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"Empowering of School Boards"

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Contents

**Participation of parents, students, teachers, and other community members
in planning, implementing, and evaluating innovations in school.**

Research tools for schools to analyze their starting levels,

and transformation processes, research report

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Abstract

This is a research-based report for Output 1 Research tools for schools to analyze their starting levels and transformation processes for the Empowering of School Boards (ESB) Erasmus + project. It introduces the project, describes the role of the University of Jyväskylä in the project, as well as presents research tools for schools to analyze their starting levels and transformation processes based on a survey for the participants of the project. Based on our results, there are no single research tools to recommend, but different schools and their different situations require their own tools. What appears fundamental is the research-based mindset and process for developing schools. In this, the constant starting level analysis to guide and support the development seems essential. This report provides a general outlook on the research tools and is complemented by the ESB project school reports for Output 1 by the ESB school teams.

1. **Introduction**

This is the research report of the University of Jyväskylä (JYU) for the Empowering of School Boards (ESB) Erasmus + project. The main aims of the ESB project were 1) democratic involvement of parents and students alongside teachers, school leaders and local government, which, for the ESB project, was focused on increasing the role of the school board, and 2) sustainability of local cultural life, which, for the ESB project, focused on training a group of trainers/mentors/mediators to enhance the general co-operation and the co-operation of the members of the school bords in schools and in local government.

This report is confined to the work conducted by the University of Jyväskylä on Output 1 in the project description, and it provides a general description of the ESB project within the framework of Output 1.

The more detailed Output 1 reports are provided by the ESB project schools teams.

The title of Output 1 was Research tools for schools to analyze their starting levels and transformation processes. According to the project application, these were to serve the ultimate goal of the Empowering of School Board (ESB) project to present practical models how to lead successful transformation processes to empower school boards as well as frameworks how to construct schools' own solutions and processes to do so.

The prerequisite for any successful transformation is through knowledge of the starting level. The Estonian Parental Association (EstPA) had been studying the situation in the pilot municipality and its schools since the first half of 2018, so before the ESB project started. This helped a lot at the beginning of the project. For example, a common understanding of the project and a mutual trust had been established with the municipality and its schools.

When the project began and the schools taking part in the project were agreed, new starting level analyses were constructed. The results and methodology of these studies were consistently evaluated and developed to meet the recognized needs of the municipality and of the participating schools and to complement the identified deficiencies with the help of research and education. In this work, the research tools, educational processes and established structures, processes and practices were also consistently updated to establish a sustainable foundation for generalizing the outcomes of the ESB project for further application.

In relation to the starting level analysis, the questionnaires, interview designs and observation protocols as well as their analysis methods were developed, modelled, tested, evaluated, and elaborated together with the participating schools to provide practical models and frameworks for all schools to construct their own research tools for starting level analyses. These tools are to enable schools to follow their transformation before, during and after the developing, education and mentoring processes.

To support schools to lead their transformation processes successfully, the research tools are to provide information on the transformation processes and their impacts. For this purpose, the ESB project applied the combination of longitudinal studies within each school and latitudinal ones to construct a municipal level picture. Similar to the analysis of the starting level, these studies made use of mixed methods and were constructed and enacted together with the participating schools. In addition, the research process was elaborated into practical research tools and framework for all schools to construct their own research tools for process evaluation.

The used questionnaires were based on the Trigon – Entwicklungsberatung raster questionnaire, which was created to map development stages and crises in organizations. Based on the starting level analysis and supported with knowledge on research methodology, the questionnaires were supplemented with novel interview designs and observation protocols by the ESB project teams working with the schools. Particular emphasis was set on how to synthesize the various methods into models and frameworks for schools to meet their peculiarities and individualizes, including the diverse cultural contexts. This we consider vital as, in the process of the ESB project, we noticed the situation of the schools to be very different, and the situation of the municipality and the schools to change several times.

We hope that the results of this research report by the University of Jyväskylä and those by the ESB project school teams will assist all schools to conduct similar and consistently improving research-based processes for similar goals as the ESB project had.

2. Role of University of Jyväskylä in the Empowering of School Boards (ESB) project

The responsibility of the University of Jyväskylä in the ESB project was to work with Output 1 Research tools for schools to analyze their starting levels and transformation processes. This work was to support schools to lead their transformation processes successfully. For this purpose, the research tools were to provide information on the transformation processes and their impacts. In this work, the ESB project applied the combination of longitudinal studies within each school and latitudinal ones to construct a municipal level picture. Similar to the analysis of the starting level, these studies made use of mixed methods and were constructed and enacted together with the participating schools and the ESB school teams.

The design and analysis of these studies were the responsibility of the University of Jyvaskyla but were in practice designed, enacted, and analyzed in close collaboration with the ESB school teams and with Estonian research experts. As the situations of all the schools varied both among themselves and during the process the trust with the ESB school teams and the knowledge the ESB school teams on the situation and process of the schools were essential in the design of purposeful research tools. As the representatives of the University of Jyväskylä could not understand or speak Estonian, Estonian research experts and the ESB school teams were needed to be able to conduct research in the language of the schools. Hence, Output 1 was divided into this general part and into the three school reports.

According to the revised ESB project plan, during the first three years of the ESB project the role of the University of Jyväskylä was to work for Output 1 by participating in the Trigon training programme studying the process, evaluating the approach for research tools and conducting research, as well as supporting project participants to be able to apply the methods learned during the Trigon training period as research tools, while at the same time directing participants to develop a research-based mindset to improve home-school collaboration and to empower parents in school-based decision making. This we can conclude to be of crucial significance for applying whatever research tools for schools to analyze their starting levels and transformation processes. Different situations require different research tools, but what is common is the trust and willingness of developing with research. The ESB school teams' reports are noteworthy evidence of the diversity, and our survey as explicitly shows both the significance and complexity of developing with research.

The ultimate work for Output 1 Research tools for schools to analyze their starting levels and transformation processes was conducted during the fourth year of the project. There are some noteworthy issues in relation to this. Firstly, several of the ESB school team members had already experience of coaching prior to the ESB project. Secondly, the ESB school teams obtained a rigorous training by Trigon to act as coaches. Thirdly, the University of Jyväskylä was working throughout the process for Output 1 on the research tools and their application ensuring that the coaching was research-based. Hence, the ESB school teams, participating schools and their municipality had a lot of knowledge and experience of what was to come during the fourth year. That developing ESB project goals require a lot of time, support and work is important to note.

The Covid-19 pandemic interrupted and affected the ESB project and collaboration with the municipality and its schools several times and in several ways. Municipalities and schools work in complex dynamic operations also in several other ways. Hence, when starting with the fourth year of the ESB project, we were in new situations in many ways. This also provided the ESB school teams both the need and opportunity to conduct new starting levels analyses, connect them with the previous development

process, and together with their schools and the municipality to work further to support the schools to reach for the ESB project goals.

The ultimate work for Output 1 Research tools for schools to analyze their starting levels and transformation processes in collaboration of the University of Jyväskylä, the ESB school teams, the municipality and its schools was carried out during 2022 in four cycles, each of which lasted a week (5 working days), hence 20 days for the participants. It is noteworthy that a lot of work took place in the schools together with the ESB school teams also in addition to these four weeks.

Each development and testing cycle included school visits by the ESB school teams during at least two half-days of the week. Schools where the methods were tested and developed had been selected as volunteers by the project coordinator. In practice, the school visits tested methods for research tools to support developing home-school cooperation. Each development and testing cycle also included a visit by project coordinators and representatives of school teams to the local school administration. Particularly when analyzing the work conducted in the schools together with the ESB school teams and with the international ESB community, we were exploring effective ways to create as much as possible a universal framework for developing cooperation in schools, in all over Estonia and in other parts of Europe.

The applied development and testing cycle were based on an action research method, which was the main design suggested by the University of Jyväskylä. Action research is widely used in studying and developing schools, but also developing learning organizations. As Altrichter et al. (2002) express the definition of action research by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988, p. 5): "*Action research is a form of collective, self-reflective inquiry that participants in social situations undertake to improve: (1) the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices; (2) the participants' understanding of these practices and the situations in which they carry out the practices. The group of participants can be teachers, students, parents, workplace colleagues, social activists, or any other community members – that is, any group with a shared concern and the motivation and will to address theirs shared concern. The approach is action research only when it is collaborative and achieved through the critically examined action of individual group members.*"

Altrichter et al. (2002) also highlights that in sustainable action research development should take place in a democratic and participatory context, and as a process that emancipates the participants. They also emphasize the need to avoid frustration and to ensure collaboration among participants, so that participants have the ownership of their data.

In action research, the aim is to change the reality under investigation by intervening in an organisation (e.g., school community or some other organisation), while investigating and re-interpreting that reality. The changes attempted through this process should result in a higher quality of practice compared to previously prevailing practices (Hart & Bond, 1995; Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1988). Also, the concept of critical participatory action research is to describe community participation in an iterative cycle where planning, operation, observation, and reflection are used to make social practices and actions visible and therefore for re-evaluation (Kemmis, et al., 2013). Action research is a widely accepted and used method and it may include many ways of gathering and evaluating information, which is why it is suitable for a complex environment (here a school system) as a research and development method.

In addition to the iterative circle of action research, our approach was based on the model of integrative pedagogy and learning. This integrates the components of professional expertise: theoretical and

conceptual knowledge, practical and experiential knowledge, self-regulative and socio-cultural knowledge (Tynjälä, et al., 2016). Also, it enables combining individual and social learning towards collaborative learning and development, and at its best, a better understanding of the school community and school system. In practice, it means that participants who come from a wide variety of backgrounds can use their expertise in the process. It is important to make use of each individual's expertise in the learning and development process, as it commits and strengthens the agency of the participants.

The ESB school team members (which our Webropol ESB project survey targeted) had been, as previously described, involved in long-term working life, and some of the people had worked in different positions in schools as well. Among the participants there were also young people who had themselves been at school only a little while ago, which contributed to enriching the work of the ESB school teams. ESB school teams also used Trigon's training, methods, and materials to a great extent.

At the beginning of constructing the ultimate Output 1 Research tools for schools to analyze their starting levels and transformation processes, the participants were divided into teams (ESB school teams) whose task was to start with to familiarize themselves with the school and its activities through some exercises or workshops they had planned beforehand. Also, during and after the first visit they started to do the starting level analysis for future planning and for the operations of their teams' own school community, as well as to assess and reflect on the school visit. Then, together with the other ESB school teams, University of Jyväskylä representatives and other international members in the ESB project, they made plans for the next school visit(s). Between the visits, various ways of action, observation, data collection and involvement of the school community were discussed. Step by step ESB school teams became acquainted with the school's everyday life and with teachers, students and parental evenings organized during the project. The methods and practices (research tools) used by the ESB school teams are described in more detail in the survey results section and in the ESB school team reports.

3. **Survey**

The purpose of this survey was to collect the methods and practices (research tools) used by the ESB school teams, to obtain information on the ESB Project members' experiences of the ESB project process, and to study the impact of the ESB Project from the perspective of the ESB project members. The following research questions were addressed:

1) How has the ESB project empowered school boards?

2) How did the school teams experience the ESB project?

The survey was conducted in the English language and consisted of open questions and Likert scale statements. The open-ended questions were analyzed using content analysis. In order to bring out respondents' own voices some experts from their written comments have been included. Statistical analysis was used in order to structure the answers from the Likert scale questions. This data was analyzed via descriptive statistics including means and medians. The results of the survey are presented below.

Results

Background information

The study was conducted via an internet-based survey (Webropol 3.0 questionnaire) at the end of the ESB project in December 2022. The responses to the questionnaire were handled and kept anonymous. A total of 48 ESB project members were invited to participate in the study. Responses were received from 26 participants, which is 54 % of all the questionnaires sent. The survey was evaluated thorough and time-consuming by the respondents. Not all questions were required to be answered, so the number of respondents varied from one question to the other. There was not the necessity for a separate research ethics due to the anonymity of the survey.

The respondents (n = 26) had wanted to join the ESB project because they had received a direct invitation to join it (n = 13), they were interested in the concept (personal level activity and contribution, n = 6), or they wanted to develop personally (n = 5). Most of the respondents had joined the ESB project in the early stages of the process: 35 % when preparing the project, 31 % when Trigon training started and 15 % during Trigon training. Only 11 % of the respondents had joined the process during the JYU research tool phase, and 8 % of the respondents had joined the process when the JYU research tool phase started.

The respondents represented different age groups widely (n = 26). 11 % of the respondents were 21-35 years of age, 58 % of the respondents were 36-55 years of age, and 31 % of the respondents were over 55 years of age. The participants were from five different countries (n = 26): 81 % of the respondents were Estonian and 7 % Finnish. The other nationalities represented were Slovenian (4 %), Lithuanian (4 %), and German (4 %). The educational background of the respondents was broad: higher education (bachelor's or master's degree) (f = 19), doctoral degree (f = 2), ongoing higher education studies (f = 2), secondary education / gymnasium (f = 2). One response was not analyzed ("Finished study examination with diploma").

Like the educational background, the professional background among the respondents varied: manager/ consultant / coach / trainer (f = 12), teacher / headmaster (f = 4), university staff (teacher/ researcher / education coordinator) (f = 3), and other professions, or no specific profession. One response was not analyzed ("I work at another school"). All the respondents had entered the work life (f = 26). Work experience varied from 8 to 46 years.

Over half of the respondents had years or even decades (from 3 to over 30 years) of experience as a member of a school board (f = 14). The other half had no previous experience as a member of a school board (f = 12). The roles of the respondents in the ESB project varied (n = 26): consultant (f = 10), ESB management team (f = 6), parent (f = 5), school board member in Estonia (f = 5), member of school staff (f =4), European Parents' Association EPA member (f = 3), and other such as researcher and youth.

Open questions

The respondents were asked to tell, what goals their own school team had set for the collaboration and development with the school community. The answers to this question were very diverse (n = 14). The following four categories appeared the most in the data: understanding the possibilities of school boards' work and school reality (f = 3), to identify the bottlenecks of the execution of new ideas and help to widen those bottlenecks (f = 3), the reluctance of schools (f = 2), and to build up contacts for the collaboration (f = 2). Other individual mentions were for example: to gain trust, to understand the needs and interests of stakeholders, to understand the readiness to change and to empower the school board, and the school asked help for their development plan. It can be seen from the open answers that the teams wanted to understand the reality of the school and what opportunities the school boards have. The teams also wanted to identify potential bottlenecks. The answers interestingly show the reluctance

of the schools.

Quotes:

> *"…To understand what is going on in this school, how the needs of students and parents are taken into account and what are the needs and interests of stakeholders/different interest groups (parents, students, teacher, management)."*
> *"Helping to find a model and solve the bottleneck issues."*

> *"...Create good relations for further cooperation."*
> *Respectively, the respondents were asked, what goals did they reach during this project?*

The respondents were also asked what goals they reached during the ESB process. The open-ended answers slightly matched the answers to the previous question (n = 13). Here are the biggest categories: confidence (*f* = 7), good contacts and communication (*f* = 7), to understand that the goals change over time (*f* = 2), readiness and willingness to change and to empower the school board (*f* = 2), and understanding what is going on in the school, how the needs of students and parents are taken into account and what are the needs and interests of stakeholders/different interest groups (parents, students, teachers, management) (*f* = 2). Also, respondents felt that young parents are a potential that they are not yet aware of; they need to be supported. Respondents wanted to be trustful partners. Trust, communication, and the creation of contacts were most clearly visible in the open answers. The teams wanted to see the bottlenecks of the execution of new ideas, and this was identified in one case. In another answer, it was nicely explained that young parents are a potential that needs to be supported.

Quotes:

> *"Create good relations for further cooperation - trust of the target groups."*

> *"Trust and understanding of readiness and willingness to change and to empower the school board."*

Next, the respondents were asked, what methods, tools, and materials they used under the frame of action research in collaboration with their school community (n=13). In addition, they were asked what kind of research and/or analyses they conducted in their school communities (n=12). There were many overlaps in the answers to these questions, so the answers have been brought together. Respondents mentioned many methods: Interviews, focus group interviews, meetings, discussions with different groups and persons in a school community, questionnaires, workshops, group works, picture drawing, hearing & talking, brainstorming, free conversation with question, visits of school lessons, excursion at the sources of school history, training (e.g., legislation of school boards or to find a common spirit), short lectures (several topics), talking stick circle, coaching, seminars, development plan and the curriculum of the school. In addition, they reported methods like emotional sculpture, round table, stickers and dots, direction, avoid, legal acts, sociometric picture, building up a trusted relationship, the model of change balance, organisation development phases tool, balloon, stools, triangle, frames, articles and news 10 hypothesis about particular schoolboards, WindRose, Eisenhover Matrix, focus group Interviews, supervision, restorative justice discussion circle, role-play of the 7 elements of organizations, 4 levels of listening and iceberg explanation by Otto Scharmer, different levels of organizations by Frederic Laloux, and mainly the First module and second module workbooks from Trigon. Also, they reported SWOT analyses, diagnosis tools, future-design tools, mirroring the results, qualitative analysis, action research,

summarizing and reflecting on it all again.

As listed above, ESB project members conducted various studies and analyses in their school communities during the ESB project. Under the frame of action research, they used various research methods, tools, and materials.In the next question, we wanted to know, what goals the respondents had not reach during the project and why not? The answers were mostly similar to each other (n = 13). The project encountered challenges in several different areas. Disappointment towards the process can be seen from the answers. Almost half of the answers show the feeling (f = 7) that the work was left unfinished. Individual answers were highlighted, among other things, that there was no time to support created solutions, the principal had changed at the school, so gaining trust took time, and the bottlenecks were a challenge.
The respondents also were concerned about the leaders' not being willing to move into more democratic teamwork. The slow initial phase of the ESB project was also criticized. It can be seen from these answers that more attention should have been paid to the initial phase of the project. Overall, the project's target group was multifaceted, and the context was consistently changing, which posed special challenges for the project's progress. The intensity of the changes is certainly a challenging factor in these days.

Quotes:

> *"During these meetings it took too much time to really get the proper, comprehensive, and mutual understanding of the project from both sides. Our school team was somewhat confused and school side as well. We reached the goal to become trustful, but it is only the beginning. The real work is yet to be done."*

> *"The school board was not really empowered at the end more than it was before the project. People have changed, there was not enough time to participate fully in all the training activities."*

> *"It would have been good to focus on the work of the fifth week already in the first week. But four weeks was essentially wasted because we scraped the school created courtesy - armor and tried to create something around it. We also lack historical notes on the process in the first four weeks…"*

The respondents' school communities experienced the ESB project in many different ways. The They were enthusiastic, and they had often contacted with ESB project members between the working sessions to share information, to ask questions, and to arrange meetings. Teachers and students were trustful from the beginning of the ESB project, unlike the people in the administration. For example, it had been difficult to commit the principals to the project.

The most important topic of the ESB process was the new information brought by the project in the schools. For many schools, the project made it possible to talk about problems openly. Also, there was not enough time - it was difficult to participate fully on the working weeks and to get the most out of the possibilities the trainings offered. Using the English language was a challenge for some principals. Some teachers did not want to participate in the project because they did not fully understand the idea of the project. However, in some cases, the project also inspired the collaboration between schoolboards and their heads.

The ESB project aimed to create cooperative assumptions that directly affect the sustainability of local

cultural life. According to the respondents, this was felt to be necessary in Estonia. Here is a one quote:

> *"There was a lot of confusion, especially among parents. The participation of parents in the school system is not something everyday thing to do, as it demands more from them than meetings with teachers. Additional obligations and responsibilities are imposed on them, which can be a problem for some parents. Resistance may also occur. Therefore, the ESB project is the one that smooths out strained relationships and prepares both parents and the school personal for the sharing of responsibilities."*

Also, the parents started to think more about cooperation and mutual tradition. On the other hand, participants thought that their steps in schools had been small steps for local cultural life.

The ESB project was implemented during the Covid-19 pandemic. The following quote describes well the challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic:

> *"As corona crisis made a big gap into the project, it was presumably one of the biggest impacts that hindered to affect the local cultural side. The project ended too soon, and the effect isn't yet to be seen in its full scale."*

According to several respondents, the activity lacked sustainability, because the research participants at the school changed so much during the project.

Participants were asked, what should be done further to establish sustainability for the ESB project in their school community. They made many suggestions for changes:

> *"As an external observer of the ESB project, I see an opportunity in the regulation of legislation in the field of education. Above all, emphasize the role, obligations and responsibilities of all stakeholders in education."*

> *"Further communication between consultants and stakeholders of the school. Setting joint goals and deadlines and analyzing the results."*

> *"To be more transparent of our mission of what we are exactly doing in the school community. Increase the understanding of the process and finding even wider common ground."*

> *"It would be good to carry out follow-up activities so that the gained willpower does not fade away and to help support the cooperation of the parties."*

> *"Local people should take the responsibility regarding the continuation of the project."*

The participants would have liked more activities related to Trigon tools and teamwork. It would have been important to have opportunities to learn more from others and to have time to share experiences together. In general, the respondents wished for a clearer overall picture of the process, so that they could better focus on the most important things. Using the English language was also perceived as a challenge factor in some cases.

The following quote sums up the overall feedback very well:

> *"Figuring out the whole from the beginning would have been important. On the other hand, this was a pilot project, so we need to learn from this for the continuation."*

Likert scale questions

A further 8 closed questions related to school teams experience of the ESB process (see Table 1 below) were made via a response with a 5-point Likert scale (1 = completely disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = not agree or disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = completely agree). In Table 1 is presented the claims, averages, and medians.

Table 1. Means and medians (a 5-point Likert scale) of the questions, (n = 17).

Statement	1	2	3	4	5	Mean	Median
The school community regarded the ESB process as important.	0,0%	17,7%	17,6%	58,8%	5,9%	3,5	4,0
The collaboration with the school community was constructive.	0,0%	11,8%	17,6%	70,6%	0,0%	3,6	4,0
Parents' participation in school decision-making improved.	5,9%	17,7%	17,6%	35,3%	23,5%	3,5	4,0
Teachers' participation in school decision-making improved.	0,0%	11,8%	52,9%	29,4%	5,9%	3,3	3,0
Students' participation in school decision-making improved.	11,8%	17,6%	29,4%	41,2%	0,0%	3,0	3,0
Collaboration in the school community improved.	0,0%	5,9%	29,4%	47,1%	17,6%	3,8	4,0
Collaboration between the school community and local authorities improved.	5,9%	17,6%	64,7%	11,8%	0,0%	2,8	3,0
We advanced well with the mission we had set for our working together.	0,0%	0,0%	35,3%	52,9%	11,8%	3,8	4,0

Moderate responses were received to this claim for each item (n = 17). Collaboration in the school community had improved (mean 3.8) and the respondents' team had advanced quite well with the mission they had set for their working together (mean 3.8). Unfortunately, collaboration between the school community and the local authorities had not improved (mean 2.8, n = 17) during the process according to the respondents.

An open follow-up question clarified the results of the claims. Here are two quotes:

> *"Changes in school (new principal, new curriculum, etc) made our work more difficult."*

"Since our school didn't want to touch the school board topic, we helped to empower the staff one way or another. Parents were quite left out and students as well (since they were all under 12 years old)."

The following Table 2 shows the results of the statements from the respondents' own perspective (a 5-point Likert scale).

Table 2. Means and medians (a 5-point Likert scale) of the questions, (n = 23).

Statement	1	2	3	4	5	Mean	Median
I got from the process new potential to be involved in the management of educational institutions.	0,0%	4,4%	0,0%	56,5%	39,1%	4,3	4,0
I got from the process new potential to improve my competence.	0,0%	0,0%	4,3%	26,1%	69,6%	4,7	5,0
In the Trigons' training programme, I developed my competence to advance collaboration among home, school, and local authorities.	5,0%	5,0%	20,0%	35,0%	35,0%	3,9	4,0
It was constructive to work and collaborate with our school.	0,0%	5,3%	10,5%	52,6%	31,6%	4,1	4,0
In JYU coaching, I developed my readiness to advance collaboration among home, school, and local authorities.	0,0%	0,0%	23,5%	35,3%	41,2%	4,2	4,0
Working in the school, I developed my expertise to empower school boards.	0,0%	16,7%	5,5%	16,7%	61,1%	4,2	5,0
During the process, I became familiar with the local governance.	4,8%	19,0%	42,8%	28,6%	4,8%	3,1	3,0
We advanced well with the goals we had set for our work with our school community.	0,0%	14,3%	28,6%	47,6%	9,5%	3,5	4,0
In the ESB project, I and my school team developed collaboration among parents, schools, and local authorities.	0,0%	11,1%	27,8%	44,4%	16,7%	3,7	4,0

Some of the respondents joined the programme later, so it affected the number of respondents for the claims (n = 23). Despite late participation, higher average scores were obtained for these statements than for the previous Likert-scale question. It was great to see that the respondents had got new potential to improve their competence from the process (mean 4.7, n = 23) and that they had got new

potential to be involved in the management of educational institutions from the process (mean 4.3, n = 23). Also, they had developed their readiness to advance collaboration among home, school and local authorities (mean 4.2, n = 17), and working in the school, they had developed their expertise to empower school boards (mean 4.2, n = 18). However, during the process, they had not become so familiar with the local governance (mean 3.1, n = 21).

Summary of results

This section summarizes the results from the perspective of the research questions. Here are the results for research question one: How has the ESB project empowered school boards.

The ESB school teams had set their goals for collaboration and development with the school communities. The main point was, that they wanted to understand the reality of the school and what opportunities school boards have. The teams also wanted to identify potential bottlenecks. Participants' answers interestingly revealed the reluctance of the schools for collaboration.

School teams experienced that trust, communication and the creation of contacts were the most meaningful issues they had gained during the project. The teams wanted to see the bottlenecks of the execution of new ideas, and this was identified in one case. In another answer, it was nicely explained that young parents are a potential that needs to be supported.

On the other hand, the teams also experienced that there was no time to support created solutions, the principal had changed at the school, so gaining trust took time, and the bottlenecks were still a challenge. Schools that participated, changed, and modified during the three-and-a-half-year project, as well as staff changes took place among teachers, school boards and local authorities.

Respondents were also concerned about the leaders in schools not being willing to move towards a more democratic teamwork. The slow initial phase of the ESB project was also criticized, and more attention should have been paid to the initial phase of the project. Overall, the project's target group was multifaceted, and the context was changing, which posed special challenges for the project's progress. The intensity of the changes is a challenging factor these days.

School teams conducted various methods, tools, and analyses, like the SWOT analysis, different qualitative analyses, action research, as well as various research methods, such as interviews with all school focus groups.

According to the ESB school teams, school communities experienced the project in many ways. The most important topic of the ESB process was the new information brought by the project in the schools. For many schools, the project made it possible to talk about problems openly. In addition, there was a lack of time - it was difficult to participate fully in the project weeks and to get the most out of the possibilities the training offered. Using the English language was a challenge for some principals and for some school team members. Some teachers did not want to participate in the project because they did not fully understand the idea of the project. However, in some cases, the project also inspired the collaboration between schoolboards and their heads.

According to the participants, the sustainability of local cultural life was felt to be necessary in Estonia. During the project, the parents started to think more about cooperation and mutual tradition. On the other hand, participants thought that their steps in schools were small steps for local cultural life.

To establish sustainability for the ESB project in their school community, the participants would have liked more activities related to Trigon tools and teamwork. It would have been important to have opportunities to learn more from others and to have time to share experiences together. In general, the respondents wished for a clearer overall picture of the process, so that they could have had a better focus on the most important things. Using the English language was also perceived as a challenge factor in some cases.

Collaboration in the school community improved and school teams had advanced quite well with the mission they had set for their working together. In addition, participants felt that their expertise in empowering school boards had improved.

The respondents experienced that the process had improved their competence and that they had become more involved with the management of educational institutions. There were developments in their readiness to advance collaboration among home, school, and local authorities, even though the collaboration between the school community and local authorities had not improved during the process. Here are the results for research question two: How did the school teams experience the ESB project.

In brief, the results can be summarized in three key elements that have been relevant. In the list below,

+ refers to positive impact and # refers to a missing/insufficient/challenging issue of the ESB project. The presented elements relate to (1) ESB project implementation, (2) school communities, and collaboration and leadership in schools, and (3) sustainability and local cultural life. Some of the topics overlap. This is why there is also a joint element (1&2), whose elements are related to both the project and the schools.

(1) How were the ESB project aims realized during the ESB project?
+ desire to understand the reality of the school
+ desire to identify and solve potential bottlenecks
+ trust, communication, and the creation of contacts as most meaningful issues during the project
+ young parents are a potential that needs to be supported
+ action research as a research tool made possible to use variable methods, tools and analysis collaborating with schools
# more speed in initial phase
# more attention to the initial phase
# multifaced target group
# overall intensity of the changes
# desire more activities related to Trigon tools
# will for more teamwork
# will for more opportunities and time to share experiences
# need for clearer overall picture of the process

(1&2) ESB implementation for both the project and the school communities
+ participants expertise to empower school boards improved
# using the English language was a challenge
# difficulties to understand to idea of the project
# lack of time, both withing school teams work and at schools
# changed conditions and people withing school teams, at schools, withing school boards and local authorities

(2) How were the ESB project aims realized in school communities, collaboration, and leadership
+ possibly to talk about problems openly
+ collaboration in the school community improved
# reluctance of schools for collaboration
# changing conditions at schools
# poor understanding of the idea of the project
# schools were not interest in democratic teamwork
# collaboration between the school community and local authorities did not improve

(3) **What impact the ESB project had for sustainability of local cultural life**
+ local culture and its development are important
+ steps are small, still meaningful

4. Conclusions and discussion

This report focused on the research activities of the Empowering of School Boards (ESB) Erasmus + project. The first chapter described the ESB project and its main goals. The second chapter focused on the role of the University of Jyväskylä and research in the project. The third one presented the project survey and its results on the ESB project members' views on the project. These include the impact, training, research, and research tools, as well as the evaluation of the project.

As for the impact of the ESB project, it appears that the ESB project main goals were worked with in three very different school contexts although they were all located in the same municipality. As one consequence of this, what was essential for the schools in the goals was interpreted and contextualized differently in each of the schools. As another consequence, how the goals had to be enacted had to be different in each school, too. In addition, during the ESB project duration, all the three schools met with various changes that required also timely variation in the interpretation, contextualization, and enactment process (see Ball et al., 2012; Risku & Tian, 2020).

Based on our results, it is vital to conduct consistent starting level analysis to be able to design purposeful research processes and tools to support schools to develop themselves. The starting level analysis and the development work based on it cannot make use of one research tool not even in one school, not to mention several schools, municipalities, or countries. They are different and during their time spans have different phases.

Accordingly, all the three ESB school teams acted differently in their processes with the schools. As for the research tools, our survey presents a wonderful richness of them. The ESB teams had various kind of support for their processes, still they would have wanted to have more of it, and, according to the ESB school teams, so would have the schools, too. When designing research processes and tools, we must work in collaboration with the schools, not just from the perspective of becoming with valid and reliable research and development processes and tools but also to come with ones that are suitable for the schools to enact in their everyday. In addition, multi-professional collaboration within the local and school community and, for example, research and development experts is important.

Did we reach the ESB project goals of 1) democratic involvement of parents and students alongside teachers, school leaders and local government, which, for the ESB project, was focused on increasing the role of the school board, and 2) sustainability of local cultural life, which, for the ESB project, focused on

training a group of trainers/mentors/mediators to enhance the general co-operation and the co-operation of the members of the school bords in schools and in local government, or as one of our ESB project members expressed it:

> "*To help schools to become more transparent, more collegial, power-sharing institutions where parents have a higher voice to intervene and lead school development towards desired future. To help schools become more democratic and to emphasize school's role in the society.*"

We would say that we made a good start in one municipality and in a few schools. In addition, we would hope this work to extend and develop.

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Due to the GDPR legislation, access to the further survey is limited.