

# RESEARCHING THE PROCESSES OF CHANGING THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

**Research was conducted for:** Franjo Golob Primary School Prevalje, Polje 4, 2391 Prevalje

**Implementing institutions:**

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## Brief description of the research

Since November 2014, a training programme on the non-violent communication approach (hereinafter: the NVC programme) has been implemented at one Slovenian primary school for the entire school staff, led by Marianne Göthlin, a certified NVC trainer from Sweden. The obligatory part for the entire school staff (teachers and school consultants) was carried out until August 2016, with the training continuing until the present day for those who decide themselves to participate (10 to 20 staff members). In the 2018/2019 school year, in accordance with the NVC principles, a multi-layered support programme was organised for pupils from two grades of the subject level of basic education (grade 6) and delivered by their class teachers.

The research consisted of two parts. One part was a quasi-experimental study of the impact of a 1-year multi-layered NVC programme on relevant psychological, social and behavioural indicators regarding the participating pupils. It encompassed a survey at the beginning and end of the school year (survey questionnaires for pupils, parents and class teachers), ongoing systematic recording of NVC activities by programme implementers, on-going evaluations by pupils and two post-hoc focus groups, i.e. a (self-selected) group of pupils participating in the programme and a group of the parents of those pupils, as well as a joint interview with both implementers.

Another part of the study consisted of semi-structured interviews conducted with all interested members of the school professional staff (84,4% participation rate). The participants were interviewed about about they understand and perform their role in the educational process via three (interrelated) aspects (teaching, relational, disciplinary), which factors support or hinder them the most in this process, and how they assess different aspects of the NVC programme. The interviews provided 962 transcribed pages (Times New Roman 12, single line spacing) that were analysed.

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Given the richness and ease of accessibility of existing literatures on cultivating safe, engaging and nurturing school environments, educational reform, organisational development and systemic transformation, **we offer a condensed summary of some of the principles** both present in the literature and arising from the experience and insights related to this research project, **which can help inform and guide future developmental efforts in the educational sphere.**

## Proposals for further projects

From the perspective of understanding the personal and social dynamics of and establishing a conducive context for **introducing changes in the school community**:

1. Given the inevitably turbulent nature of transformation, the uncertainty and danger accompanying it, conscious and systematic support of the organisational development process is foundational; it is advised to consider principles captured in the professional literature, related to the efficient functioning of groups (working towards common goals).
2. Inclusion of all relevant stakeholders (including the children) in phases of planning, delivering and evaluating the program, facilitated by a neutral third-party person or team holding relevant competencies and a legitimate mandate, with sufficient time, support and resources to provide the supportive infrastructure for the program's implementation.
3. Prior to introducing a new approach into a school community, the needs and expectations of all participants, the existing strengths and weaknesses, along with the climate must be surveyed. It is important to craft a shared meaning for the project: its aim, goals, principles, and long-term aspirations (the common vision). It is important that the school staff plans the journey together, both from the perspective of the content and work methods.
4. Throughout the project, a safe and open space is required for exploration of both positive and negative aspects (including insights, realisations, suggestions, celebrations as well as doubts, reservations, passive and active opposition to new initiatives, obstacles arising during the process...). In order to strengthen participants' feelings of inclusion, belonging, support and ownership proper possibilities for them to co-create the program are needed or at least their feedback should be collected, reflected and integrated in all phases of the process.
5. With a complex themes, such as the relational, educational and disciplinary aspects of a teacher's work, it is essential to iterate through phases of finding commonalities and common ground of understanding and interest, as well as sensitively acknowledging existing differences in views, values, beliefs, and accepting the differences in readiness for personal exploration and transformation, as well as (different) levels of relevant skills and

capacities (which might be initially unrecognisable or manifest themselves in nuances that later turn out to be essential).

6. Finally, a delicate aspect worth considering as a starting assessment prior to implementing such projects is an analysis of existing power relations – what are the (in)formal agents and networks of power and influence, and what is their attitude towards the proposed program?

Regarding the **design, delivery and implementation of training programs** (especially those addressing emotional and social competence):

1. As a starting point, it is useful to keep in mind the immense complexity of the dynamics of individual and collective human systems. Being aware and sensitive to psychological, social and organisational dynamics that transformative invitations induce, is vital. When addressing soft skills, beliefs and patterns, matters of personal and professional identity, human relationships and staff dynamics, a comprehensive understanding of intrapersonal, interpersonal, group and organisational dynamics is required (related to the macro context of the entire organisation, and the micro context of individuals and a group/collective). Without this consideration, regardless of the starting intentions, it is likely that considerable harm can result both for individual persons and the staff as a whole.
2. When designing the content of the program, it is very supportive for the participants learning experience and the integration of knowledge and practice (as well as for sustainable integration of the program with the existing system, connected organisations and institutions), to situate it within the local context of policies, customs, cultural norms, relevant (inter)national guidelines as well as contemporary scientific understanding.
3. Before committing to a choice of introducing an approach into the collective as a whole and contracting an implementation team, it should be carefully considered which (combination of) approaches best fits the needs/challenges of the given school community, and if required, designing different programs tailored to different sub-groups of the collective.
4. The training and facilitation methods (especially when addressing personal and relational themes), must be responsive to the needs and learning preferences of participants, as well as accommodating for differences in personality, allowing for a self-paced learning experience, supported by a clear and safe context for choosing what activities (not) to participate in, without (implicit or explicit) fear of retribution or rejection (especially when participants are working together as colleagues).
5. Ideally, training should be in the local language and some awareness of the working environment of the participants, or if that is not possible, expert translation (both from the perspective of language and content) should be provided. It is reasonable to provide a way to support the understanding (in terms of language and comprehension) of struggling participants in a way that does not hinder the learning experience of the group as a whole.

6. For learning transfer, it is necessary that the program addresses situations encountered by teaching professionals in their everyday work and supports them with gradual practice so to cultivate the capacities and embodied knowledge to act differently when faced with challenges (e.g. debriefings of video-recordings, realistic role-plays etc.).
7. When planning or evaluating a program it is crucial to bring awareness and reflection to the blind-spots, preconceived notions that we hold and sometimes protect, to the (un)conscious conflicts of interest.

In relation to the **research and evaluation principles**, consideration of the following points can increase its quality and usefulness:

1. A professional, well designed and executed research is essential both for supporting and refining the chosen approach/program itself, as well as grounding it in a scientifically acceptable evidence base, which is one of the prerequisites for scaling any initiative to the level of public policy/system reform.
2. Integrating the research aspect with the content aspect of the project's planning, delivery and evaluation can afford powerful synergies. As stated, ideally, ongoing expert evaluations are employed to inform and "course-correct" the design and delivery of the project as it is unfolding to avoid or ameliorate tensions and critiques, as well as identify and address unexpected opportunities.
3. Nowadays there is both a wealth and a fragmentation of different approaches and communities of practice, devoted to supporting human development and flourishing schools, as well as schools of thoughts and methodologies. If the conditions permit, it is advisable to include measurement instruments into one's research repertoire that are standardised and widely used, in addition to ones designed for the specific purposes and frameworks of the program. This enables the gradual forming of conceptual and empirical bridges between approaches.
4. If the intention is to assess whether the designed program is better at developing chosen capacities/traits/states in comparison with the current way of working, a randomised controlled trial (RCT) or carefully prepared process research is advised. In RCT research, special attention is warranted with regard to capturing the starting conditions of relevant indicators prior to introducing changes, as well as forming experimental and control groups in a way that is maximally comparable.
5. Research protocol needs to be elaborated from the perspective of *operationalisation of key metrics* (Are our measures capturing the processes/states/traits that we intend to strengthen/weaken?), *statistical validity* (Are the data we intend to gather and the analyses we intend to employ sufficient for assessing our hypotheses?), as well as *pragmatic*

*feasibility* (Will the research participants be able to fully participate in the designed research process, in addition to all other responsibilities they already hold?).