

Name: School innovation in Europe: promoting project-based learning and links with the school community at the Sierra Nevada Primary School

Location [on the map]: Granada, Spain

About our school

Location: Güéjar Sierra, Granada

Established: 2006

Status: public school that provides early childhood, primary and lower secondary education for children of 3 to 14 years old (grades 1-8)

Number of pupils: 190 (in 2016)

Website: <http://ceipsierranevadaguejarsierra.blogspot.com.co/>

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Why did we innovate?

The school is in a socially-disadvantaged rural area. The image of the school has been rather low and despite the fact that it is the only school in the area, it was rather isolated from the local community. The teachers' turnover was very high, due to the remote location of the school and students were demotivated and disengaged. In September 2012, the new school leader has been appointed, who has an extensive experience in innovative pedagogies and herself is a member of a university research team on didactics and school organisation. She presented a project to revive the school and the learning process structured around seven key elements for school improvement: school climate, school image, academic excellence, methodological change, development of emotional intelligence, introduction of art in school and openness to the community. In the beginning, the emphasis was made on the two out of seven key areas: methodological change through the implementation of project-based learning and strengthening links of the school with families and communities.

Our innovations

In line with the newly established school strategy based on seven key elements (in 2012/2013 school year) that school since then has been in the process of transformation towards project-based learning. Currently all teachers work with this methodology, getting engaged into classroom level and school level projects. Along with these changes various projects are currently being developed and implemented at school, which usually do not require any additional funding, but rather different ways of organising available resources: recycling project, school vegetable garden (aimed at promoting interest in organic farming), co-education plan (focusing on gender equality issues), peace education (aiming to promote learning to live together and conflict resolution), ICT-related projects (introducing and exploring the potential of digital tools for learning and teaching), library project (through which the school managed to create its own library and now uses it for literacy contests, family learning evenings, etc.).

Project-based learning promotes student-centred learning approach and is organised by educational stages. Each project is developed for 1½ or 2 months and modified for each school year in accordance with the competences and skills the project aim to develop for children of each age group. At the initial stage the ideas are suggested by teachers; however, students are encouraged to share their ideas and participate in the process of the project design. During the project implementation, students' families are also encouraged to participate and share their professional knowledge in the field and themes of the project. At

the end of the projects, there are usually exhibitions and final discussions and reflections, which are open to families and school communities.

The school is also in the process of transforming into learning community, where each school member (pupils or teachers) are active participants in the creation of collaborative learning environments. Since 2012 the school is engaged into internal project "Building a school in the 21st century ", which emphasises the links with community as the core feature of modern schools. The school offers a variety of voluntary extra-curricular activities, open space for children to meet and relax during breaks, different rituals (e.g., Monday meetings 'Mondays with Joy), which promote communication, friendships and collaboration in the school community.

Besides these innovative processes, the school participates in the ERASMUS + project¹ "Learning to lead leaders: Pedagogical leadership as a driver of change".

What have we achieved?

Pupils

Among the main changes driven by the innovation processes in the school, the school leader points to the general improvement of academic results, increase of the motivation of the students and the improvement of the school climate amongst teachers and with students. More specific achievements are also significant and include increase in students' enjoyment of reading and respect for sustainability and the environment.

The school staff considers that the school better meets the diverse students' needs. When possible, the school promotes team teaching and involvement of volunteers into the class to support teachers in addressing the needs of vulnerable children. The methodological approach based on cooperative work has allowed students diagnosed with "special educational needs" to participate in interactive groups and not feel disengaged in the class.

Teachers

The innovation process has contributed to the professionalisation of teachers and improve the team work in the school, as teachers report.

School as a whole

According to the first perceptions of the school leader, the image of the school has improved. The school became better engaged with its surroundings, families and communities, who actively participate in school projects.

The process of change: what helped us succeed?

School level

The vision and commitment of the newly appointed school leader, based on extensive experience and through research knowledge, has been the key enabler for the transformation of the school organisation and learning process.

The gradual change process, which allowed the development of shared vision and understanding on whether the suggested school innovation could lead was important. The school leader allowed sufficient

¹ <http://ceipsierranavadaguejarsierra.blogspot.com.es/2016/06/aprobado-nuestro-proyecto-erasmus-plus.html>;
<http://ceipsierranavadaguejarsierra.blogspot.com.es/2016/07/estancia-en-reino-unido-proyecto.html>

time for internal consultations, discussions, training to develop teachers' capacity to follow the school strategy.

In the recent years, school experienced a 90% teacher turnover. The school, however, managed to attract new, experienced teachers who shared the same vision and ideas for the school development, whose enthusiasm helped to overcome resistance of the remaining teachers and school community at first.

Municipality level

Support and advice of the educational inspectorate has been crucial to transform the school into learning community. The inspector helped to establish links with the local community, overcome their resistance and consulted in the process of the implementation on methodological and administrative issues.

Training and support from the Centre of Teachers (CEP) (coordinated by Andalusian government) has allowed the school plans to be revitalized by focusing on the new methodologies, introducing innovation experiences carried out in other schools and changing the mindset of teachers.

The support received by the Department of Education of the Andalusian government for the Learning Community project. The school has been invited to join the Andalusian Network of Learning Communities², through which it had access to different forms of training and counselling, as well as advice from the other schools in the network.

The process of change: what limited us?

School level

The main barrier to innovate in the school has been the resistance of parents. A significant part of the families saw education in a traditional way and rejected transformation into a Learning Community at first, believing that teaching quality would deteriorate, and children would be less prepared for the high school. However, the constant discussions with families, their engagement into project work and support from the school inspectorate vouching for the methodology helped to overcome the resistance and scepticism.

Lack of initial training of teachers for project-based learning. However, continuous professional development available through the Centre of teachers and Learning Communities network helped to address these skills gaps.

Municipality level

The rigidity of the educational administration as well as the lack of financial and material resources for innovating hindered the implementation of innovative approaches. Schools are not always free in allocating available financial resources the way they see fit. The Andalusian education authorities provide financial support for families in the form of "Cheque-libro", a targeted amount per student to buy textbooks, which cannot be easily spent for other purposes (e.g., support innovative project or develop new teaching materials). Besides this, the decisions about the kind of books or other materials must be decided one year in advance, which renders it virtually impossible to base decisions upon the final school year evaluation.

Sustainability of change

The sustainability of innovations depends on teachers' enthusiasm and team work: school leader considers that if current teaching staff remains in school, the project can be sustainable.

² It is a regional initiative followed by some autonomous communities. Link to Boletín Oficial de la Junta de Andalucía 126-28/06/2012: <http://www.juntadeandalucia.es/boja/2012/126/21>

Sustainability also depends on the effective participation of parents, which is expected to increase in the coming years. Finally, the official and continuous support of regional education authorities ensures the continuity, particularly through the close involvement and guidance of the inspector assigned to the school.

The scientific basis of all the innovations implemented at school is key for their sustainability and transferability.

To learn from its innovation processes, the school constantly and periodically evaluates its projects. These evaluations are internal follows indicators developed during the project design and teachers' meetings.

What did we learn in the process? Key messages

A gradual change process with clear goals and implementation plan is crucial for sustainable innovation. Every innovation requires time and involvement of the whole school community.

The innovation process involves a certain degree of experimentation and risk-taking, but should be also informed by scientific evidence and support by constant monitoring and reflection on the implementation process.

Each innovation must be accompanied by professional development and counselling to teachers (both internal and external), focusing on the key skills required for the new approaches, for them to be effectively implemented and embedded into school culture.