Fostering students' active participation, autonomy and sense of responsibility at the Wolfgang-Borchert secondary school

About our school

- ♦ **Location**: Spandau, Berlin
- ♦ **Established**: The school in its current form was founded in 2009 as a merger of two schools
- ♦ **Status**: Public school that provides secondary education (grades 5-10)
- ♦ **Number of pupils:** 490 (in 2016)
- ♦ **Website:** http://borchertschule-spandau.de/
- ♦ **Contact person:** Daniele Mroncz

Why did we innovate?

The school is attended by students from primarily disadvantaged backgrounds, with a high proportion of students with a migrant background (over 50%). The school fosters inclusion: in each class, there are some pupils who are in need of special support.

The school believes that pupils have different needs – including learning and social-psychological needs – and should receive support according to their needs. With the application of various innovative and inclusive approaches, the school hopes to meet the different needs of students and at the same time create a spirit of community and cooperation at the school. The change of school leader at the beginning of the 2016/17 school year led an increased focus on students'active participation in learning and school life.

What were our innovations?

The school's innovations aim to promote students' active learning, prepare them for professional life and develop such competences as independence and responsibility. In this light school innovation approaches are comprised of the following activities:

Practical learning (vocational training oriented activities) for grades 9 and 10 adopted by school in 2006/07. It aimed to offer a secondary degree, particularly for pupils who find traditional classroom environment challenging. It combines practical training (three days per week) at the place of students' choice and classes (two days per week) at school aiming and promotes individualised learning, integration of practical activities, personal development, and preparation for vocational training.

Project-oriented teaching has been introduced in the year 2010/2011 through the concept of whole-day teaching. This concept consists of classes taking place in the morning and afternoon, two days per week. The additional time on the two afternoons per week is used for the project work, such as 'Roberta' (constructing robotics), 'Young people as researchers' and 'Responsibility'. The latter is implemented in grades 7 to 10 through regular group work at school (grade 7) volunteering activities in the community (grade 8), and through targeted projects in the school (grade 9-10). Furthermore, the concept of responsibility is also integrated in the regular subject classes.

Project-oriented teaching partly replaces the traditional teacher-centred method with a more student-oriented style. It has the advantage of responding to the interests of students, in supporting and developing their creativity and autonomy. Pupils have the possibility to suggest topics for projects themselves. The approach follows the new framework plan by the Berlin Senate for Education effective from 2017/18. The school considers individualising learning and teaching processes necessary to work with diversity (migration and social background, learning needs) in the classroom. Different learning materials and approaches (e.g. different media, group work, and individual work) enable learning progress for each pupil according to their needs and preconditions, and facilitate mutual learning. School also includes daily issues (e.g. how to open a bank account and fill in forms etc.) in their lessons to contribute to life-practical skills that students might not learn at home.

To promote students' active participation the school has introduced 'Guardian Angels' approach in the year 2016/2017. It encourages positive thinking and acting of students, conflict prevention and resolution, as well as overall students' participation in school processes. A selected team of students receives targeted training in order to intervene in crisis situations with the goal that conflicts would be solved by students themselves as the first option. School staff intervene only if there is a need for assistance. This project targets the social-psychological needs of pupils and complements content- and learning-focused projects in the school.

Besides these innovative approaches, the school also promotes individualised learning and teaching. Different learning materials and approaches (e.g. different media, group work, individual work with different tasks according to the learning needs of the pupil, project work) are used within a class in order to enable the learning progress for each pupil according to their needs and preconditions, and facilitate mutual learning. The school also offers a variety of working groups for students according to their interests and language welcoming classes for newly arrived migrant children and refugees. The school also offers possibility to work with smart boards in each classroom.

⭐ What have we achieved?

Pupils

School staff observed that pupils were more motivated to come to school, gained self-confidence, autonomy and developed entrepreneurial aspirations, improved presentation skills, had improved respect for the rules of the school and social norms of behaviour towards others.

Pupils with behavioural challenges responded better to work in projects rather than in teacher-centred learning settings, according to the school staff opinion.

Teachers report improved academic achievement after the implementation of the innovative approaches Moreover, most students of 'practical learning' pass their final exams with good results even with much less school-based lessons than students of regular classes.

Thanks to the project work and practical learning, students are much more likely to find vocational training positions in the organisations collaborating with the school.

Teachers

According to the school management, teachers were more motivated and engaged to work in creative settings and more satisfied with the learning and teaching process as it allowed responding to individual interests and be more flexible.

School as a whole

Innovative measures considerably improved the prestige and publicity of the school. Teachers consider the external image of the school as very important because of higher pupil enrolment and financial support as a result.

Thanks to innovations, the school has won prizes in several competitions, including its first place among Berlin's schools in the 2015 round of the competition 'Strong school' (*'Starke Schule'*) and ninth place nation-wide in the same round (Starke Schule, 2016). In 2015, the school was given a positive evaluation by the external evaluator for education in Berlin. Moreover, the school has a quality label as 'MINT-friendly school'[1], as promoting 'Excellent vocational orientation'.

✅ The process of change: what helped us succeed?

School level

Individual motivation, commitment and initiatives by the school leader and teachers were key enablers for all the innovative approaches in the school.

In the case of 'Guardian Angels' initiative, the agreement and support of the teachers and pupils and high motivation of teachers helped to introduce the initiative.

---

[1] The MINT initiative is supported in most Lander by different local actors (Ministries, Foundations etc.) and aims to recognise particular efforts and performance of schools in mathematics, technics, IT and natural science

Municipal level

The Senate made provisions for participatory approaches in its new Framework plan for education (*Senatsverwaltung für Bildung, Jugend und Wissenschaft,* 2012). This provision led the school to think about how to implement it and introduce more project-oriented teaching styles, which promote students' active participation.

Cooperation, exchange and networking with other schools in Berlin (in the framework of the 'Responsibility' project and the practical learning), as well as joint training sessions with other schools (e.g., within the network of 'Strong School'), enabled mutual learning and inspiration. Strong School is a nationwide competition where schools can apply every two years in order to be accepted into a network and receive further support and guidance.

Financial incentives, e.g. provided through the MINT initiative (aiming to recognise particular efforts and performance of schools in mathematics, technics, IT and natural science) and the Berlin 'eEducation Masterplan' enabled the introduction of projects such as 'Roberta' and the acquisition of technical electronic equipment (digital boards and tablets).

The Senate leaves the autonomy of implementation to schools, which enabled them to reach set goals in a way that best fits the particular circumstances of the school.

The process of change: what limited us?

School level

Cooperation and communication among teachers including the new school leader can be a barrier during the implementation of innovation. It is crucial to find a shared vision and reach a common understanding in the process.

Insufficient time resources often provide additional challenge as teachers are already overburdened and have to invest more time into administrative tasks. School management added that the additional teaching hours that the school received funding for were not enough and investing more time into innovative methods or new projects was very difficult under such circumstances.

The traditional time system of a 45 minutes lessons in school does not always allow introduction of project work that requires different time settings.

Sustainability of change

In general school staff considers the innovations as sustainable but key people behind each innovation were crucial for their effective implementation, as long as they stay on the project-level. For innovations to become established in the long term, they have to be institutionalised as it happened (e.g., as 'Practical learning' approach).

Project implementation and its support might be susceptible to the change of the school leader. Some projects such as 'Roberta' or 'Young people as researchers' may receive less attention as it might not be in the area of expertise of the new school leader that has just come to the school.

The school conducts internal and external evaluations, which helps to understand the directions for further development of the school. An internal evaluation of the school's performance takes place every year. The external evaluation is an obligatory measure according to Berlin school laws: an

external evaluator visits the school and evaluates its performance based on a number of indicators, every five years.

The school follows the processes of strategy development and decision taking on the basis of the evaluation and in response to the issues at stake. Among the teachers, there are thematic teams. These teams meet and discuss to what degree they have achieved their goals and which challenges they are confronted with.

Through the 'Strong school' award the school has become a part of the network that promotes school-to-school collaboration and mutual learning, which is a good opportunity to learn about new innovations and upscale internal innovations.

What did we learn in the process? Key messages

Communication and cooperation among teachers were challenging in some cases but motivation of teachers was also a core enabler for most innovations. Therefore, it is important to achieve the common vision and understanding and promote teacher's cooperation in the innovation process, to ensure shared ownership.

School autonomy, favourable policy provisions that enable innovation, and cooperation with and support by policy makers is instrumental for the effective implementation of innovations and for planning their sustainability.

Regular internal evaluations are a key tool for the effective school strategy development.

Further reading

- **A full report** 'Supporting School Innovation across Europe' explores the conditions in the school education system that can enable or constrain positive change in schools.
- **12 case studies** explore the national approaches and individual school innovations. They include the perspectives of key national education experts and stakeholders who were interviewed and took part in workshops.
- **24 individual profiles** give a quick view of the changes and experiences in each school.

Available here:

www.schooleducationgateway.eu/innovation

- The school profiles also feature as part of the European Toolkit for Schools, alongside a range of materials and many other inspiring examples of practice from European countries.