

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

Making students the owners of their learning process through teacher empowerment in the Tjotter school



About our school

- ◆ **Location:** Lelystad, Flevoland
- ◆ **Established:** 1978
- ◆ **Status:** Public school that provides primary education for students from 4 to 12 years old
- ◆ **Number of pupils:** 243 (in 2016)
- ◆ **Website:** <http://www.obs-de-tjotter.nl/>
- ◆ **Contact person:** Astrid Ruytenberg



Why did we innovate?

In 2011/2012, the Dutch School Inspectorate concluded that student results in the Tjotter school were too low. Additionally, the school used to have a negative pedagogical climate, and suffered from a loss of trust between school and parents, according to the Inspectorate and the teachers. Eventually, the school staff lost confidence in the former school leader and requested the school board to appoint a new leader. With an arrival of the current school leader four years ago, innovative processes started and the school staff was encouraged to take an ownership for various innovations. Right after, a common view of education and teacher mutual learning was established, in addition to the culture of continuous improvement.



What were our innovations?

A number of innovation have been established and combined in the school during the last four years.

The Tjotter school leader first focused on the improvement of teachers' pedagogical and didactical skills. From her previous experience as a school leader in another school, she believed that the quality of a school depends on the quality of teachers. She encouraged similar classroom management strategies for all teachers. Team schooling with subsequent follow up and monitoring within the learning community of teachers, individual coaching and change of personnel were among her instruments. Learning from good examples (observing how other teachers have implemented an innovation, watching videos in which an innovation is demonstrated) played an important role for the learning process of teachers. Teachers regularly observe each other's lessons by using a common questionnaire. The school leader uses a similar observation instrument to ensure the transfer between CPD sessions and the daily routines in the classroom.

School has also created student portfolios to make students the owners of their learning process while students were also encouraged to participate in its formation. Positive behaviour support has been included to emphasise positive attention for children. One young beginning teacher played a particularly active role in the innovation. She focussed on cooperative learning and taught other teachers about this method. Cooperative learning in the classroom encourages active learning by group work while student and group results are visible on a data wall. This engages students in continuous improvement by reflecting on these outcomes. The same teacher also suggested the school leader to contact the Teacher Foundation that offers tools that encourage a culture of continuous improvement within schools and connects schools together.

Other approaches being used at the Tjotter school to improve student learning and results include: Encouraging student participation and (direct) feedback on student's results; 'Teach like a Champion' (62 teaching techniques to improve student learning); and HGW (Action Oriented Approach) for student differentiation, a way of assessing the needs of each child to address differences in the class.



What have we achieved?

Pupils

Within one year, student results improved from dissatisfactory to satisfactory, according to the evaluation of the Dutch School Inspectorate.

Students who have experienced the innovation underlined that they have enjoyed the data wall on which they can see their test scores as well as their personal and general improvements allowing them to set goals and receive follow-up feedback.

Students feel happier now as they get a reward for good behaviour or academic achievements in a class.

According to teachers, students are proud of their achievements portfolio and have more motivation as they see their own growth. Even if they have lower score than others, improving grades still contributed to higher average of the class.

Teachers

The special needs coordinator emphasised the importance of stronger cooperation among teachers that enhanced as teachers work together and discuss their problems in the learning community.

Teachers report that they are proud of their work, are more open, ask each other for feedback and analyse their problems together. There has been more cohesion in the group of teachers.

Parents

According to teachers, parents are more open and satisfied about the cooperative attitude of students, which is a result of students feeling more responsible for their own learning process.

The relationship between teachers and students' parents has improved, and parents trust the school more now than back in 2012.

School as a whole

Although the Tjotter school used to be a rather "weak school", but it managed to improve its performance, as assessed by the School Inspectorate, and nurture a school culture that allows making mistakes in the process of learning of the whole school community.



The process of change: what helped us succeed?

School level

According to the teaching staff, the innovation primarily depended on the school leader who had a strong determination for change, previous experience as a school leader and interpersonal skills that facilitated the implementation process. The school leader was ambitious and spent significant amount of extra time at work for the innovations.

The school leader admitted that she was very dominant during the first two years of her work. At the same time, she allowed teachers to experiment and build up expertise. She distributed the responsibility for innovation among the team of teachers. She focussed on what they needed and enabled them to see and experience the innovation she expected. Recently, she has given up her dominant role giving more control to the teachers because she wants them to become the owners of the innovation.

The school leader organised CPD-courses focusing on the points mentioned above, while clearly focussing on teachers' enactment in the class. The head teacher also coached teachers herself, organised co-teaching by external experts, and encouraged teachers to visit lessons of other teachers and to give feedback to each other. Collaborative design of lessons was encouraged. All activities were accompanied by clear goals, a time schedule and monitoring. Thus, a common language of the enactment of education and a culture of continuous improvement and monitoring was established in the Tjotter school.

The costs of extra professionalisation and co-teaching involved an extra budget of about 30,000 to 40,000 euro per year above the regular CPD budget of about 20,000 euro. The school also invested in computers and tablets to enable students to work independently.

Municipal level

The school board (in charge of 21 school from Lelystad) gave the new school leader the freedom to carry out changes. The school leader needed extra financial support for teacher professionalisation purposes, which she obtained from the broader network of professionalisation organisations across Dutch schools. She deliberately selected a professionalisation approach that she was familiar with and trusted.

National level

The innovation was encouraged by the national Inspectorate that generally labels the quality of the school as either 'extra weak', 'weak' or 'basic/satisfactory'. After the Inspectorate had noticed that an improvement process had taken off, it did not label the school as 'extra weak'. The school leader found this very supportive because she believes that such a label would have been very discouraging for the team of teachers and would have interfered with their willingness to innovate.

The educational infrastructure around the school played a role in supporting the innovation as school leader obtained expertise for teacher professionalization from this network.



The process of change: what limited us?

School level

According to the teachers lack of time and large amount of new routines as well as additional work stress were the key barriers for the implementation.

According to the school leader, teachers were not used to reflect their own actions and resisted her feedback at first. As a result, some teachers, who did not show enough growth in implementing innovative ideas, were asked to find a job elsewhere. The other teachers started adopting innovative ideas in their work not out of fear to lose their jobs, but because they saw that the new pedagogies worked better than the old ones.

Teachers still lack opportunity to see how other teachers work as it is difficult to find replacing teachers necessary when a teacher visits another class or school.

National level

A barrier highlighted by the school board member was the fact that the Dutch law requires full-time teachers to teach 25.75 hours a week, which leaves only 20 hours for collaboration, learning new routines and designing improvement. As a result, a culture of isolation is likely to persist in schools that lack a school leader that actively establishes a learning culture within the teaching team.



Sustainability of change

At the beginning of the school year, study conferences for teachers are planned by the school leader (about ten per year). Four times a year, the team gathers to discuss the innovations, and the Teacher Foundation has introduced a weekly Board Session.

Regularly, the Teacher Foundation organises school visits that enable teachers to ascertain how teachers work at other schools. These visits are well appreciated by teachers who found they learned a lot by observing how other schools worked.

Moreover, every month, teachers visit each other's classes. The special needs consultant visits each class four times a year. The school leader also visits classes, using an observation form, invites the teachers to try out something new and allows them to decide on which elements of their behaviour they want to get feedback.

There is constant reflection on the present practice going on in the team. If things do not develop in the desired direction, teachers write down a goal, an action and a date on which this point will be evaluated again.

The sustainability of the innovation depends on the degree to which teachers manage to sustain a culture of continuous improvement. If there is no clear commitment among the teachers, the sustainability of the innovation cannot be guaranteed. Since the innovation depends largely on the improvement of the teaching skills, it is important that teachers continue to feel committed, and are supported accordingly.

Presently, the school leader has also been leading another school two days per week, which helped to mainstream innovations implemented at the Tjotter.



What did we learn in the process? Key messages

Innovation requires leaders with excellent interpersonal skills. Policymakers should invest in the preparation of school leaders and should create new functions within the school for teachers who become the leaders of innovations.

As teachers are well versed with the complexities involved with teaching, they are uniquely positioned to promote change within schools.

To enable teachers to learn from others, it is necessary to have extra personnel to replace the teachers who are visiting other classes.

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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