

This profile is part of the EU Study on Supporting School Innovation Across Europe. It presents one of the 24 schools in the study, giving an overview of the changes and experiences in that school. Find the rest of the materials from the study at:

www.schooleducationgateway.eu/innovation

Fostering students' engagement and nurturing life skills through the debate method in the Comprehensive School Foscolo of Taormina



About our school

- ◆ **Location:** Messina, Sicily
- ◆ **Established:** 2012. It is made up of 14 schools located in seven municipalities.
- ◆ **Status:** Public school that provides ECEC, primary and secondary education for students from 6 to 14 years old
- ◆ **Number of pupils:** 1520 (in 2016)
- ◆ **Website:** <http://www.ic1taormina.it/>
- ◆ **Contact person:** Santoro Carla



Why did we innovate?

The socio-economic context surrounding the school is rather diverse, as the school is located in seven different municipalities. There are strong differences in income rates, consumer price index, an access to cultural resources, and intercultural relations. The school welcomes immigrant students coming from disadvantaged areas, such as Eastern Europe, Asia, and North Africa. Students usually come from families where parents are usually seasonal workers. The school has a protocol for welcoming immigrants to favour their full integration: engagement with families, personalised study plans, and education strategies such as cooperative learning.

As the main goal of the school is to motivate students to learn, the school management decided to apply new teaching strategies that could encourage higher levels of student engagement and participation in the learning processes. The school is thus investing in interactive teaching and learning activities, such as the debate and flipped classroom, and training its staff in innovative approaches to teaching.



What were our innovations?

In late 2015 the school in Taormina introduced the debate method in two of its branches (Taormina and Trappitello), involving secondary and primary school students.

The debate method is a teaching approach that facilitates the development of life skills, cooperative learning and peer education. During the formal debate two teams of students advocate their stance while acknowledging the opposition's arguments, plan counter-arguments and refute the opposition's claims with a logical line of thought. The topic can be chosen by the teacher or by the students, and it usually is non-disciplinary. Students lead a formal debate, according to the specific rules and in a certain period of time. At the end of the discussion the teacher, or a third group of students, evaluates the team performance and identifies the winner of the debate. Evaluation is based on the whole process of research, analysis of sources and data, and presentation in the context of the debate. It also considers the role of the individual within a group. This, however, does not always translate into a mark, even though middle school students expect to be evaluated.

This approach to teaching is carried out differently depending on the level of schooling. In primary schools, it is not constrained to a single subject so much as it stimulates students to learn through critical thinking, discussion, and respect of schedules. However, it can sometimes be strictly disciplinary. Within the middle school programme, it is more discipline-based (i.e. "fractions or decimal figures?"), but it can also have a multidisciplinary connotation (as it happens, for example, when dealing with the topic of immigration).

Debate is expected to reinforce and enhance students' knowledge of a general topic, engage students in the learning process, and verify that students can analyse, incorporate, and apply the literature to various situations. It also expected to enhance students' organisation and listening skills, and boost confidence in dealing with challenging issues. Debate pushes students beyond memorisation and the superficial application of theories and nurtures critical thinking instead; it actively integrates and applies classroom materials to various situations and circumstances.

In autumn 2015, a teacher from Taormina went to a seminar on school improvement organised by Indire (the Ministry of Education) in Tuscany. The seminar of Avanguardia Educative illustrated innovative teaching strategies, and the teacher thought that the debate and flipped classroom approaches in particular would be beneficial to her school in Sicily. She discussed this with the school leader and they decided to propose these educational strategies to all 200 teachers in the school. Teachers agreed to try these new approaches, and the school introduced the debate strategy in December 2015. In total, three secondary school classes in Taormina, two secondary school classes and two primary school classes in Trappitello started using debate in the classroom, and run a debate each month. The idea was also to connect different classes from different complexes within the same comprehensive school (e.g. via online debates). Debates between different classes or schools happen four times per year.



What have we achieved?

Pupils

- According to teachers, every student tries to take part in the innovative approach. Students have developed a more positive attitude towards research, have become more passionate in presenting and arguing for their own ideas, and have become more curious.

- Parents also noticed active participation of their children. For example, they willingly meet on Saturday mornings and afternoons to study together and prepare their counterarguments for the debate.

Teachers

- According to the school leader, teachers have become more aware of the benefits of new technologies and more self-confident. With some encouragement, they are willing to learn new practices and follow them, which favours the sharing of knowledge among the teaching community. Hence, there is dissemination of these innovative practices, and other teachers become aware of them.

Parents

- According to the school leader, parents are very satisfied with a new teaching method as they have noticed positive changes with their children, e.g. greater engagement into learning, being more curious and asking more questions.



The process of change: what helped us succeed?

School level

- School had a proactive teacher who promoted innovation and attended an INDIRE training course for school improvement where she learned about Avanguardie Educative and its approaches to teaching. Upon the return, teacher encouraged the implementation of the debate strategy.
- Support from the school leader helped to introduce and sustain change as she aimed to promote collaboration among teaching staff operating in different branches. As the debate technique allowed classes in different branches to discuss the same topics, it was considered to be instrumental for this objective.
- The school principal also ensures a coherence of vision among the different annexes by circulating daily among them. She also has a team of four assistants with specific roles and duties, as well as 11 annex managers who take care of staff presence, organise substitutions, etc.
- Overall, introducing the debate approach did not take a lot of resources, because the teachers were trained by Avanguardie Educative and then they worked on their own, without other material or financial support.

National level

- Avanguardie Educative offered four webinar trainings on debate, flipped classroom, and workshops. This encouraged school branches to use the debate approach in the classroom, and organise a debate each month. The webinar on debate was taken by 50 teachers and the techniques was later adopted by 15 of them.
- Avanguardie Educative itself was an enabler of innovation, as it allowed the school to be a part of a national network, to discover other innovative realities nationwide, and to find advice on Debate from other schools which had already adopted this technique.



The process of change: what limited us?

School level

- Teachers' attitudes towards change of teaching methods was a key barrier for the implementation of innovations. Debate uses modern technologies for research, which makes it difficult for many teachers with a lack of ICT knowledge to easily update the practices.
- Lack of wireless connection hindered the introduction of innovative teaching methods in school branches.

Municipal level

The Municipality is not yet involved in the experiment, which causes challenges in the implementation of specific innovations. The lack of Wi-Fi, for instance, is a barrier to all models relying on ICT.



Sustainability of change

- School leader, teachers and parents consider the debate to be sustainable. It is the most widely spread innovation across school branches, and it seems to be effective in enticing students, who are more used to new technologies than their teachers.
- The debate method mostly requires quality teacher training. If teachers accept the shift from teacher-centred education to student-centred education, the new educational methods will be accepted and sustainable.
- In Taormina school there is a committee dedicated to the monitoring of all the educational and management aspects. There are also many internal committees analysing the different aspects of school life and sharing them with the teaching board. Teaching board meetings, which are held monthly and attended by all 200 teachers, are also a place to discuss innovations in educations.
- School and parents' representatives meet once a month and parents' representatives have the task of communicating with all other parents with regards to educational innovations.
- The school is creating tables and internal evaluation tools, because the staff believes that an evaluation based on sole perception would not allow us to grasp the full impact of innovations.
- As the innovative approach was introduced in the Taormina in late 2015, there were no formal requests for consultations coming from other schools in the region thus far.
- In the past four years, the comprehensive school has merged with other two schools, and thus the principal and teaching staff are trying to even out the teaching practices within the different annexes, and use the school website to promote the introduced innovations. Communication with other schools in the region happens on a more informal basis during general teachers' meetings, conferences, and events.



What did we learn in the process? Key messages

- Schools and wider school community should actively encourage the introduction of innovations in whole school instead of focusing on a single class or teacher.

- Strong leadership and participation in national networks are crucial to keep the innovation process sustainable.
- The teaching staff has to be well-trained and willing to run the innovative approach, and there should be teacher leaders - a group of teachers – assigned extra responsibilities for innovations depending on their expertise).

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.

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