

Name: School innovation in Europe: student-centred and game-based learning to support student engagement and development at the Open School in Miskolc

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

About our school

Location: Diósgyőr, Miskolc

Established: 150 years ago

Status: public school that provides pre-primary (ages 3-6), primary and lower secondary (ages 6-14/16), vocational secondary (ages 14-17/18) education

Number of students: 300 (primary school, in 2016)

Website: <http://baptistaiskola.hu/>

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Why did we innovate?

The Open Door school is located in one of the most disadvantaged parts of Miskolc. Students' average performance in competence tests and diagnostic tests at first grade are lower than the country average. The disadvantaged situation of the school pushed the school staff to reconsider their approach to teaching and learning.

Since the mid-1990s, the Open Door school is strongly devoted to the Step by Step programme (SbS), which became a strongest driver to implement other innovative approaches in the school. All other innovations adopted later have either strengthened this first defining experience, or were abandoned without leaving sustainable results.

Our innovations

The Step by Step programme (SbS) was designed by the American Open Society Foundations (OSF) in 1994 for the education of 3 to 10-year-olds in Central and Eastern European countries. The SbS programme involves student-centred and game-based learning, with constant feedback. The school also organises two whole-school project months per year that end with a presentation day, often open to the wider public; always to the parents. Classrooms are arranged according to different aspects of learning. As part of the innovation, the school applies "morning circles", which are organised around one theme: the name of the day, the date, the weather, actual topics, poems, etc. Each child learns to speak in a way that is to the point, and gets the chance to express what he or she thinks and feels. It's also a useful approach to compensate the stress that students might have brought from home.

What have we achieved?

Students

According to teachers who participated in the focus group, it is not easy to measure which changes are direct results of the method. Students' social competences, like communication and cooperation, are good indicators. School staff has been using the method for a very long period as an overall school approach, so they do not have the possibility to compare, as there is no 'control group'.

Before the implementation of the programme, the students were hard to teach, they were not motivated and there were a lot of behavioural problems. The new approach to teaching and learning enhanced the

school's social environment. According to the school leader, the school climate has improved, and students' cooperation and communication skills are developing within a few weeks after entering the school.

Teachers have noticed that students are cooperative and interested, that they enjoy learning. The teachers consider it as the result of the teaching approach they apply. However, the school is not yet satisfied with standardised national and international competence test results. Nevertheless, the school staff said to be proud of students' social, ethical and disciplinary development (few behavioural problems) despite the fact that the test results are bad.

Teachers

According to teaching staff, one of the most significant achievement at teacher level is the unity of the staff and the formation of a professional learning organisation in the school. Over the years – due to the deep involvement of the leaders and of two trainers – teachers developed a culture of sharing and learning from each other. The staff has developed the habit of organising workshops where classes are show-cased and analysed.

The school staff has developed a scheme for evaluating lessons. 'Demonstration classes' have helped teachers too better integrate bigger or smaller elements of innovative projects. According to external academic researchers, they have become well-trained, self-confident professionals having a common vision and going in the same direction.

Parents

The school staff is also proud of the growing level of parental involvement. The two project closing days attract more and more parents each year. However, parental involvement does not include the planning or evaluation of the educational programme of the school. The parents are asked to fill in a questionnaire every year on school life, teaching and learning (although with a low response rate). In the lower grades there is tighter bond between the teachers and the parents who come to school with their children and talk to the teachers casually. In upper grades where the students come to school by themselves, the connection is scarce.

The process of change: what helped us succeed?

School level

The school's socio-economically disadvantaged situation and lower performance was considered as the strongest factor for incorporating, piloting and implementing the SbS philosophy and practice. Later, success urged the staff involved to disseminate this practice further.

The current school leader was selected from the staff and was well-informed about the method and had quite some practical experience. Therefore, the change of personnel has not caused any problems.

National level

A lot of schools were seeking for methods fit to work with socially disadvantaged children, to promote equity and inclusion after the 1989 regime change. The state also initiated programmes for answering this need. Since joining the EU in 2004, EU funds have been used for educational reforms and innovative initiatives. The Open Door has been very active, and – amongst others - took part in the Integrated Pedagogical Programme projects, which were enabling and enriching factors to sustain their proven methods. In the framework of this project they could equip three more classrooms according to SbS needs, were able to finance workshops, trainings, to buy ICT tools and educational assets. This programme also provided for dissemination, so the school – like many others – has gained significant experience in teaching other schools.

The Open Society Foundations (OSF), particularly active in Hungary and in Eastern Europe during the democratic transformation of the former socialist countries, provided professional and financial help and organisational frameworks for introducing and implementing the SbS programme among other educational initiatives. Financial support from the OSF for the implementation SbS programme helped for most needs of the Open Door school, such as classroom furnishing, a class library for parents and students, cultural and sports activities, etc. The state provided money partly to sustain and disseminate SbS, as well as to help the integrated education of socially disadvantaged students in the framework of the nationwide Integrated Pedagogical System.

Professional help first came from universities in the form of CPD courses, then from national NGOs, providing professional materials and trainings. NGOs also created and facilitated the network of the SbS schools with the financial help of the OSF. The SbS programme was introduced to teachers via 120-hour continual professional development (CPD) courses in the 1990s. In 2002, two school teachers were also trained to become international SbS trainers. These trainers are still members of the school community and give trainings for the staff.

The school has established good connections with universities, researchers. They receive a lot of visitors and their reputation has grown significantly. There have been conference talks, newspaper and educational journal articles about SbS and their way of applying the method. Receiving positive feedback made the staff proud, and strengthened the feeling that they are a successful professional community.

The process of change: what limited us?

School level

When talking about the obstacles, Open Door teachers agree that time is the biggest problem. Teachers reported that it was easier before the 2011 educational law which heightened the number of compulsory teaching hours. Since lessons are completely activity-based, the method requires a lot of planning and practical preparation. Overloaded teachers can be powered by enthusiasm, but overworking can lead to burnouts. The law also prescribes more hours for learning, and it is difficult to include the morning talking circles into the time table, even though they are an integral part of the SbS methodology.

Big class sizes do not provide favourable conditions for any innovative methods. The state covers the operational budget of the school based on the number of children, but providing meals for all is not included. As the budget is so low, they had to merge two classes (grade two), currently with 34 students.

Another threat to the sustainability of the SbS programme is the fluctuation within the staff. The teachers are overloaded and work under hard circumstances. Two teachers have already decided to move to another school, where teaching is less stressful and burdensome, where there are fewer children coming from disadvantaged social backgrounds, and where the class sizes are a lot smaller

Municipality level

The teaching workforce is getting scarce, especially in this region, so it is not easy to substitute those who leave.

Sustainability of change

The school introduced the SbS methodology first in a single class, and as they were experiencing good results and positive feedback from the students and parents, it has become generally used everywhere.

As for now, there are three active primary schools in the SbS network, which is maintained by the Partners Hungary Foundation (PHF). However, these three schools are far from each other (in Miskolc, Kiskőrös, and Pécs), and due to budgetary and time constraints, they do not indulge in vivid networking.

The trainers take part in occasions aiming at mainstreaming the innovation, but in the last three years they have not been able to organise anything else than afternoon workshops for teachers of other schools. This is mostly due to the fact that the state has not been financing CPD trainings that do not belong to a central project, and the schools do not have any budget to support this.

The school has been maintaining a very good partnership with the Teacher Training Centre (TTC) of Miskolc University since the beginning of the 2000s. The SbS programme has been introduced to future teachers, who can choose to get their teaching practice at the Open Door School. Open Door has become a basis school for student teachers' compulsory practical training.

What did we learn in the process? Key messages

The school has previously struggled with student motivation, behaviour, and lack of parental engagement. The implementation of the SbS programme proved to be a practical remedy for several of the issues at the school.

One of the school's most significant achievement is the development of a professional learning organisation among the school staff. Through the involvement of the school leaders and two trainers, teachers developed a culture of sharing and learning from each other (such as via the organisation of workshops where classes are show-cased and analysed).

SbS has been embedded and became a defining part of the school culture. Technical details, pure methods are easy to transfer, but beliefs, attitudes, and a complex, holistic approach are not. That is why an organic, local innovation that comes from local needs is more sustainable.