

*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](http://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/innovation)

# Non-formal education and student engagement to support better achievement and social competences at the Ion Luca Caragiale School in Tulcea



## About our school

- ◆ **Location:** Tulcea, Tulcea County
- ◆ **Established:** 1969
- ◆ **Status:** Public school that provides early childhood education and care as well as primary and lower secondary education for students from 3 to 15 years old
- ◆ **Number of pupils:** 630 (in 2016)
- ◆ **Website:** <http://www.scoalacaragiale.eu/>
- ◆ **Contact person:** Dumitra Dumitraşcu



## Why did we innovate?

The Ion Luca Caragiale School is located in a community with significant socio-economic difficulties. At the end of the 1990s, the first attempts to innovate at school level started with some primary classes being organised based on the 'Step by step' alternative pedagogy system.

The school has initiated several innovative practices since then, through both national and international projects and initiatives (including Comenius and Erasmus+ projects). Despite the demographic downwards trend in the area, the school has managed to remain attractive for a large number of students from across the city of Tulcea, and not just from its immediate vicinity.

The school was chosen for a case study in order to illustrate how innovation in educational practices can contribute to building a resilient organisation that is able to offer quality services, in spite of the low levels of available resources.



## What were our innovations?

The 'Step by Step' system involves two teachers per class in a learning process organised around teams of students, rather than based on an individual learning. The school continues to offer both regular and 'Step by step' classes at primary level, with all students attending regular classes during lower secondary education (from 5<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade).

The 'Different school' ('Școala altfel') programme, introduced in 2011, offers an entire week of the school year dedicated to non-formal education. The theme of a LLP/Erasmus+ project in which the school participated was used for the 'Școala altfel' programme, with all students involved in activities that used and expanded the resources created in the project. Partnerships with NGOs and the local community have also led to the implementation of several projects involving students in all stages, including planning and evaluation stages.



## What have we achieved?

### Pupils

The Ion Luca Caragiale School has a very high level of engagement of students in all aspects of the school activities. This is noticeable in the social and management skills that students exhibit in ad hoc situations, in which they manage to organise themselves and set out appropriate tasks. Students particularly appreciated the implementation of the 'Școala altfel' programme that featured non-formal education, more communication and interaction in teams.

According to students, the relationship with their teachers is different from other schools. The teaching staff engages the whole class during activities, rather than only students with high academic results. According to teachers, students are agents of change when they go on to attend high school, as they demand the same type of engagement from their new teachers.

### Teachers

The academic and non-academic achievements of their students was a very powerful driving force in supporting teachers' day-to-day work, and motivation.

### Parents

The school was one of the first in the county to benefit from the support of a legally registered parents' association. Parents closely monitored the performance of students and opportunities that they were able to access upon finishing lower secondary education. Parents and the association that they set up have accompanied the school throughout its endeavours. They have had multiple roles such as the supporting quality control through feedback, bridging the relationship between the school and local institutions, as well as offering resources (time, know-how, financial resources) when possible. One instance in which parents made a significant contribution was in advancing financial resources for international exchanges to be able to proceed on schedule.

### School as a whole

Overall, the school has a good academic record. The average scores that the students have obtained during lower secondary education are very close to the end of the national cycle test results, with the

lowest difference in the county. The evaluation during school years is fair and reflects good quality educational services.

The valorisation of the innovative practices implemented is evident in the way the school is decorated with images and products of such projects, so that students can see themselves and their colleagues as active and valuable parts of the school culture. This is in contrast to the way many schools choose to highlight individual academic achievements over group involvement.



## The process of change: what helped us succeed?

### School level

The school management and the level of engagement of the teaching staff were the core enablers of the innovations implemented at the school. The organisational culture of the school emphasised strong, open, non-hierarchical interactions. The sharing and adaptation of the methodological resources was at the core of the school's pedagogical practices.

The School Development Plan outlines that the school's main goal is to equip students with skills that are relevant in daily life. The school sets out to achieve this by engaging students in meaningful activities, with a methodology derived for the most part from non-formal education.

The parents' association has accompanied the school throughout its endeavours providing multiple roles such as the supporting quality control through feedback, bridging the relationship between the school and local institutions, as well as offering resources (time, know-how, financial resources) when possible.

### Municipal level

The relationship between the school and local authorities has been constructive, including financial support and favourable legislative framework. One of the parents is a member of County Council, and facilitated the cooperation between the local administration and the educational system.

### National level

The school received strong support from the Romanian National Agency for Community Projects in the Area of Education and Training (ANPCDEFP) to build project writing and project management skills through trainings and regular meetings, and through participation in relevant EU programmes (Erasmus+ and its predecessors).

Moreover, the Law on Education of 2011 can be considered as a support factor for the school. This legislation included a curriculum reform adding additional year of study to the primary cycle, inserting pre-school education and redesigning curriculum with a focus on competences, rather than on learning objectives. It inspired changes in learning methods and encouraged innovation in the school.

### European level

The Erasmus+ Programme and its predecessors have made it possible for the school to acquire international experiences and to enrich its portfolio of practices. The experiences of the school in EU projects was praised by the teaching and administrative staff.



## The process of change: what limited us?

### School level

The staff involved in innovative projects has indicated that they still feel underprepared for specific tasks (e.g. financial management) and expect further training.

### Municipal level

Some interviewees felt that the financial and technical support that should come from local authorities is not always available in a transparent manner to all schools. On the other hand, local authorities have pointed out legal barriers such as the legislation governing public spending that hold them back from offering direct financial support, and expressed their desire for more autonomy in the allocation of resources.

### National level

In general, the teaching staff considers legislation as supportive to promote innovation. However, filling this framework with meaningful activities is hindered by insufficient resources and limited teacher professional development opportunities.



## Sustainability of change

Innovations that require low levels of resources (e.g. methods derived from non-formal education) have attained a degree of sustainability that allow them to be replicated further in the school. However, the sustainability of these innovations largely depends on the programmes that support their implementation.

The innovation that has been introduced by the 2011 Law on Education can be considered as sustainable, considering the level of support provided by the educational system. However, the level of support received through training has been lower than what teachers genuinely needed. Moreover, the assessment of the impact of the curricular reforms on academic achievement will only be available when the first generation of students will finish primary education. This data was not yet available at the time of writing.

One of the most direct forms of feedback is that of parents continuing to bring their children where their elder siblings have studied. As indicated during the interview with parents, this is not mere inertia or lack of options, but a conscious choice. Parents have said that they constantly monitor the end of cycle results and the options they afford to students. There are regular parent-teacher meetings throughout the school year.

Planning for innovation is only done for the near future, because the school management considers that access to resources is unpredictable. The school had a community development project for 2017 in the final planning stages and hopes to continue to access Erasmus+ projects, but it finds it hard to make plans for how it will approach innovation in 2018 and beyond.



## What did we learn in the process? Key messages

The school's main goal is to equip students with skills that are relevant in daily life. The school sets out to achieve this by engaging students in meaningful activities, with a methodology derived for the most part from non-formal education. Student engagement is noticeable in the social and management skills that students exhibit. Students particularly appreciate the implementation of the 'Școala altfel' programme that featured non-formal education, more communication and interaction in teams.

School leaders in Romania have a perception that engaging in innovation entails significant risks, thus discouraging local initiative, in favour of innovation that has the formal support of county and national level decision-makers.

The responsibility of the transfer of practices tends to fall on individual teachers, rather than the school as an institution. Overall, there are insufficiently developed mechanisms, resources and reward systems that would facilitate a coherent institutional approach to the transfer of innovation.

### 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](http://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.

© European Union, 2018  
All rights reserved.

This document has been prepared for the European Commission. However, it reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

