

Name: School innovation in Europe: Fostering equal chances for children from different social backgrounds by making learning more active at the Béla IV Primary School in Hejőkeresztúr.

Location [in the map]: Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén, Hungary

About our school

Location: Hejőkeresztúr, Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén

Established: 1965

Status: regional public school that provides primary education (ages 6-14)

Number of students: 227 (in 2016)

Website: <http://www.hejokereszturiskola.hu/index.php/english>

Contact person: Emese Nagyné Kovács

Why did we innovate?

Students with a disadvantaged background are highly represented at the Hejőkeresztúr school: 73% of the students are from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, and over 50% are of Roma descent. The socio-economic situation of the school pushed the school to innovate, improve the school results, student motivation, and reduce early school leaving. In 2000, the school leader and other 16 teachers participated in a 'Complex Instruction' professional training organised by the US Embassy in Hungary. The school staff considered this to be a good way to motivate and support the growing number of students with underprivileged social backgrounds, while students reacted to this innovation positively.

Our innovations

- The Complex Instruction Programme

Adapted in the early 2000s to the local context of the Hejőkeresztúr school, and based on a similar programme developed at Stanford University (USA), the 'Complex Instruction Programme' (CIP) was implemented creatively and complemented with some other methods that also serve students' competence development (see below). The combination of these methods has resulted in a unique educational programme in Hungary, which could be labelled as the 'Hejőkeresztúr Model'.

The programme provides equal chances for children from different social backgrounds. The method seeks to change children roles and responsibilities in active learning. CIP is based on four principles: (1) education involves a varied level of non-routine, open-end tasks to mobilise students of different abilities; (2) responsibility is shared, learners are responsible for their personal work while the group is responsible for individual achievements; (3) work is evaluated against set norms and roles; (4) hierarchy within the group - the status of the students is mobile.

The complex application of norms and rules also enables the students to assess each other's behaviour. The teams consist of 4-5 students, who take on a different role each time. There is always an assistant teacher, a speaker, there can be a note-taker, a material manager, a time-keeper, and someone who is responsible to maintain a positive climate. It is possible to have more roles in a lesson but no one can be left without personal responsibilities.

- 'Peer-reading' programme

Because of the low level of achievement in reading tests, the school leader suggested introducing a reading programme for the elementary grades (one to four) where students regularly read aloud to each other in pairs, and then exchange their thoughts.

- 'Learning between generations'

Low parental engagement induced the school to introduce the 'learning between generations' programme. Children draw their family trees and label each member with a special skill they have.

- 'Playful learning'

A state initiative has recently aimed to introduce playful learning in schools. This initiative supported school staff to learn how board games can raise motivation, develop logical and social competences. The Hejőkertesztúr School found that it suited their approach to teaching and have been using board games during classes and as extracurricular activities for years. This proved to be an additional opportunity to make more students succeed.

- 'Digital mathematics'

This innovative practice was implemented in 2016. 'Digital mathematics' refers to a system in which the differentiation process of teaching is automated, and students get the level of tasks that fit their personal needs.

What have we achieved?

Students

According to the school staff, the innovative practices have helped to make the school climate more peaceful, and make cases of drop-outs and grade retention less frequent. According to teachers, the biggest achievement was that children have become more cooperative. Rotating roles in the classrooms helps the development of diverse competences and makes the status of a child unfixed within the group. This way, children can see each other in many roles and situations and find out what they are good at. They learn how to lead, how to speak about the job done, how to work effectively.

Teachers

Teachers have learnt how to teach other teachers and how to disseminate their approach to teaching and learning with two professional networks. The first network helps to make the dissemination process more effective, through partnerships with universities, teaching the method in ITE courses, common CPD courses with university teachers. The second teacher professional network aims at 57 schools that the Hejőkertesztúr school has already trained and who started working according to the same methodology implemented at the school.

School as a whole

Despite a very high rate of socio-economically disadvantaged children and children with learning and behavioural difficulties, the school results in the national competence tests are at an average level. Students achieve 15-20% higher scores than other schools of the same socio-cultural background. The school has also become a learning community over the years.

The process of change: what helped us succeed?

School level

For three years, the school leader dedicated time to research and experiment the CIP methodology in a single class before embedding it in the whole school. The whole staff took part in internal CIP trainings

organised by the school leader, before most of them apply it regularly. Teachers were required to attend trainings, but the adaptation of the method was voluntary and most teachers were willing to take it up in their practice.

National level

The most important national partners of the school are universities, particularly teacher education centres at Miskolc and Eszterházy University. This form of partnership involves mutual teaching and learning processes that contribute to the professionalism of teachers.

Private stakeholders also contributed to the implementation of the new approach. For example, Vodafone supported CIP activities and networking as all CIP schools received 1,300 tablets in 2015-2016, free of charge Wi-Fi connection, and upcoming CPD trainings.

International level

In 2000, the US Embassy in Hungary organised a Complex Instruction (CI) CPD course in Pécs. The newly appointed school leader and 16 other teachers from Hejőkeresztúr took part in this training. Their impression was that CI was the right way to motivate and help their growing number of students with underprivileged social backgrounds. In 2006, the school leader had a meeting with the developers of the CI programme at Stanford University. It revealed that basic principles of the methodology were the same but practical application differed, which contributed to the continuous application of the method at the school.

In 2004 the school also received about 16,500 Euros of EU Funds in the framework of the 'Integrated Pedagogical System' to continue the application of CIP.

The process of change: what limited us?

School level

The physical environment at school was not suitable for the new methodology, as in the adaptation period there was a need for mobile furniture. All the desks were fixed and unsuitable for frequent group work.

Moreover, CIP is a time-consuming methodology. Time resources have been an issue as teachers prepare all activities and materials before class. Recently they have had more teaching hours but there are other compulsory tasks that make teachers overloaded.

Sustainability of change

At the school level, several elements helped to make the innovative practices sustainable. Besides carrying out compulsory self-evaluation tasks including parent and student questionnaires every year, the school has several close monitoring methods to follow each individual student and see how the absence and failure rates are changing, who goes to what kind of secondary education, track individual achievement, know who has better or lower results than before, etc. Their in-school monitoring process also focuses on different aspects of the CIP lessons, compared to the traditional ones, such as: teacher and student activities and the way they influence one another; speech and activity frequency of children with a lower and higher socio-economic status (SES); the effect of SES on student performance; dissolving original social status/ rising the status within the group by ever-changing CIP roles in group activities; and sociometry to see the change of central and marginal indicators. The school is in a continuous process of experimentation, development and search for solutions, and seeks to modify their practice to make it even better. For example, they realised that it is more convincing if students are present at some parts of the teacher training courses that they give.

The sustainability of the new practices at national level was supported by national development programmes that focused on raising the attainment of disadvantaged children, with a strong networking element. The school developed good professional connections with other schools. They have learnt the importance of experiential learning as a part of the teachers' CPD. Some visiting schools started showing strong interest in applying the method, and asked for presenting the CIP at their schools or trainings for their whole staff. The school gives non-accredited trainings on request, and most schools get to know the programme in these trainings. For the time being, staff members from 57 schools have been trained, 26 have been using the method as it is used in Hejőkeresztúr, and all 57 are in the informal CIP network. These are mostly primary schools (grades 1-8), but there are 16 secondary schools that have joined.

By now, there are trainers at other CIP schools as well, so Hejőkeresztúr is not solely responsible for the dissemination. In an academic year, the network can take up and train 20 new schools. Some of the trainings have been organised and held by the school itself, some by the Miskolc University. Thanks to network building and active participation in different national projects, the CIP programme has become well known. The CIP programme is the basis of a large school development programme in Hungary, called KOALA, which aims to decrease early school leaving by training the teachers of endangered schools.

The method has been available in three slightly different accredited CPD programmes for more than five years. Each programme is organised by different parties (two universities and an NGO), and all the courses are given by Hejőkeresztúr trainers. The CPD-programme enables participants to equally apply the CIP methodology in heterogeneous student groups to help the talented, the underachieving talented and the children who are lagging behind. Based on this training, participants who have been convinced and motivated start applying the CIP in their daily teaching practice. Mentoring is provided by CIP trainers for the whole academic year, also implying bilateral visits: new CIP teachers can go and see lessons at Hejőkeresztúr or other CIP schools, while mentors go and observe lessons at the joining schools once a month. When the academic year is over, and a new school decides to apply the methodology, trainers provide another four-year support cycle.

Moreover, the Dénes Gábor Award Holders private club helped to disseminate the Hejőkeresztúr model in Hungary and since 2013, as well as in the neighbouring countries of Ukraine and Slovakia.

What did we learn in the process? Key messages

The Complex Instruction methodology can provide equal chances for children from different social backgrounds, notably in changing children's roles and responsibilities in active learning. This methodology is based on a few key principles. Education involves a varying level of non-routine, open-end tasks to mobilise students of different abilities. Responsibility should be shared so that learners are responsible for their personal work while the group is responsible for individual achievements, and that the status of the students is mobile.

Compulsory elements in teaching practices and pedagogies create rigidity. Flexibility should be included so that the schools could adapt innovations to their local circumstances and needs.

Schools as learning communities can develop into professional communities. Workshops, open door policies, frequent discussions lead to identify problems and find solutions. School leaders must create and promote this culture. Being open to visitors and teaching other teachers also strengthens their professionalism. Open school days, project days and parent meetings are also efficient ways to talk about the pedagogical views and the innovations at school, and to make the parents involved.