



**EFFeCT**

European Methodological  
Framework for Facilitating Teachers'  
Collaborative Learning



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# **CASE OF GOOD PRACTICE**

**(Local/community Level)**

**Collaborative Teacher Learning at Tirza Basic  
School (Latvia)**

## PORTRAIT

Tirza Basic School (Tirzas pamatskola) is one of the so called small schools in Latvia – school in the rural settlement with relatively small (and during the last decade significantly decreasing) number of students from grade 1 to the end of the compulsory education (basic school grade 9 in Latvia) and crucial role in the life of local community. Such schools are vital for providing access to education for rural children, especially from low income families and usually in addition to education function informally perform also other roles for local people.

Since 2009 one of the main goals for development of the school has been to make these diverse activities of school and teachers more visible and focused through transforming into a multi-functional education, culture, sports and social support center where versatile, sustainable education services are available, thus promoting public private partnership development and citizens' social activity. Instead of complaining about difficulties the school has realized that it has suitable infrastructure, experience and staff to become such education, culture and social support center for the local community.

As the assessment study carried out in 2011 reveals transformation of the Tirza Basic school has shown development of the basic features characterizing a community school and are as follows:

- Maintaining formal education as a basic function of a school (a possibility to provide access to quality education as close to the children's place of residence as possible);
- Wide range of target groups involved in school activities;
- Extended functions of a school (educational, social, cultural, etc.), with an emphasis on interest education for all the age groups (from pre-school to seniors) and life-long learning;
- Extended access to school resources and their usage for the needs of local community, full use of the school infrastructure – in the first part of the day, as well as in the second part;
- School as a civil society and community development centre.

In the process of transformation teachers play crucial role becoming agents of change; they learn and teach at the same time and involve in interaction with presence of personal, professional and civic identity (Tuna, 2015).

According to the school principal they were “looking for innovative solutions in developing the school capacity and dealing with problems topical for the community, encouraging involvement of different target groups into community development. We have acquired new knowledge and new experience in supporting families, promoting life-long learning and entrepreneurship, planning the community development, promoting the inhabitants' initiative and offered new opportunities for meaningful leisure time activities. It has not been easy and rapid change but along the way our teachers have benefited from this new experience tremendously”.



More information about Tirza Basic School can be found at <http://www.tirzasskola.lv/?p=955#more-955>; <http://parmainuskolas.lv/category/vidzeme/tirza/>; <http://parmainuskolas.lv/en/category/vidzeme/tirza/>. Video on community activities <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SEkn8KLpxW0>; Tirza for Active People (in English) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J5IvyzmNlpM>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bx6dlkicjt0> etc.

## CONTEXT

Tirza Basic School (Tirzas pamatskola) is an education institution established by Municipality Council. It is located in Tirza Rural Territory, Gulbene Municipality – in the North-east part of Latvia approximately 180 km from the capital city of Latvia, Riga. Gulbene Municipality consists of Gulbene town and 13 rural territories, including Tirza Rural Territory. 924 inhabitants had declared their place of living in Tirza Rural Territory on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2016.<sup>1</sup> There are no manufacturing companies in Tirza Rural Territory and its economic development is hindered by the lack of asphalted roads. The distance from Tirza Rural Territory to Gulbene town is 27 km. The main economic sectors in the rural territory are farming, logging, woodworking, services and small enterprises. The school and administration of the rural territory are the biggest employers in Tirza.<sup>2</sup>

Tirza Basic School offers education programs of basic and primary education as well as special education programs which integrate children with health problems in the school. The school provides also so called interest education programs for children after regular lessons and distance learning programs for adults. Preschool program is also within the portfolio of the schools offers. 118 students attended school in the study year 2014/2015 and there were 21 teachers ensuring the education process.<sup>3</sup> The school also offers dormitory and 24h service for the group of pre-school children. In the study year 2014/2015 19 students stayed in the dorms and five pre-school children attended 24h group. These children are mainly from large families with hard living conditions or from families where parents have shift work.<sup>4</sup>

In its self-evaluation report school has included its special offers, which are inclusive education, humane pedagogy, work in projects and interest programs, education programs for pre-school children and adults.<sup>5</sup> The school also actively promotes further education of teachers which includes acquiring new skills and knowledge. According to the self-evaluation report: “(..) teachers are informed about further education options, management of school encourages them to involve in education programs as well as attend and get information about experience of other schools. The school itself organizes further education courses by attracting resources from projects for education of teachers. All of the teachers are involved in teacher methodological associations of Gulbene Municipality (..). Workshops for exchange of experience have taken place at school for history, Latvian language, technology and science, primary school and pre-school teachers. Teachers, who have got the 4<sup>th</sup> quality level according to the national system

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<sup>1</sup>Website of Gulbene Municipality. Iedzīvotāji 2016.g. 1.janvārī. Available: <http://www.gulbene.lv/lv/nvd/iedz/1200-160101> (accessed 20.04.2016.)

<sup>2</sup> Tirzas pamatskola. Pašnovērtējuma ziņojums. 2014.gada septembris, p. 4. Available: [http://www.tirzasskola.lv/?page\\_id=33](http://www.tirzasskola.lv/?page_id=33) (accessed 20.04.2016.)

<sup>3</sup>Website of Tirza Elementary School. Vispārīga informācija. Available: [http://www.tirzasskola.lv/?page\\_id=24](http://www.tirzasskola.lv/?page_id=24) (accessed 20.04.2016.)

<sup>4</sup> Tirzas pamatskola. Pašnovērtējuma ziņojums. 2014.gada septembris, p. 4. Available: [http://www.tirzasskola.lv/?page\\_id=33](http://www.tirzasskola.lv/?page_id=33) (accessed 20.04.2016.)

<sup>5</sup> Tirzas pamatskola. Pašnovērtējuma ziņojums. 2014.gada septembris, p. 5. Available: [http://www.tirzasskola.lv/?page\\_id=33](http://www.tirzasskola.lv/?page_id=33) (accessed 20.04.2016.)



share their experience and lead methodological workshops for teachers of Gulbene and other municipalities.”<sup>6</sup>

The school is also active in implementing different projects that gives teachers opportunities to acquire new skills and knowledge that can be useful both for fulfilling direct job duties and that can contribute to development of teacher personalities. Projects within the Soros Foundation – Latvia (SFL) initiative “Change Opportunities for Schools” have been especially important. They were implemented in years 2009 - 2010 and 2012 – 2013 and made a significant contribution to development of school and professional and personal growth of teachers. With the help of these projects school developed as a multifunctional community center promoting the development and wellbeing of whole rural territory. There were different activities in these projects, which “significantly changed perception on what the school can and cannot do and in what form it can work.”<sup>7</sup> Significant contribution of projects is also promotion and establishment of cooperation between teachers, local inhabitants, students, their parents, local NGOs and local government in a way that significantly changed traditional relationship models and gave opportunity to see each other as a partner, from whom it is possible to learn something new.

The main project activities were educational classes and workshops for diverse groups of local population, lead by teachers as well as other people, improvement of leadership and civic participation, efforts to broaden opportunities for active lifestyle, activities to promote tourism and entrepreneurship, establishment of education program for learning businessbasics, establishment of services for pre-school children of early years “Babies’ school” (Bēbīšu skola), informal classes and activities for families, “backyard celebrations” when students went to visit senior citizens, living in the distant settlements, excursions and field trips to explore local neighborhood etc.<sup>8</sup>

## METHODOLOGY

In order to get information on good practice examples of collaborative learning of teachers and other local stakeholders, analysis of literature and internet resources was carried out and two telephone interviews were conducted with the principle of Tirza Basic School Svetlana Ziepniece.

Tirza Basic School was chosen for this research because of the successful experience and cooperation researchers had with this school during the SFL initiative “Change Opportunities for Schools”. Tirza Basic School was one of the most successful and visible examples of school transformation to become a resource for development of local community. It was also largely due to the fact that principal of the school and the whole school team directly involved in the initiative put a lot of emphases to reflection on what

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<sup>6</sup> Tirzas pamatskola. Pašnovērtējuma ziņojums. 2014.gada septembris, p. 30. Available: [http://www.tirzasskola.lv/?page\\_id=33](http://www.tirzasskola.lv/?page_id=33) (accessed20.04.2016.)

<sup>7</sup> Interviewwithprincipleof Tirza ElementarySchool SvetlanaZiepniece.

<sup>8</sup> Website of SFL initiative „ChangeOpportunitiesforSchools”. Tirzas pamatskola kā daudzfunkcionāls izglītības, kultūras, sporta un sociālā atbalsta centrs. Available: <http://parmainuskolas.lv/category/vidzeme/tirza/> (accessed20.04.2016.)

is the main purpose of the new activities and how they can create more sustainable change.

During the data gathering process on the experience of Tirza Basic School regarding organization of collaborative teacher learning, information was obtained on several activities, which can be considered as good practice examples on how teachers can learn through collaboration. Although teacher collaborative learning was not purposefully organized in these examples and it happened in a way indirectly and as a “by-product”, they reflect new, innovative forms of cooperation among teachers, between school and teachers and between school, teachers and other local stakeholders that lead to accumulation of new knowledge and skills and development of school as a significant community resource. Through regular participation in different projects and other school-and/or community led activities teachers increasing realized that personal and civic aspects of their personality also influence quality of their direct professional performance. Activities, organized by the SFL for the project teams from all involved schools always modeled and encouraged setting goals, looking for meaning and reflection on process and achieved results. Same pattern Tirza Basic School started to implement in the school for all teachers and other involved partners, so through cooperation and sharing learning became more internalized and sustainable.

If this kind of examples will be promoted and implemented more, significant experience will be accumulated and both Tirza Basic School and other schools will be able to learn from these examples and in future make plans for purposeful collaborative learning with similar activities.

Since in case of Tirza Basic School instead of one good practice several examples of their activities are described this report includes several step backs from the chapter length and sequence defined in the research guidelines. In order to better describe the content of activities implemented by Tirza Basic School, the chapter of cases of good practices is longer and includes both information on practice and learning. Accordingly other parts of the report (“Participation”, “Depth”, “Equity”, “Facilitators” and “Barriers”) are shorter, more general and include information that relates to all implemented projects and activities of Tirza Basic School described in the chapter “Practice and Learning”.

## **PRACTICE AND LEARNING**

This chapter describes projects implemented in Tirza Basic School which included collaborative teacher learning. In addition to overview of the main activities of each project a description is given on how the particular practice promoted teacher and other stakeholder collaborative learning and what knowledge all the involved partners obtained.

### Project “Young European Volunteer at School”

For three years a project “Young European Volunteer at School” takes place at Tirza Basic School. The school is accredited as an institution which has the right to host young volunteers from European Union. For two years there was a girl working at school from Germany, this school year a girl from Portugal lives and works in Tirza. Although this

experience includes cooperation outside local and even national level, the main project activities took place at school and local community providing students, teachers and school in general new and unprecedented experience that other educational institutions can also learn from.

The school got information about opportunities to collaborate with these young volunteers from other European countries while working in the SFL initiative “Change Opportunities for Schools”. The school prepared proposal together with Gulbene Municipality Council so that the young person who is coming to work at Tirza Basic School would have broader opportunities to involve also in other activities and organizations and get to know more people of Gulbene Municipality. These young volunteers get a place of living in Gulbene town and on regular basis they arrive at Tirza Basic School to involve in its activities.

In the first two years of the project foreign girls did the volunteer work only at Tirza Basic School working as teacher assistants in lessons. They are involved in organization of different extracurricular activities for students (hiking trips, excursions etc.) and project activities. Having such teacher assistant requires additional attention from the teacher but at the time provides a lot of opportunities for growth and improvement starting with language and communication skills up to applying new informal education methods etc.

This year there is a new approach in the project. The volunteer girl has skills and knowledge of rehabilitation of children with health problems and old people and she works both at Tirza Basic School and local care center with old people and small children. At school the girl works with five and six year old children teaching them English on particular days and with older children by involving in different workshops and events organized at school.

There are very good reviews of the work of volunteer girl from the care center, school children and their parents. Therefore the school gives its students opportunities to communicate with this young volunteer as much as possible so that they can improve their daily conversation skills of English in informal environment and also cooperation skills with representatives of other culture and nationality.

When involving in school activities, young volunteers have to cooperate closely with teachers. If joint classes or extracurricular activities are organized, teachers and young volunteers have to agree on common goals, tasks, study materials, achievable results and evaluation of students. Therefore the biggest benefits for teachers of Tirza Basic School from the joint activities with these young volunteers are improved English skills and cooperation skills but it also encourages teachers to look at their work from fresh perspective and gives wider outlook about Europe.

Tirza is a small rural territory and principle of Tirza Basic School Svetlana Ziepniece admits that a considerable part of teachers initially have been uncomfortable or even afraid from contact with persons who do not speak Latvian and who do not belong to the local environment and culture. This is why communication with these young volunteers are of special importance and helps to overcome psychological barriers and acquire new skills. Besides these skills young volunteers introduce new forms of informal education

and show teachers different methods for the work with children in that way supplementing the traditional methods used at school.

Seeing encouraging attitude from the school administration and positive feedback from students and their parents teachers feel more motivated to engage in new experience and gradually become more relaxed and open what helps them to understand their students better in the situations when they meet challenges.

#### Project of the State Employment Agency “Internship of Youth”

Similar to young volunteer project from 2010 till 2013 Tirza Basic School implemented a project “Internship of Youth” in cooperation with State Employment Agency during which young people living in Tirza Rural Territory had opportunities to have 3 – 6 month long internships in Tirza Basic School.

During this project the school provided young people a place for first work experience and together with teachers they organized different interest education classes and extracurricular activities, for example, untraditional hiking trips. Also in these cases teachers had to cooperate closely with these young volunteers to organize successfully intended activities. As a result of this cooperation teachers learned from these young trainees not only new methods of informal education but also learned to accept different, untraditional approach instead of familiar practices. The principle of school admits that in the result of this project the environment of school became more democratic but the thinking of teachers – more flexible. Therefore also the students had their benefits as they were given opportunities to learn with new, more effective methods.

Gain was mutual as the young persons who had their first work experience at Tirza Basic School got significant skills and knowledge related to work life, for example, they learned what it means to work in a group of different people and collaborate with colleagues and employer, observe the established rules, propose innovations and ideas in appropriate but firm way etc. After this internship all involved youngsters found permanent job or successfully continued studies they had started.

#### Projects for improving teacher leadership skills

In order to promote and develop leadership skills of teachers, different projects are developed and implemented with the support of school. The direct goals of the projects are related to education of youth but besides that leadership skills of teachers are improved. Thus all activities have more than one objective and results have more long-term impact. Principle of Tirza Basic School thinks that “each teacher has to have characteristics of a leader, because otherwise he can’t be a leader of a class, but teacher skills are at different levels, therefore they have to be developed and improved.”

For development and implementation of these projects initiative groups are organized to promote cooperation and diversity of experiences. There are attempts to include teachers, local youngsters, who have graduated Tirza Basic School, students of school and sometimes also their parents. This is very important to have diverse experiences in the groups representing target audiences and stakeholders of the intended activities. When



the group is formed, in collaborative activities it looks for ideas of new activities and initiatives to make the life of their place of living more interesting and pleasant. The principle of school admits that this is a very successful form of collaborative learning of all involved persons and especially valuable for teachers who have an opportunity to involve deeper in the life of the community and better understand their students and their families. Teachers also apply and improve their skills and competences which may not be directly utilized in the day to day classroom work, such as their hobbies.

One of such projects was “Cloud Pushers” (“Mākoņustūmēji”) implemented in 2013 (financial support - “Grassroots Europe for Local Wellbeing”). Its initiators were young members of local NGO “KāpNes”. In order to write a project application a group of teachers was formed, around which young people gathered who had graduated from school and those who were still studying. Teachers delegated duties of writing project to these young persons in that way teaching them and improving project writing skills themselves. In addition to that in these projects teachers learn to delegate students different tasks and as principle of school admits “not to play the main role all the time, because it is important for teachers to learn to go side by side and these projects very well allows doing it.”

The main activities of the project “Cloud Pushers” were informal studies (workshops) for young persons of event organization, community clean up, during which territory improvement took place in Tirza Rural Territory, campaign of graffiti drawings and public sports day of Tirza where besides traditional sports games other activities were organized, including board games for those who wanted to participate in more quiet activities. Videos were developed to document activities and their results which also serve as evidence and learning material for other students and youngsters.

#### Project “Learning Partnerships” of Tirza Basic School and NGO “KāpNes” in the Sub-programme of EU Lifelong Learning Programme “Grundtvig”

One of the examples of collaboration between school and local NGO during which English classes for teachers and local youth were organized was a project “Learning Partnerships” of Tirza Basic School and NGO “KāpNes” in the sub-programme of EU Lifelong Learning Programme “Grundtvig”. The main activities of NGO “KāpNes” are related to adult education. Its main goals are solving social and economic problems by public and private sector partnerships, sustainable development of territory with local and other economic resources and promotion of education of inhabitants of all ages.<sup>9</sup>

English language classes for teachers and youngsters took place in 2013 and 2014 twice a month except for summer period. Six teachers of Tirza Basic School with different level of English knowledge participated in these classes. Some of teachers could say something in English but others had to learn everything from the beginning. Classes took place in informal environment after lessons in school’s premises. Separately there were also English classes for 12 local youngsters.

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<sup>9</sup>Website of Latvian Rural Forum. Biedrība “KāpNes”. Available: <http://lf.partneribas.lv/archives/1129> (accessed 22.04.2016.).

A volunteer girl from NGO “KāpNes” was the teacher of these classes during which participants learned the basics of the language and improved their conversational skills. The principle of school gives very positive assessment of this collaboration with NGO, during which teachers could improve their English skills and knowledge. Also teachers themselves are glad for this experience and admit that improved language skills have been useful both in communication with foreign partners of different projects and school guests and they have also helped to communicate with family members and friends living abroad and in search for study materials on the Internet. From the professional perspective it was very important for teachers to accept the role of the learner, especially in communication with younger person, probably former student thus overcoming perception that the teacher always has to be more knowledgeable and in the authority position in the society. Experiencing learner’s perspective also increases empathy and sensitivity towards difficulties that students can feel in the learning situations and give some ideas what methods can be applied to build self-esteem, persistence etc.

## **PARTICIPATION**

When describing teacher involvement in projects and collaborative learning, principle of Tirza Basic School tells that since SFL initiative “Change Opportunities for Schools” a strong teacher team – leader team has developed who are the main initiators and implementers of main activities and projects both at the school level and community. They also have become active in attracting cooperation partners, for example, local NGOs. When telling about hers as principle’s role she admits: “In our case a principle works as accumulator, (..) I try to keep interest for these things, but those who do it are those teachers, teacher group, who engage in those activities because they see the point to do so, they see benefit for themselves and their job and people with whom they interact.” Besides most active teachers there are other teachers, who join and involve in certain activities.

The principle tells that “in our case there are not teachers, who do not involve at all, there are more active, less active, but everyone participates”. This is definitely new featured created during long term participation in the structured cooperation where each opinion, action and reflection counts and is of great value. Teachers admit that they feel more holistic and feel that what they do really matters.

Asked to describe teachers according to the level of their involvement in projects and different activities, principle of school affirms that “one third of teacher group, around 30% are those who are more active, who both initiate projects and involve in NGOs, who participate in all previously mentioned activities”. Accordingly two thirds are those teachers who more or less actively participate in some activities or projects according to their interests or if they are invited by others. Together with teachers also other employees of school and pre-school education program participate in certain activities and events, for example, teacher assistants, who work in pre-school education institution and student dorms. Kitchen staff and cleaning ladies also involve in different activities and they develop more professional relationship with teachers as they belong to the same organization - what is beneficial for both sides.

In projects, where cooperation between young people take place, in addition to students from school also representatives of local youth, who study or work outside Tirza Basic School, actively participate next to each other. The principle of school tells that there are 5-6 more active young persons (which is good number taking into account population of Tirza) who contribute their ideas, time and practical skills in many projects and have become active patriots of their home town and community. But there are also less active youngsters who participate only in some projects according to their interests. The more active representatives of local youth are graduates of school who voluntarily involved in school's work during project of State Employment Agency "Internship of Youth" and since then continue to maintain good collaboration with Tirza Basic School. At the beginning they have been helpers to the teachers and it has been interesting learning process for both sides; later on some youngsters have become independent group facilitators or become permanent staff in the school.

In certain projects and activities Tirza Basic School collaborates also with local companies and NGOs. One of those NGOs is Organization for Development of Tirza Rural Territory (Tirzas pagasta attīstības biedrība - <http://www.tirzasbiedriba.lv/>) which has very actively involved in promotion of school's development. The organization was established in 2004 and also several teachers are active members of it. Principle of Tirza Basic School tells that "with the help of this organization we got "second breath" and changed (...). Changes, that have taken place inside school, to a great extent happened because of this NGO". Organization attracts additional financing for school, helps to develop infrastructure of school and in cooperation with school implements different projects.

As regarding teachers NGO provides an opportunity to demonstrate civic engagement what is very much needed for successful civic and citizenship education. Teachers do not teach about civic participation formally from the textbook; they are involved in specific activities together with their students, their families and other people from the community. Teachers acquire new knowledge and skills from each other as well as from other members of the community what is also beneficial for managing diversity in the classroom and school in general. The "Project Citizen" (Participate and Influence) methodology has been used to identify community problems, possible solutions, to choose the most appropriate solution and to develop action plan. Teachers have learned how to use this methodology themselves in the interactive workshops engaging in collaboration and reflection. After that some teachers have applied the framework from the methodology in their work teaching specific subject area.

## **DEPTH**

As already mentioned before, involvement in projects of the initiative "Change Opportunities for Schools" made a great contribution for school's development. This experience also facilitated emotional and creative growth of school, teachers and other employees, as well as development of joint understanding of how to work together so that school's work would have the best results not only for growth of students, but for growth of teachers themselves and for the development of whole local community. It inspired

school to avoid fears and try out new creative methods to reach its goals and promote collaborative learning.

This experience is very well described by the story of principle of Tirza Basic School on school’s involvement in initiative “Change Opportunities for Schools” and its way to common goals: “There were big discussions when we applied and were included in the initiative “Change Opportunities for Schools”; then we looked for our special characteristics with which we can be interesting to ourselves and others. At that time going through project activities we made conclusions that in rural territory school cannot be detached from the life of community. If it is detached, it is not interesting. Therefore we discussed a lot – teachers, employees, all together. We even had a small forum of ideas, workshops for generating ideas of our own, then we organized them together with inhabitants of surrounding rural territory; now there have been three citizens’ forums, which school has organized in order to understand what is important for local people, for ourselves and on what can we agree regarding our future life. There was like this – if we want to have wholesome, interesting life both at school and at our place, where we live, we have to understand and learn that nobody will bring anything to us. How you feel yourself, how your children, who study here, feel and how people, who live here feel, depend on the level of our activity. It is our inner agreement reached in big discussions, therefore we continue to work.” Such conclusions also influenced teachers’ attitude to their work; they started to establish better relationship with families of their students and students themselves seeing success or challenges of students within the more holistic knowledge about their situation, personal characteristics and interests etc.

Traditionally functioning school	School as a multifunctional community center
Working with parents	Cooperation and partnership with parents and other family members
Offer things that are skillful to perform putting forward specific conditions (when, what, how, for whom etc.)	Needs-based action taking into account the local context, needs and interests of local people
Demand (expect) resources from the state, municipality and parents	Make resources (intellectual and physical) available at the school accessible as public resources for all society, shares them with the local community
Stand apart from the community in the physical and content meaning (locked doors, closed teaching process in the school/classroom, activities only for people who are directly connected with the school etc.)	Uses community resources for learning, development of students’ competences and civic participation

(Tuna, 2015)

In general it can be concluded that Tirza Basic School has implemented transition to the new model of school acting as a community resource centre and it has influenced teachers’ collaboration among themselves as well as with the members of the local community.

## EQUITY

Principle of Tirza Basic School admits that any interested person has opportunities to involve and participate in projects implemented at school and in their activities: “But we also don’t turn against those, who don’t want [to involve]. People are different – more open, less open. We try to promote this thing, but don’t want to make it mandatory, so

that a person would feel under pressure that he must involve in all activities, but there are no such teachers, who don't involve anywhere. (..) To motivate them to involve, we try to make it interesting and carry away them with this idea.”

In order to ensure information on opportunities to participate each project has publicity activities. After successfully implemented projects gratitude is expressed to people, who were involved. In the conclusion of especially significant projects their implementers have received gratitude diplomas from school or in response to school's request from Council of Rural Territory or Gulbene Municipality. In such way the attempts and hard work of teachers or other active representatives of local community are publicly evaluated, ensuring satisfaction and providing motivation for further work.

## **FACILITATORS**

When describing facilitating factors for teacher involvement in activities of mutual cooperation and collaborative learning, the principle of school first of all mentions the team of active teachers, positive and supportive atmosphere among employees, desire and sense of duty to involve and participate in different activities: “I think that here it is important to what extent people are aware of their participation in activities that take place. I guess it is called democratic participation. I'm afraid to affirm that we are very democratic, I don't know how it looks from the outside, but at least we try a lot to [promote] this participation both in teachers, in children and in parents, so that there would be sense of participation and responsibility for what we are doing.”

In addition to that the principle of school positively assesses the desire and readiness of teachers and other representatives of local community to work without additional remuneration: “We do a lot voluntarily because it is necessary to us and we want to do it. I don't say that everyone wants to do it, there are people, who don't want to do such things, but majority is ready to be open and work not only for money.”

The principle of school also mentions the benefits that the work in small school has and emphasizes the openness of school to new experience: “We are small school, where everyone knows everyone well. We can react quickly to needs. In big group of people or in big school there is certain hierarchy for that, there are other benefits. But we react to needs faster, maybe we are more flexible. People are not afraid to speak about these needs, that there is such necessity. Maybe there is also openness that promotes such things.”

According to the gathered information not only openness of school and management of school and their ability to listen to necessities of teachers is important, but also the openness of teachers themselves to new experience and desire to improve their knowledge and skills. The principal is happy for the enthusiasm of her teachers, who despite big workload are interested to acquire new knowledge, for example, in the field of new technologies: “(..) I look at teachers and I am happy. 4-5 teachers are sitting now in webinars and learning more about technologies, one is teacher of chemistry, other – teacher of primary school, teacher of geography who maybe don't have the direct need for that but he does that. All of these teachers are also not so young. In my opinion that is fantastic. The openness of teachers is achieved in this way, they are ready to change. We

don't have to fight that new things are coming and we don't have to force to do it. Our environment has changed and teachers are very open and ready to do many good things.”

In addition to the previously mentioned, facilitating factor is also modern environment and good infrastructure, which the school has as a result of attracted financing from different projects. Accordingly it allows teachers and students to implement new, creative initiatives.

However in the result of projects not only environment is improved but the school and its employees have got significant experience and knowledge that allows continuing realization of creative initiatives. Also in this case the principle of school especially evaluates the experience of projects in the initiative “Change Opportunities for Schools”: “Each project has had its place and special character. *Change Opportunities* definitely was the beginning for everything and we learned a lot, we learned, we grew as organization, as personalities, as leaders by working in this project and by broadening our horizon and knowledge on how we can work and what we can do. Of course also this financial support that we got in order to implement those activities, to start them. All of the other projects then had some specific task, what was necessary.”

## **BARRIERS**

When evaluating barriers that hinder implementation of different projects or cooperation and collaborative learning principle of Tirza Basic School teachers, firstly, external factors were mentioned relating to unstable political initiatives and lack of clear vision for future: “Barriers are external threats, which are logical, you don't feel safe for future (..). The schools lack stability at the moment, you don't understand your future, vision, for how long you can plan the thing you do at the moment or when you do it, you don't really know whether it will be for further five years, one year or two years.”

In the opinion of principle of Tirza Basic School barriers can be related also to the situation that there are different opinions in the society and not always it is possible to understand each other and positively evaluate intentions and ideas of other person: “Barriers could be the thing, which is in all schools and in society, that not always people understand you, not always your best intentions are understood as your best intentions. There are things that are misunderstood (..).” There is no common agreement what kind of school is the best: the one with selected students, high academic achievements and strict or formal relationship among students and teachers, or the one where spirit of cooperation prevails both among students, students and teachers and teachers themselves. Schools such as Tirza Basic School are happy and skillful to accept every child from surrounding community or even other places and to help; meanwhile one can hear remarks also in the public channels of communication that this is not good feature of the school but something that may question “quality of teaching”.

While learning together, the teacher gradually changes his/her position from the dominating role to the participant's role, and further on – to the position of an actively reflecting practitioner recognizing changes in the professional identity as a process and product within the overall activities of the professional development (Charlier et al., 2001). Extending the partnership with the community the teacher's perception of the



surrounding environment improves and becomes more positive, and it is essentially meaningful, especially in the situation of Latvia when in the public discourse the quality of education in small schools is sometimes questioned. It is important that the teacher does not feel as a passive victim of the circumstances but is looking for opportunities to influence the situation taking advantage of the existing opportunities and through professional pedagogical work and civic attitude and participation.

As one more hindering factor the principle of school Svetlana Ziepniece mentions lack of financial resources. However at the same time she admits that it is possible to find opportunities for implementation of any good idea despite different external factors: “Obstacle could be one of things that there are more ideas than resources to implement them. Maybe we are naive optimists, but we don’t complain much. I can’t name obstacles that could not be overcome. Of course, everything depends on the will of politicians and on economics, on everything else. (..) but we were taught in the project or maybe it is the philosophy of life – if there is an idea, it will be possible to find money. It usually happens like this and not in a way that there is money and then there will be an idea. If we won’t find money there, we will find in other place. If we will not find money, it was a bad idea. We live according to this principle. Everything happens, if there is a wish to do it.”

Analyses of the Tirza example confirms findings in the theories and education policy documents that the role and functions of the teacher in the context of rapid changes in the 21st century are undergoing drastic transformation that is closely connected with the changes in the society at large, and specifically, in the school as an institution. Therefore, meaningful and sustainable transformation of the school into a multifunctional community center is possible only as a result of conscious changes in the attitude and practice of the teacher.