

## 6 Reflection Cycle – from Collective Ideas to Joint Action

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In School-In, the teaching staff used the Reflection Cycle as a follow-up method directly after the Dialogue Café (chapter 5) to narrow and implement specific measures derived from the ideas that came to light in the Dialogue Café. In many projects, this crucial last step – sustainable implementation – often fails (Pinto & Slevin, 1988). This chapter starts with the scope and previous work with the Reflection Cycle, from which School-In has profited greatly. Subsequently, we describe how this working method was adapted and utilised in School-In to foster inclusive processes in school. The chapter closes with reflections on implications for further research and school development.

### 6.1 Origin of the Reflection Cycle and previous work

The Reflection Cycle is a working method based on the idea of general problem-solving processes (Betsch, Funke, & Plessner, 2011), with its underlying principles having been used in various professional development programmes. We adapted the idea from the German teacher professional development programme SINUS for Primary School (2009–2013). In this programme, the Reflection Cycle was used by teams of mathematics and science teachers in primary school to improve mathematics and science education (Fischer, Kobarg, Dalehefte & Trepke, 2012; Fischer & Rieck, 2014).

The Reflection Cycle approach was derived from the portfolio method (Meentzen, 2009) and the logbook approach (Fischer, Trepke, Dedekind, Rieck, & Prenzel, 2010) used in the previous SINUS programmes. It consists of the five steps: (1) identification of the development area; (2) definition of goals; (3) agreement on measures; (4) implementation of measures; and (5) documentation of and reflection on measures and effects. If necessary, the cycle can be repeated. The value of the Reflection Cycle for school development processes in SINUS for Primary School is well-documented. Trepke (2014) investigated 449 documentations of 79 groups of teachers working with the Reflection Cycle. Core findings indicate that reflections for school development have to be fostered, prompted, and supported regardless of teachers' experience; otherwise, they will not occur. This is in line with other research, such as the scientific work of Wackerhausen (2009), who claims that higher-order reflections have to be

triggered. Trepke (2014) also found that the quality of the work with the Reflection Cycle is directly related to the acceptance and satisfaction of the development programme (Trepke, 2014). Therefore, we aimed to establish good framework conditions for reflection and to elicit tacit knowledge, acceptance, and satisfaction among the participants to ensure good quality.

## 6.2 The application of the Reflection Cycle in School-In

The Reflection Cycle helps teaching staff to generate written, specific ideas and agreements on how their measures can be realised in practice. Documenting the process in this manner should contribute to more specific measures and to a sense of ownership and responsibility for the measures developed. Furthermore, when the process is documented, individual responsibilities become clear and more binding.

Our choice to use the Reflection Cycle working method in School-In was first and foremost based on its empirical justification and the findings from SINUS. In addition, our choice was based on its many similarities with another model – the SMTTE model (Håstein, 2013). The participating schools in School-In were familiar with the SMTTE model from the programme ‘Inclusive Learning Environment’ (Knutepunkt Sørlandet, 2015).

In School-In, the Reflection Cycle was further developed and adjusted according to the intention for the project. Unlike previous programmes, we adapted the model to facilitate implementation of measures concerning the entire school (independent of year level or subject area) and enable work on topics such as inclusion and expectations. Therefore, the participants in the Dialogue Café and Reflection Cycle groups were mixed, consisting of teachers and paraprofessionals from different year levels and subjects.

Furthermore, the Reflection Cycle was always used following the Dialogue Café in order to narrow the ideas and knowledge from the Café to specific measures that could be taken into action. These measures were developed jointly through systematic collaborative work. In the Reflection Cycle, the groups worked together to select ideas, develop measures, and finally, to create plans for implementing the measures and discuss what kinds of effects to look for in their school on a daily basis.

This reflection and resulting documentation were also interesting for research purposes, but most importantly, it provided a scaffold and guide for the staff in evaluating their own progress, reflections, and outcome.

## 6.3 A typical run of the Reflection Cycle in School-In

The starting point for the Reflection Cycle was the development area and the pool of ideas generated in the Dialogue Café. To counteract some groups behaving passively or remaining at a descriptive level, we helped them in their documentation by using prompts (Trepke, 2014). These prompts were provided in log sheets, reminding



**Figure 6.1:** The procedure of the Reflection Cycle (in adaption to Trepke, 2014, p. 35)

the teaching staff of what would happen in each step. The advantages of these log sheets were twofold; they helped to introduce this new method to the teaching staff in School-In in addition to being used as a means of documenting the steps of the Reflection Cycle process.

Each group was asked to pick certain ideas from the Dialogue Café to begin planning a measure. We encouraged the teaching staff to be as hands-on and specific as possible. They needed to consider their possibilities in terms of available personal resources, financial resources, and time. We also reminded them that small measures that could be repeated on a regular basis (e.g., daily) would be more likely to have a substantial impact than a major one-time event. In addition, we highlighted the importance of integrating the measures into the school's routines.

The Reflection Cycle in School-In consisted of five main steps, which were provided in written form for the teaching staff group work (see the appendix).

In step 1, the group selected an area that was related to the common development area of the whole school, based on the ideas that emerged during the Dialogue Café discussions. If the school's development area was 'jointly inspire students to engage and participate using the local community', one area could, for example, be enhancing 'student's engagement' in class.

In step 2, the group defined and specified the goal they wanted to achieve, for example ‘relating the learning content to the school’s local context’. A short plenary presentation about the development area aiming at ‘student engagement and participation’ had informed the participants of relevant theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Prenzel, 1995) in advance. The School-In team had provided the teaching staff with information explaining that the school’s local context could be helpful for all students to understand the relevance of the learning content, and that relevance is important for students’ learning and motivation processes (Dalehefte & Canrinus, 2022; Dalehefte & Midtsundstad, 2019). Therefore, the staff were familiar with the educational and inclusive relevance of using the local context in instruction.

In step 3, the group defined the measure, for instance, ‘using examples from the school’s local context in instruction’. The group also defined criteria for identifying effects in terms of changes in student engagement. These criteria should be as specific and objective as possible. Writing ‘students are more motivated’ (table 6.1, example schools A and B) was not sufficient; the criteria should be more concrete, for instance ‘more students than usual are actively engaged’, indicated by observance of raised hands, active participation, etc. After step 3, the School-In researchers left the groups to work on steps 4 and 5 on their own for three to five weeks. As a daily reminder of the teaching staff’s ‘homework’ for School-In, posters with all measures created by all groups were hung on the wall in the staff room to attract attention and encourage the teaching staff to talk about the measures and inform each other of progress and perceived success, as well as pitfalls experienced during the implementation.

Step 4 was the implementation phase for the measures that had been planned. In the example presented, the teachers tried to draw parallels to the local context in their teaching. This was done by using local examples, such as a local company in social sciences, local natural resources in natural science, a local author in Norwegian, explaining distances in mathematics by relating to local and well-known places, etc.

Finally, in step 5, the group met again and reflected together on their experiences. They documented this in the log-sheet and evaluated the results. The groups were then asked to provide ‘feedback reports’ by email and to present the work at the next School-In plenary session. The term ‘reflection cycle’ implies that the process does not end after step 5 but could be repeated (step 6) with new or improved elements if the group was not satisfied with the measures or if their goals were not reached. The method supports group reflection processes, in addition to contributing to post-reflections by the teaching staff, that is, evaluating the measures and intentions after the implementation took place. Some groups chose to repeat the cycle, whereas others were more eager to try out a new measure in a new cycle.

## 6.4 Lessons learnt from the Reflection Cycle in School-In

In School-In, we also experienced some challenges that can be highlighted for possible replication purposes. The transition from the work with the Dialogue Café to the

work with the Reflection Cycle involved a great deal of work, not least because the School-In visits were always scheduled after the regular school day and the staff slowly got tired. Under these circumstances, the staff members were expected to switch to a new method and immerse themselves in specific measures. We had to emphasise that the measures should be as specific as possible, and that they should be realisable within the next few weeks. We noticed that the measures tended to be too comprehensive and demanding; thus, we encouraged the staff members to be realistic about their resources and to choose smaller measures that could be implemented in everyday school life. This helped them to see that small measures could have a great impact if implemented in the staff's daily routines.

Altogether, the project generated about 70 different measures. Table 6.1 gives an overall impression of the reflection cycle measures and examples of goals and measures chosen by selected schools.

**Table 6.1:** Examples of topics chosen for the Reflection Cycle by innovation schools

School/ group	Overall school development area	Group goal	Group measures	Indicators
School A	A place for every-one – co-creation of community and the school's reputation	All students should experience being able to contribute to the (everybody's) learning outcome of the class	(1) 'Hand over' talks between teachers with information on what students have contributed to in other subjects during the school day (2) Picking students individually based on talents, to let them contribute according to their strengths	(1) More active participation of all students (2) Prouder and more content students (3) A better climate in the classroom (4) Classmates speak more kindly of each other
School B	Jointly inspire students to engage and participate using the local community	Use of a variety of teaching methods to better address and involve students	(1) Ask colleagues about their teaching methods (2) Feedback on colleagues' teaching (mentoring) (3) Use the time of the joint meeting for this topic	(1) more positive feedback from students themselves about the teaching (2) more student participation

School/ group	Overall school development area	Group goal	Group measures	Indicators
School C	Together on common expectations for the school's student role	Change of teachers' attitudes towards their students ('Students will contribute if they get the opportunity') Justification: The new general curriculum requires that the student view in teaching be actively respected	(1) Students will experience the lesson as meaningful [to them] (2) Teachers make use of productive questions ('why' questions) (3) The lesson content is adapted to the students' needs	(1) Students experience mastering tasks [and talk about it] (2) Students, together with the teacher, wonder [about learning content/results] (3) Teachers' attitudes become a common thread in the reflection talks between staff [at meetings, etc]

Ensuring that the teaching staff kept up with the intervention was challenging. Between the School-In visits on the innovation days, the groups worked independently with steps 4 and 5. This was a crucial part of the intervention, and we knew from former research that this point in the process was vulnerable, especially for less experienced teachers (Fischer, et.al., 2012). We were concerned that the intervention would perhaps not be prioritised among the school's many daily challenges and activities. This is why we emphasised the importance of making the measures visible with posters in the staff room and why the groups were asked to give feedback and report on their measures by mail before the subsequent project visit. On the one hand, this kind of accompanying support provided the teaching staff with an opportunity to ask for assistance. On the other hand, it emphasised the importance and value of teaching staff's independent work. By the next visit, the groups reported their experiences with the measures in the plenary.

## 6.5 Implications for further research and school development

Compared to the other working methods used in School-In, the Reflection Cycle has quite a pivotal role. The Reflection Cycle's focus is to enact and specify the many good ideas that emerge, that is, to put the school's development ideas into action. Previous research has discussed the fact that translating objectives into practice does not occur as a matter of course within organisational development (Schuler & Jackson, 2014). The Reflection Cycle helped the participants to focus on the development area, justify their choice of objectives, specify their description of planned measures, and finally, to identify effects of the measures by jointly defined indicators.

The application of the Reflection Cycle, combined with the Dialogue Café, showed promising and evident results (Hillen, 2020). Since the Dialogue Café generated many ideas that could be worked on further, the Reflection Cycle was a suitable tool for

narrowing the measures and prioritising a selection to implement. In a way, the Reflection Cycle safeguarded the translation of collectively developed ideas into joint action. The effectiveness of using the Reflection Cycle in School-In can be indicated by the enacted measures and activities supported by the application of the Reflection Cycle (Hillen, 2020).

To summarise, the Reflection Cycle can foster school development in addition to development in other kinds of organisations, particularly when used in combination with the Dialogue Café. The Reflection Cycle is thus considered essential for ‘Organisational Didactics’ (Midtsundstad et al., 2022). Generally, the Reflection Cycle tool offers a structured and responsible approach to support and challenge ‘learning communities’ in their activities to implement, for instance, new curricula, educational regulations, etc. With increasing demand for teachers to engage in research-based teaching (Munthe & Rogne, 2015) in school, this tool can also provide valuable support for research on systematic school development for schools in general.

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# Appendix

## Reflection Cycle

*Step 1: Development area*

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*Name of the group members*

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*Step 2: Goal definition*

Goal  
(be precise!)

Argument  
(why is this goal important?)

*Step 3: We have agreed on the measure* \_\_\_\_\_

Description of measure (be concrete, not too comprehensive, but realistic!)

Visible signs  
(How will you recognise if the measure works? What signs can you look for?)

In the plenary session with School-In: Each group presents goals, arguments, measures, and indicators of effectiveness. An overview of this work is summarised on a poster to be hung up in the staff room.

*'Homework'*

Before we meet next time, put the measures into practice and write down your experiences here:

*Step 4: Implementing the measure*

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Implementing measure  
(How did you implement?)

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Experiences  
(what did you experience?)

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*Step 5: Evaluation/reflection*

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Measures  
(What indicators of effects did you see? Where are you in the process now? (repeat the cycle?))

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Group  
(How did the collaboration work? What did you learn? How can you use these experiences in further work?)

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