in the school, parents. If someone asks, "How are you?" The answer was "Good." When you are in a situation to think about your own life you become conscious that you have been thinking less about yourself".

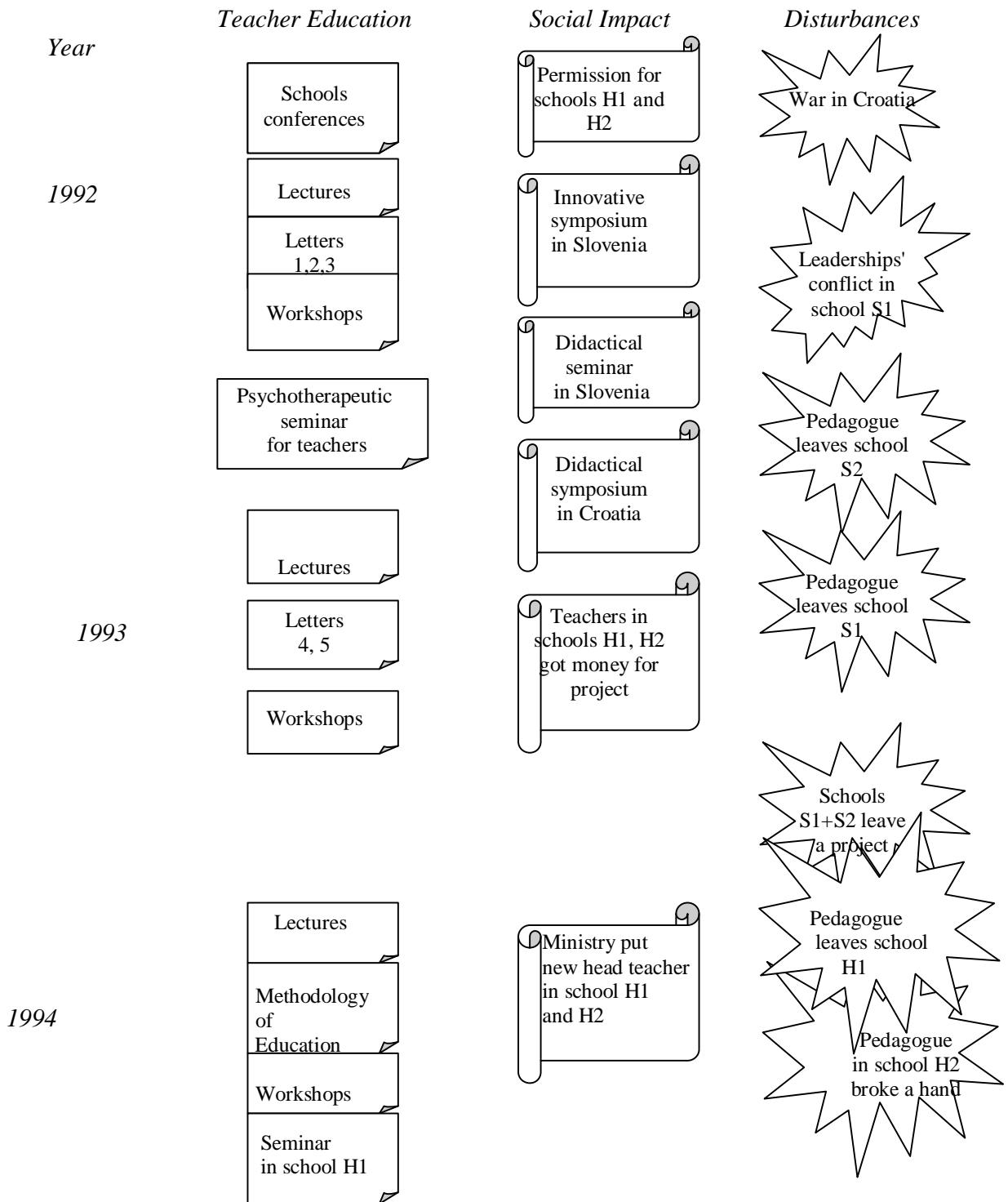


Chart 1: Changes in independent variables

"I did not have the habit of thinking about myself, and my wishes. Always I thought about others, about their wishes, and about my duties, what I have to do, and to do more."

*"There are lots of things that I am not satisfied with. I always tried to find my guilt and I would be unsatisfied with myself. But now I am **satisfied with myself.**"*

In the beginning we had enthusiasm in the schools and it looked like that we would have a very successful project. Croatian Ministry of Education gave permission for Innovative Schools and some money for teachers' work. School H2 got some money from UNICEF, and school H1 from the local authorities. In Slovenia, Educational Institute had money for the teachers' education program. We had some innovative meetings, didactical symposiums in Slovenia and Croatia. During this time we published our "Didactic" (Bognar/Matijević), and a book "Let's Be Friends", (Bognar/Uzelac/Bagic) about non-violent communication. It was important for our project. In the Slovenian school, S1, we had parents very interested in this project and they supported it. We had some articles published in Slovenian and Croatian newspapers, which supported a good social climate for social change.

From the very beginning this project had many difficulties. It started just before the war in Slovenia and Croatia. People didn't believe in the war and they tried to act normally. After some time it became impossible. In 1991 Croatia was in the middle of a terrible war and we had to stop our activities. The following year the war diminished and we restarted, although, the war was a constant presence in our everyday life. In teachers' letters we can read:

"This year we were growing up on such a hard way, spatially refugees."

"The laughter is dying on the lips, it is affected and changes in good-trained grimaces. I still like a laugh, but its sound is weaker, duration shorter...So many unhappy people around us. Slowly but surely, I am spending my last reserves of optimism."

As time passed enthusiasm went down. Teachers in schools S1 and S2 did not get the money and they did not get permission from the Ministry. Educational Institute in Ljubljana had fallen into financial difficulties. The schools tried to finance the project themselves but after some time they had to discontinue the project.

The pedagogues played an important role in the project. In school S2 soon after the project started, the pedagogue went from the school. In S1 we had a conflict inside the leadership team and that pedagogue left the school. In school H2 the pedagogue broke a hand during a workshop. In H1 the school pedagogue was very active, but when the Ministry appointed a new headmaster, she left the school. All these events had a very negative effect on the project (chart 1).

The Dependent variables were *individual initiatives* and *common activities* that changed in the schools. First teachers' ideas we had already in the first year. Teachers wrote in their letters about little changes in their classrooms that they had made. In their writing they express the essence of the Innovative School:

"I think that it is the chance that pupils accept a school like a friend, like an institution that is nice and so beautiful. They would come to school without fear, without headache before examines. It would be a school in which children would not feel unsafe, scared, shamed by parents because of bad grades, fears by teachers. In this school would be more laughter and goodness."

*"I expected that someone will give me instruction about what I would have to do. I didn't get it and I was confused. Today I know that I never should have gotten instructions. I understand now that this what an Innovative School is - **Here we are not working by instructions!**"*

Initiatives	H1	H2	S1	S2
Common	43	15	0	7
Individual	18	3	0	4
Total	61	18	0	11

Table 1: Teachers' suggestions for the changes in the schools

The difference in suggestions for change in the schools is illustrated in Table 1. In the school H1 we had the most initiatives and in this school at the end of the second year of the project we had an explosion of creative changes. They created an original approach to the teaching process. Their theme was "Streets" and they changed all their classrooms into streets. They used this theme in their reading, writing, singing, counting, and painting, playing and so on. Atmosphere in this school is reflected in the following letters:

"Last evening we had a teachers' meeting and we could feel some liveliness, some joy that people were able to express even though we are in this crisis. I was happy. I think that your letters and suggestions have influenced people. Something is happening."

"This can be credited to our headmaster, who is very careful with students and with teachers. He creates an atmosphere of trust and kindness. Because of this our human relationships are good, friendly and cooperative...If some of my friends say to me that he or she does not like going to their job, I am surprised, because I am going to school with joy. The reason is, except for my love for my profession, is just these relationships and good professional leading by my colleague pedagogue."

In the school S1 we did not get any suggestions. They had more projects in school and they were not motivated for this project. Teachers from this school broke the connection with the project. Their explanation was that they are working in a modern way, that they needed stronger leadership and more Slovenian experts. They did not like to write letters and they asked for direct contact. We had interviews with them, but without results. In the school S2 we got some ideas but a small number and they terminated their collaboration before anything happened in the school.

If we try to explain the conditions in the schools where teachers began to be creative we could note the following:

- Clear social support from the Ministry of Education, Pedagogical Institute, and local authorities.
- Financial support from the Ministry and local community.

- Good school leadership and good human relationships in the school.
- Atmosphere in the school feels safe and comfortable.

Conclusion

Through out the three years of the project we realized the Innovative School. In the beginning we had very enthusiastic teachers, social support, good school leadership and a team of experts who were ready to try something big and new. It was a very unstable time and very quickly the situation changed. Many events happened that we had no control over and this very much influenced the results. However, in this bad condition we got results, which show that people in the school are able to create a school according to human needs. It was a slow and sensitive process. We could say:

Human creativity is a shy bird that sings only in some conditions.

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