School as a Learning Organisation: Impediments to Its Implementation in Latvia and Abroad

Beata Lavrinoviča[1], Inga Linde[1], Gunta Siliņa-Jasjukeviča[1], Inese Lūsēna-Ezera[2]

[1] University of Latvia, Latvia
[2] Liepaja University, Latvia

ABSTRACT

One after another, European educational systems are applying reforms to transform primary and secondary schools to fit continuously changing and dynamic environments. Reforms require schools to serve as lifelong learning centres for various learners' groups, including school leaders, teachers and school staff, making them more flexible, collaborative and innovative in what comes to the teaching approaches. Simultaneously, gradual transformations in education are contextualised by the decrease in teaching staff and low motivation to remain in the profession due to a variety of reasons.

'School as a learning organisation' concept is introduced to define a school that continuously changes and adapts to new environments and circumstances through individual and collective learning of its staff. This paper aims to review the main impediments to implementations of the 'school as a learning organisation' concept, considering its functioning in Latvia and abroad. Literature and document analysis was done to assess the characteristics of learning organisations in the European context. With special focus on Latvia, several focus group interviews were conducted with the education managers and stakeholders to verify the implementation impediments in Latvia and define main risks of schools as learning organisations. Content analysis was applied to draw conclusions.

The results have shown that institutional autonomy and leadership are the keys to positive changes in educational staff perceptions and motivation to take on risks and obtain new knowledge, skills and competence for the individual and organisational growth. However, there are other impediments, such as lack of time, financial resources and insufficient communication and understanding of the whole idea of the school as a learning organisation, that stops schools from being the agents of change. The obtained results will be further applied in the design of the 'School as a learning organisation' model and a tool for its measurement in Latvia.

Keywords: autonomy, collaboration, leadership, learning organisation, schools in Latvia, team learning

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Introduction

The concept of the 'learning organisation' was first introduced by Peter Senge (1990) as a result of systems thinking, shared vision, development of mental models, collaborative and individual mastery, which altogether lead to organisational growth. Years later, the concept started to be discussed by the experts in education, focusing on the need to transform educational institutions, including their staff, leaders and external stakeholders, into lifelong learners willing to positively impact students' learning outcomes. Kools and Stoll (2016) have conceptualised a school as a learning organisation (SLO) as the school with the capacity to change and adapt routinely to new environments and circumstances as its members, individually and together, learn their way to realising their goals. It is determined by the combination of 7 action-oriented dimensions, which are currently used by the OECD experts to define schools as learning organisations. These are:

1) a shared vision centred on the learning of all students,
2) continuous learning opportunities for all staff,
3) team learning and collaboration,
4) a culture of enquiry, innovation and exploration,
5) systems for collecting and exchanging knowledge and learning,
6) learning with and from the external environment, and
7) modelling learning leadership. Later, for greater precision, the 8th dimension,
8) partners contributing to the vision of the school, was proposed (Kools etal., 2020).

The theory has been translated into a functional instrument to measure schools' compliance with the concept of a learning organisation.

Despite theoretical conceptualization and wide dissemination of the concept by the OECD experts, practical implementation is not easy. So far only few European countries, such as Greece and Wales (United Kingdom), have researched in detail and reported on SLO implementation internationally (Kools and Stoll, 2016; Papazoglou and Koutouzis, 2020). These experiences are extremely diverse. Even in Wales, which is considered as a flagman of SLO implementation in Europe, schools demonstrate diverse results as 58% of primary and secondary schools managed to work on 5–7 SLO dimensions and only 30% out of these schools worked on all 7 dimensions, but the rest of 42% of schools have to improve their performance according to SLO quality criteria, as almost a third part of schools in Wales was only able to report 1 or 2 SLO dimensions in practice (OECD, 2018). The best results were demonstrated in terms of team learning and collaboration among all school staff, but the weakest point seemed to be the creation of acommon school vision for all learners that is a student-centred learning at its core (OECD, 2018).

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In Latvia, SLO concept is included in the recommendations of the National Centre for Education and is defined by four main elements –
1) vision that promotes learning for every student,
2) culture of inquiry and innovation,
3) teamwork and mutual learning, and
4) management support for development (Skola2030, 2019).

Several large municipalities have already defined SLO as a concept to develop regionally and locally. Although the concept of SLO is not widely known among the school staff across Latvia, characteristics of SLO have been identified by the interviewed representatives of education policy-making institutions. This paper aims to identify the main impediments to the implementation of SLO in Latvia and abroad.

Methodology

Content analysis was carried out by reviewing scientific literature and documents describing schools as learning organisations in theory and practice. The OECD reports and scientific papers composed by Marco Kools and colleagues (Kools and Stoll, 2016; Kools et al., 2020) were analysed as a primary reference to international practice. The theoretical model of schools as learning organisations composed of 7 main dimensions (also called as the Wales' model) was applied for further analysis of organisational learning practices in education applied in Latvia and other European countries. Snowball sampling method for further literature selection and analysis was applied to conclude on the main impediments to 'school as a learning organisation' concept implementation in Europe.

The situation in Latvia was specifically analysed based on 7 focus groups interviews, where discussions with representatives from school management and education boards, municipalities, the State Education Quality Service, the National Centre for Education, the Association of Education Managers, the Ministry of Education and Science and the Employers' Confederation of Latvia took place. Interviews with the total of 30 respondents (groups of 2–7) were carried out by the Professor Inese Lūsēna-Ezera and Associate Professor Gunta Siliņa-Jasjukeviča in the period from August 19, 2022 to August 26, 2022 in the MS Teams platform (online) and took no longer than 2 hours each. Semi-structured interviews were recorded, transcribed and subjected to content analysis. Apart from the topic of impediments to SLO implementation, the questions also focused on general understanding of the SLO concept, it's dimensions and practical examples of implementing SLO practices in Latvia. The main goal of the interview analysis was to identify the most important impediments to SLO implementation nationally. All interviews were conducted in accordance with

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the ethical standards of the institutional and national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Results

Despite gradual educational reforms carried out across Europe and country-specific recommendations of OECD experts on how to support schools in becoming learning organisations (OECD, 2018; Liebowitz et al., 2018; Kools and Stoll, 2016), the understanding of SLO in Europe is generally low at several levels – among policy makers (national and municipal), school leaders, school staff and the larger stakeholder groups. The basic impediment to designing a proper perception of SLO in educational institutions and among the decision makers themselves, is the lack of framework and clear vision on the SLO implementation nationally, as there is no universal formula for SLO implementation across countries. The design of the SLO framework includes participation of a variety of stakeholders to make it functional, data-based and adjusted to specific needs.

Even when the SLO framework is well designed, it needs to reach main stakeholders. Respondents in Latvia particularly highlight the lack of SLO guidelines and proper communication with educational institutions (teachers and school leaders) as a serious risk for SLO implementation. First of all, policy makers and researchers are often operating with complex academic terms that are simply not accessible for non-academic school staff. As pointed out by the representatives of the Employers' Confederation of Latvia, 'it is very important to turn each of their beautiful phrases into very concrete actions'. School staff need brief and practical guidelines answering specific questions of 'what exactly is expected?' and 'how can I accomplish it?'. According to the respondents, the enormous amount of strategic documents and incompatibility of languages makes it difficult to translate abstract terms into specific outcomes, creating confusion. As stated by one of the interviewees in Latvia, 'schools are already tired and extremely overloaded with all new reforms, all novelties, therefore, we have to be very careful about how we build this whole story from their perspective'.

In general, several interviewees have pointed out the constant reforms as a burden for implementing SLO, as dynamic changes hinder mindful developments in previously defined directions. According to one interviewee, 'stability is a need for us to implement the best quality. We will get used to this now and then we will move on.' On the other hand, SLO as a concept itself stands for dynamics.

According to respondents, insufficiency of the municipal and state support for schools, especially in the employment matters, is listed as one of the impediments for SLO implementation in Latvia. The lack of trust and communication among the stakeholders, as well as perceiving them as 'controllers' rather than 'supporters'

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and the ones that share responsibilities for SLO development, hinders fruitful growth of SLOs. The support has to be systemic, responsibilities well defined and coordinated collaboratively in between several institutions: the Ministry of Education and Science, the State Education Quality Service, the National Centre for Education and the State Education Development Agency. More targeted support is a necessity, as stated by the representatives of the National Centre for Education and the Ministry of Education and Science.

Developing a shared vision means creating the basis for a purposeful school development plan that is defined jointly by all staff and stakeholders, so it is not set 'from above'. Research shows that those who have contributed to the creation of a shared vision are better equipped to deal with its implementation and the associated challenges (Schlechty, 2009). However, respondents admit that one of the most challenging dimensions of SLO to implement is creating a shared vision involving all students in the learning process. Special concerns are expressed towards the abilities of school leaders to manage transformations and participation of parties that are supposed to support schools, but do not engage sufficiently. 'The most difficult thing is creating a common vision where other partners are involved. For two years, I have not been able to get the municipality engaged in defining the purpose of the school together with me. How does the municipality see my school's place in the county?'. Moreover, this vision is not complete without the involvement of students (Smyth and Fasoli, 2007) and external stakeholders, such as parents, local community, other educational institutions or companies (Kools and Stoll, 2016).

The requirements towards schools as learning organisations need to provide adequate resources to develop as SLOs. This means developing specific competences of school leaders, teaching and non-teaching staff, providing time for individual learning, collaboration, interaction with education stakeholders and ensuring its financial coverage.

One of the impediments to the SLO development is characterised by insufficiency of skills and competencies which hinder inquiry, innovation, proper use of data, collaboration and team learning, etc. As a 'continuously changing and adapting' structure (Kools and Stoll, 2016), learning organisation requires teachers to be inquisitive and proactive. However, as stated by the respondents, not all educators have enough initiative to learn new things – 'it is easier for them to work with what has been [learn] in the past'. As stressed by multiple respondents in Latvia and SLO researchers from abroad, collaboration and team learning are specifically important, as these support pedagogical competence development, open dialogue, trust and feeling of safety, improve organisational processes, including learning, as well as eliminate fear of failure, which in result might decrease the number of mistakes (Higgins et al., 2012; Kools and Stoll, 2016). What is more, certain skills can be hardly developed in students by the

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teachers not having them. The same applies to school management as school leaders who do not facilitate and participate in learning cannot convince other school staff to do it.

School leadership is one of the main components of ensuring development of SLO (Kools and Stoll, 2016; OECD, 2018) and the role of the leader should not be underestimated. The learning leadership responsibility usually lays on the principal or senior management team; however, as stated by the OECD experts, the concept of leadership is often misunderstood (Liebowitz et al., 2018). For instance, interviewees have recognized that good management of educational institutions is mainly achieved by skilful 'managers', but less often by leaders. Learning leadership, in turn, remains one of the most challenging dimensions of the SLO model'. As stated by the respondent, 'everything depends on the head of the institution, whether they are leaders in their institutions, whether they have this vision, (…) how they engage their team, their organisation and community'. As pointed out by another interviewee, 'A principal must be a strategist. He has to see all sequenced things that need to be evaluated in order to achieve the goal set. And if there is no strategic vision, there will be no followers. And there will be no way at all.'

The lack of skills among school leaders (principals, management teams) is a problem for schools to develop as SLOs. School leaders, who are most often associated with learning leadership, must be able to challenge their own and school staff's thinking, be brave, willing to take risks and strive for positive transformation (Kools and Stoll, 2016; MacBeath, 2013). A learning leader is a person that promotes and reminds about shared goals, challenges, stimulates the development of their own knowledge, leads achievement of goals, as well as learns together with the team of the school staff, instead of coordinating learning processes of others (Leithwood and Reihl, 2003; Kools and Stoll, 2016). As stated by the interviewees, it requires 'strategic vision, great communication skills and being able to demonstrate a personal example of a learner'.

The interviewed education stakeholders agree that the task of the leaders of the schools in is extremely difficult as it requires resistance to stress and strong mental health. As stated by the practitioner, 'a lot of principals experience burnout; we have a lot of vacancies and no one is running to become a school principal'. School leaders are often overburdened with employing teaching staff, taking part in evaluations and fulfilling loads of administrative functions, so there is little room for learning process leadership. According to one of the representatives of local municipalities, '... so that the school's leadership team could start to speak about SLO, basic needs of schools must be met first. Basic needs include having teaching staff, time and no work overload, so the focus can be put on developing a culture of research and innovation (…) it simply cannot be done in the 25th hour of a day!'. Systemic investments are required from the

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leader in both school management and pedagogic practices, which requires being extremely social and engaging in constant interaction with the team.

TALIS research has revealed that about a third (32%) of teachers report lack of support from their employer as a barrier to professional development (OECD, 2014). Therefore, modern educational systems emphasise leadership training, and Latvia is not an exception. Variety of meetings and training sessions are organised for school principals as systemic support actions; however, as respondents point out, a lot depends on personality traits, for instance, openness, empathy, ability to communicate and share. The lack of professional training and experience exchange for school leaders, weak mechanisms of responsibility sharing (e.g. delegation) and insufficient autonomy of schools are a serious burden for SLO development.

The lack of time is among the most common impediments to SLO implementation stressed by the practitioners and experts of SLO. Even if there are highly qualified school leaders, it does not necessarily mean that they have real time to dedicate to leadership functions, that is, to communicate regularly with staff, collect necessary information and learn new things. Similar challenges are experienced by the teaching staff. The teaching staff often lacks time for learning, as apart from lesson preparation, a large number of reports and assessments are to be done on a regular basis, and besides that, tasks associated with communication with parents are often overwhelming (especially based on the experience of pandemic). More than half of the teachers participating in TALIS research report 'that their own schedule conflicts with professional development' (OECD, 2014). In Latvia (similarly as in other countries) there is a serious shortage of teaching staff, as teachers often feel undervalued, exhausted and burned out, as a result, they leave the profession. To ensure purposeful development as a SLO, an atmosphere of trust, communication and paid time for collaborative activities of school staff is necessary, otherwise teaching staff already have a load of individual professional training to implement as a standard professional requirement (Lielvārds, 2021). Another problem is caused by the mobility of teachers as a number of teaching staff in Latvia work in several schools, therefore, regular communication and involvement of all staff is problematic.

In Latvia, more attention should be paid to creation of such a support framework that promotes greater interaction and cooperation between the schools (as opposed to a competition between them). Closer cooperation with other schools can provide the exchange of professional experience, cooperation with parents can lead to greater support for teachers and greater involvement of students, and cooperation with higher educational institutions can increase professional development opportunities for all staff. Universities, for instance, can also benefit from such collaboration, as schools provide an insight into practical challenges to be researched (Kools and Stoll, 2016). For professional schools, collaboration

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with employers is particularly important, as it adds to the knowledge of the teaching staff about the industry and ensures that students are well prepared for working life.

Parental involvement in SLOs has been particularly emphasised by the Association of Education Managers, local education authorities and representatives of municipalities as an essential element of SLO activities. According to them, parents have the opportunity to improve the educational process with their participation, belonging and accountability for students' learning outcomes. What is necessary, according to an interviewee, is 'Understanding and engagement. Participation is a benefit for every institution, but for every pedagogue it would definitely be the support that is received from the colleagues, from the management, from wider collaborative work between educational institutions. This support would benefit everyone.' Without collaboration with a larger audience of stakeholders, the opportunities for innovation development in schools are limited.

Modern schools and education systems all around Europe tend to develop functional systems to gather, store, exchange and process data to be applied in decision making. However, even in the systems where multiple level evaluations of teachers, principals and schools take place, the data is not always properly analysed and applied for improvement. SLO in turn emphasises the importance of data gathering, specifically paying attention to qualitative data that provide in-depth insight into daily challenges for more efficient solution search. It includes processing data on teachers and students, as well as a larger stakeholder pool, such as parents, non-teaching staff, other schools etc. (OECD, 2018). Latvia is one of the countries where multiple evaluations of schools take place; however, data management is still considered as one of the weakest points from the perspective of SLO implementation. In addition, respondents admit that qualitative data (for example, student grades and satisfaction surveys) do not provide sufficient information. In order to engage deeply in the research of SLO implementation, the processing of qualitative data needs to be present at all levels.

What hinders creation of such data management and exchange systems is the lack of time, skilful management, methodologies and tools, inability to involve all staff and ensure proper technological solutions for fast and convenient data management. The lack of the abovementioned hinders effective monitoring and using school data to make informed decisions.

While the funding is not the main determinant of being a SLO, insufficiency of financial resources is a serious impediment to SLO development in all European education systems. The education budget cuts in Greece (Papazoglou and Koutouzis, 2022) and schools' consolidation into school networks in Portugal (Liebowitz et al., 2018), Latvia (OECD, 2020) and other countries demonstrate the constant optimisation efforts and their consequences. Financial resources

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determine the workload of school staff and motivation to engage in extra learning activities, as it allows school leaders to employ a sufficient number of employees to avoid teaching staff's work overload so that teachers can spend more time on inquiry and experimentation. Moreover, finances and their fair distribution allow for increased efficiency of collection, exchange and analysis of data, where modern ICT tools can be applied to support decision making. Obviously, the financial capacity of schools has an impact on the technological equipment of classrooms, and consequently on innovation and creativity in the learning process; therefore, the lack of cooperation with other schools and industry in order to exchange resources and knowledge might be another risk for developing as a SLO.

Discussion

According to Systems Theory, isolation significantly limits the learning opportunities of the parties involved (Portfelt, 2006). The isolation of schools nowadays is associated with limited opportunities to launch creative projects, benefit from funding programmes and cooperate with other stakeholders to observe and adopt practices, and implement social learning. SLO, on the other hand, is positioning schools as highly social structures that understand the benefits of cooperation between teaching and non-teaching staff, local and national authorities, local organisations, businesses, parents, students, researchers and other stakeholders and practices collaborative learning.

There is no universal formula for SLO implementation in different countries. However, the literature emphasises shared leadership and autonomy of schools as important prerequisites for developing as SLOs in accordance with the real needs of stakeholders (OECD, 2018). Autonomy of schools has not been highlighted as a problem in the interviews with education stakeholders in Latvia; however, the OECD experts point out this condition for successful SLO implementation in other countries. Centralization of educational systems, where a large proportion of decisions is taken at ministerial level, are assessed as less efficient and hinder SLO development. For instance, educational systems in Greece or Portugal are gradually moving towards decentralisation of schools, however, hindering factors are the lack of skilful school leaders, easy trackable financial schemes, support of municipalities and other schools and other lacking elements. Similar impediments have been observed in Latvia.

Therefore, effective leadership is emphasised by the experts across the globe. Leadership has a huge impact on school autonomy in practice (Briggs and Wohlstetter, 2003), as it can sustain high quality of education with the collaborative practices and avoid relying on centralised decisions and centrally distributed financial resources as the only resources needed to improve the quality of learning, for both staff and students. However, leadership skills of school

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management and the time and motivation to practise learning leadership activities are one of the main concerns of education stakeholders internationally. To be effective, regular communication between the school leader and staff is essential. The lack of proper leadership hinders development of an inclusive working environment, trust and support between its staff in schools, which is important for promoting common learning, experience sharing, information exchange and collaboration. The research shows that the working environment focused on mutual trust and collaboration positively impacts student learning outcomes, and their engagement and participation in school life (Silins et al., 2002).

Leadership can be developed through acting as a facilitator, coach or mentor, by regularly collaborating with other school leaders, by organising weekly meetings, consultations, networking, conferences, inductions of new teachers, sharing knowledge, experiences and resources, shadowing other school leaders, and networking and collaborating in other ways (Matthews et al., 2011; Somech and Drach-Zahavy, 2007; Kools and Stoll, 2016). Researchers acknowledge that mentoring as a regular practice has a positive impact on the learning process and the cultivation of common values (Kools and Stoll, 2016; Thompson et al., 2004; OECD, 2014). As a task of the learning leader, mentorship requires certain knowledge and mentorship skills, ability to create trustful and supportive atmosphere, as well as time to conduct it regularly. The lack of proper mentorship skills can create additional pressure, hinder self-confidence and readiness to experiment and innovate among school staff. Variety of practices of acquiring and implementing school leadership (including induction periods, setting the physical space, peer learning activities etc.) are demonstrated across the globe and need to be analysed and described to be practically applicable in schools.

Interestingly, the research has revealed an opinion, that smaller schools (referred to rural schools) are considered as having better potential for developing as learning organisations, as they are naturally developed as local community centres with closer interaction and common learning habits of their stakeholders. The research carried out in Greece confirms the assumption about smaller schools (<50 pupils) having better conditions to develop as SLOs, however, there is no valid proof stating that rural schools have better disposition towards SLOs than urban ones (Papazoglou and Koutouzis, 2020). Moreover, the research on SLO in Wales shows that secondary level schools were less successful in developing as learning organisations (OECD,2018). A similar assumption about professional schools is also shared by the respondents. Further research is necessary to validate these hypotheses in more countries by applying one of the SLO evaluation tools to identify risks and potential solutions to support SLOs.

The limitation of this research on impediments to the development of SLOs in Latvia is that it focuses mainly on the stakeholders not directly involved in the learning process, but rather acting as experts at the national and local

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levels. Bigger picture might be drawn by developing in-depth interviews with the teachers and school principals that are aware of the meaning of the SLO concept. More impediments and risks to SLO implementation, that were not specifically mentioned in the interviews, can be found in the extensive report on 'Developing Schools as Learning Organisations in Wales' (2018) prepared by the OECD.

Conclusions

Four main stakeholder groups involved in the development of SLO were detected during the analysis of data on main impediments to SLO, such as,
1) policy support system,
2) school leadership,
3) organisational learners (school staff), and
4) learning partners, and each of them has its own function and barriers to its implementation.

At the education policy level, SLO is promoted, first of all, by collaboration with researchers, developing the nationally relevant SLO model and communicating it to schools and education stakeholders. At this point, the main risks are related to the translation of theoretical, academic concepts into practical guidelines that can be directly applied to organisational learning at school level.

Another serious impediment to SLO development is the lack of human and financial resources to enable teachers and non-teaching staff to devote more paid time to learning activities. As a large part of the responsibility for autonomous SLO lies on the school leader (principal or management team), it is significant that the school leader is well prepared for this role, has a clear understanding of the concept of SLO, is future-oriented and has appropriate competencies to engage in the learning process, facilitate learning of others, provide support to the staff, involve school staff and other stakeholders in the creation and further implementation of the shared vision for student development. School leader is both the learner and facilitator of team learning within the educational institution.

What hinders development of SLO and partly depends on the capacity of the school leaders are: insufficient support for school staff, including the inability to provide individual mentoring or proper feedback to individual staff members, the lack of trustful and encouraging atmosphere in the school, the lack of a system for collecting and sharing information, the lack of time or mainly administrative role of the 'leader', which generally means the lack of leadership as a potential agent of change. The impediments to the development of SLO are highly dependent on the skills, such as, ability to take risks, experiment, innovate, communicate, collaborate and work out a shared vision, of both school leadership and school staff, as well as the lack of paid time to practice them in an individual and team learning.

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Another aspect hindering organisational learning is detachment of learning from the real work environment, meaning that learning is mainly facilitated outside the school, with others rather than within the school team. However, the presence and involvement of larger stakeholder groups is a part of successful SLO development. Weak networks with parents, other educational institutions, such as schools and higher educational institutions, and even students, is a risk, because isolation of school significantly decreases the access to resources and opportunities for learning.

The situation in Latvia demonstrates similar challenges for SLO implementation. The main impediments stated by the education stakeholders are: the lack of communication between different level policy makers and implementers, inappropriate languages of communication, low shared responsibility in schools and insufficiency of time and financial resources to implement common learning and collaboration. The lack of necessary skills and the actual shortage of teaching staff, are caused by high workload and low financial remuneration, lack of instructional and financial support from school leaders and municipalities, and low prestige of the profession in society.

Aknowledgment

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About the authors

Beata Lavrinoviča, PhD student of Educational Sciences in the Faculty of Pedagogy, Psychology and Art of the University of Latvia.
beatalavrinovica@inbox.lv

Gunta Siliņa-Jasjukeviča, Dr. paed, associate professor at the Faculty of Pedagogy, Psychology and Art, senior researcher in Scientific Institute of Pedagogy, University of Latvia.
gunta.silina-jasjukevica@lu.lv

Inga Linde, PhD student of Educational Sciences at the Faculty of Pedagogy, Psychology and Art of the University of Latvia.
inga.linde@inbox.lv

Inese Lūsēna-Ezera, Dr. sc. administr, professor and leading researcher at Liepaja University.
inese.lusena-ezera@liepu.lv