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## **BREAKING WITH 'CHALK AND TALK'. A TRI-LEVEL APPROACH OF ADAPTIVE EDUCATION IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN HUNGARY**

*Mari Bognár and Annemarie Oomen*

MAG (Hungarian abbreviation of the words “Preventing – Adapting – Caring”) is a pedagogical development programme implemented with funding received under the Matra Programme of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and from the Hungarian Ministry of Education. The overall objective of the MAG project is to develop elementary schools as effective places of learning for all children, especially for socially excluded, at-risk students, in such a way that teachers, head teachers and local education officers will participate each according to their professional and formal obligations. In Hungary, altogether 13 schools from 4 small regions, thus 26 heads and deputies, 13 Local Education Authority staff members and 85 teachers from the participating schools participate in the programme.

The development plan was finalised in February 2003. In theory, assistance to implementation was to be provided as of September 2003. In reality, however, it did not happen before January 2004. Thus the funded development period will last for two and a half years. Both in terms of content and implementation (in theory and practice), the MAG Programme builds upon the various results of the successful pedagogical development efforts of the recent period, and it constitutes a coherent system by combining these international experiences. Its key aspects are the following:

1. The main development objective is to improve students' learning environment.
2. Teachers are drivers of improvement.
3. The “unit” of pedagogical development is the school (school improvement).
4. Schools can only improve in a sustainable manner in an environment where change is understood and supported.
5. The persons involved in the development work have individual, constantly changing interests and related needs.

### **1. THE MAIN DEVELOPMENT OBJECTIVE IS TO IMPROVE STUDENTS' LEARNING ENVIRONMENT**

The overall objective of the MAG Pro establishes that it intends to develop schools into places of effective learning for all. To this end, it relies on the *model of adaptive instruction*, which was developed and successfully applied in the Netherlands by Rinse Dijkstra. Here, “adaptive” means that instruction should be adapted to the students' needs, as opposed to adapting students to the requirements of schools. It indicates the preventive nature of the model. Instead of focusing on the points where a certain child is unable to meet the requirements of an establishment, it attempts to identify those aspects of schools, which can be further improved to create a more supportive environment that stimulates learning. This means that the aim of adaptive instruction is not to define

where children lag behind their peers, an imaginary average or the curriculum with a view to provide remedial teaching to close such gaps.

Adaptive instruction is based on the three essential needs pupils have. If teachers take these into account, they will be able to maintain interest and improve learning. These three basic needs are: relating, competence and autonomy these can be linked to the third, fourth and fifth levels of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, but in this approach, they do not constitute a hierarchy.. The basic need to *relate to others* is based on security and acceptance; *competence* requires a belief in being able to do things, the joy of doing things, being understood and experiencing that "I can do something"; *autonomy* requires the experience of taking initiatives, assuming responsibility and the ability to influence others. Adaptive instruction helps teachers to become *supportive* (i.e. to support those who could otherwise not succeed themselves), to create challenging and *stimulating* conditions (i.e. to create situations which call for action, initiative or decision making on the part of the learner); and to develop an atmosphere of *trust*, where everybody is required to perform at the peak of their potential. Teachers have three tools to achieve all these: *interaction* with the class and individual children; managing the *process of learning / teaching (instruction)*; and organising the learning environment, i.e. *classroom organisation*.

## 2. TEACHERS ARE DRIVERS OF IMPROVEMENT

In the MAG project, the greatest emphasis is placed on supporting teachers to enable them to effectively change their old practices and to use genuinely adaptive instruction in their day-to-day work. These are achieved with the following tools: *selecting* the participants of the programme, organising *training and consultation* for the participants, providing them with *resource material and other aids and methods*, and *managerial support*. Our aim is to equip the teachers with practical pedagogical methods and tools, as well as ideas stimulating the further improvement of these. The aim is to enable teachers to instantly try them in the classroom and experience the outcomes.

From the schools, only those teachers joined the Programme, who felt that they really wanted to take part in it after a preliminary, comprehensive project demonstration and a consultation session building upon that. Participation is not compulsory for any teacher.

Our *teacher trainers* working in the regions assist the in-service training of teachers there. We provide training to altogether 7 trainers to work with the 13 schools (which means that one trainer works with teachers from two schools on average). The trainers come from the county pedagogical institutes. They receive their training from two trainers – of -trainers from the University in Budapest which are trained by the Dutch party. The Dutch trainers are experts in constructive pedagogy and adaptive instruction. The teacher trainers deliver two regional training sessions in their own small regions (these sessions focus on learning through *workshop* activities). Every twomonths, local training sessions and consultations take place in the schools in question, where the participating teachers can share their experiences to date and discuss the results and the current opportunities for further improvement. These training and consultation sessions provide opportunities for learning at the *workplace*. As the MAG project progresses, they gradually lead to a situation where similar discussions about improving classroom practices and professional issues become part of the daily work of the school. The aim of these training and consultation sessions is to make the teachers participating in the MAG Project to use adaptive instruction methods, teaching material, equipment and appropriate assessment techniques that are in line with the concept. Learning at the workplace is strengthened by the fact that within one school more than one teacher participate in the same development process and

the participants can also discuss their successes and challenges outside the training sessions. In those schools where this used to be unusual, the daily conversations in the staff room begin to have more and more professional content.

In order to support teacher learning, *resource books* are published on an annual basis. These contain practical examples and experiences from MAG schools; all relating to the topics each year focuses on. As the MAG Project is implemented in schools with differing physical-financial conditions and pedagogical cultures, a rich repertoire of examples should encourage those who work under difficult circumstances and give impetus to those whose technical conditions are better. The regularly spread Newsletter provides further opportunities for professional support and the own Web Site, which are both used for the dissemination of good practices. We expect that, within a short time, the schools will develop a need to exchange ideas, and later the whole region and eventually all teachers participating in the Project will be involved in such activities. MAG is prepared for that and as soon as such needs are articulated, we will be ready to provide the professional support needed. (i.e. support for organising regional meetings, assistance to peer visits, etc.)

### **2.1. The “unit” of pedagogical development is the school**

Teachers who change their daily practice should not only receive help from their colleagues (who face the same challenges and share their experiences), but also from the *heads of their educational institutions*. Therefore, the MAG Project involves the heads and deputies of all participating schools. Naturally, for these two members of the school management, it is not enough to learn the theoretical and practical aspects in the training provided to them. They also need to know how to support the teachers who renew their practice and how to extend their achievements to the whole institution. The heads of the 13 schools have their training together, on a national level. This way, peer learning can take place among the participants from the same region, and the heads making developments in similar fields can also exchange their experiences with their colleagues working in schools with different conditions.

As development efforts focus on learners and the classroom processes around learners, the teachers who come from the same school are viewed as the key partners of the MAG Programme. At institutional level, one of the main levers of development is that there should be more than one teacher from each school participating in the Programme. In this way they can provide each other regular support and – which is equally important – represent a *critical mass* from the perspective of staff development. At the same time - as it has been described in connection with supporting the teachers' work - teachers need the *support of the school management* in this process. This should be partly actual, personal support (e.g. confirmation through consultation) and partly raising the profile of the programme up to school level. In their training sessions, the heads of the schools learn, on the one hand, about the changes they can expect to see in the classroom practices of the teachers participating in the Project, as well as how to help the teachers who try new things. They also learn how the new approach can be later extended to the *organisation as a whole* (by incorporating it into the annual work plan, or extending it to other years of schooling, transposing it into the pedagogical programme of the school). To this end, we use *in-service training* for heads and deputies, and we also ensure that the school based training sessions organised for teachers are not limited to an activity of the teachers and the trainer only. The heads and deputies of the schools should know about the results of these training sessions and they should constantly build upon them. Another aspect of raising development to school level is gaining the *support of Local Education Officers (LEOs)*. They should view the Programme as an important, long-term development effort.

## **2.2. Schools can only improve in a sustainable manner in an environment where change is understood and supported**

The MAG participants come from three levels. This is a key feature of the programme. There are participants from a region where the LEOs encouraged schools to participate in the Project. This means that a kind of local, stimulating challenge has existed from the outset. In other places, the institutions realised that the MAG objectives coincided with the national policy objectives for education, and they deemed it important to create a supportive local environment. The Project requires the representatives of the LEOs to recognise the opportunities arising from this three-tiered structure and to make use of them with increasing awareness. They should know what medium term and long term local *objectives* could be achieved through the project. This will give them an explanation why the existence of the Project should be promoted across successive government cycles and why the results should be disseminated to other schools. The LEOs should have a set of tools which is adequate to their own conditions and can be used for *supporting* schools – including the organisation of local PR activities; supporting applications for larger funds or providing co-financing for them; informing the members of the local authority of the Project results and translating the results into a language they can understand, etc. In order to keep the institutions under *pressure*, local authorities can incorporate into their quality management programmes, or the terms of reference of their quarterly pedagogical assessments, etc. challenges which are in line with the MAG spirit. LEOs receive four days of training every year. These will provide an opportunity to recognise and accept the importance of the above and to find the right tools to enforce them. In these occasions, the LEOs may learn from each other's experiences, and they can also work together with the heads and deputies of the schools several times. This way, both parties are given an opportunity to learn the other party's perspectives and to reduce the element of mistrust in their relations.

This tri-partite approach takes into account both the local and the national development environment. On the one hand, MAG is in direct co-operation with the local stakeholders. On the other hand, the National Institute of Public Education, OKI, manages the process at meta-level due to its national function. The actual development results can be supported by redefining the objectives, requirements and funding opportunities existing in the national educational environment in such way that they can be applicable to the MAG Project (in most cases, this is achieved through training the trainers and the joint consultations of the trainers from the three levels). The continuous dissemination of results (web site, newsletter, presenting the Project at various conferences), can also have an impact on the national environment. Last but not least, describing and analysing the general experiences from the development activities may contribute to making the national practice of educational development more efficient and effective.

## **3. THE INTERESTS AND ACTIVITIES OF THOSE INVOLVED IN THE PROCESS OF CHANGE ALSO CHANGE AS THE PROCESS PROGRESSES**

The structure of the MAG Project is based on the Concerns Based Adaptation Model (CBAM). This is reflected by the objectives set for each project year, as well as the way the activities are organised under the Project. According to this model, individuals are mainly concerned with the *effects of change upon themselves* in the initial period of change. At this stage, the dominant activity is collecting information. In the next phase, the concern for the task and its accomplishment is in focus. The interests and activities are driven by this concern, and individuals start observing how others cope with similar tasks, what experiences they have about the same thing. The repeated trials and internal

refinements are followed by a phase where the impact of the development efforts and the further enhancements of those impacts are in the centre of the developers' attention.

In the initial phase of orientation and information, local dialogues were organised in each region with the involvement of the representatives of the LEOs and the heads of the institutions. After these conversations, all participants (including teachers who were considering joining the project) were given written information about the essence of adaptive education and their role in it. The official launching of the MAG Project in the form of a kick-off conference, where all teachers, heads and deputies of participating schools and LEOs were present, followed this. On this occasion, the Dutch trainers gave informative presentations on why and what sorts of changes are needed in the established and applied practice at the various levels. Then the teachers formed groups by regions. These groups, the group of the heads, deputies and the group of the LEOs had discussions where the group members raised their questions and doubts and tried to find answers with the help of the Hungarian and Dutch trainers.

The guiding principle of the programme is to make progress in small steps. Everybody should change their practice so much, as they are able to. The resource book published at the end of the first year intends to reinforce the belief that any change is valuable, no matter how small it may be (this is because in this phase, the participants mainly focus on their own personal concerns). As a rule, we try to avoid using Dutch examples in the training sessions in order to prevent remarks implying that this concept can only be implemented under the physical and financial conditions existing in the Netherlands. The conference organised at the end of the first year was the first occasion where all MAG participants have had an opportunity to learn from each other. As of the second year, we intend to provide opportunities for exchanging experiences within and among regions. We plan to set up a MAG Network by the end of the third year, and a study trip to the Netherlands is also scheduled for that year. This is because we can expect that the participants of the Project will be ready by that time to further improve the evolved practice, to make student learning even more effective and to raise meaningful questions relating to these.

The authors suggest the following topics for discussion:

- How it is possible to transform the meta-analysis of improvement practice into policy-relevant questions?
- What kind of experiences the professional supporters have had in the multilevel improvement process?
- What are the pitfalls and challenges?

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