

Name: School innovation in Europe: promoting students' social competences and teachers' collaboration through informal learning practices at the 4th Primary School of Thiva

Location [on the map]: Sterea Ellada, Greece

About our school

Location: Thiva, Viotia county, Greece

Established: 1974-75

Status: public school that provides primary education (grades 1-6)

Number of pupils: 245 (in 2016)

Website: <http://4dim-thivas.voi.sch.gr/>

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Why did we innovate?

The school is located in an industrial area of Viotia county, which received many refugees from Asia during the 1920s. The area can be considered underprivileged in its history of refugee and working-class population, taking into consideration the period of de-industrialisation and the high unemployment rates of the region thenceforth. Furthermore, the school is situated close to the disadvantaged Roma settlement and receives some numbers of Roma pupils (though majority of Roma children go to another neighbouring school). Due to diverse population of the school and their mixed socio-economic backgrounds the school faced a number of challenges related to pupils' achievement and overall social climate at school. To improve the educational level of pupils and school performance, to enhance cooperation between teachers and to avoid conflicts among pupils the school has decided to put emphasis on the informal learning, which proved to be an effective way to tackle social problems and students' and teachers' isolation.

Our innovations

The school has been developing innovative practices of informal learning for six years (since 2011) when the current school leader took office. Initially they began as an initiative within the school and continued with the support from a "Mathenume Parea" (Learning Together) programme coordinated by the Latsis Foundation, which support schools in their educational innovation projects.

As the first step of the informal learning approach, the school aimed to create informal learning environments by renovating the school yard and make it suitable for the learning purposes. The renovation plan was developed in collaboration with the teachers' union and further supported by the School Counsellor of Early Childhood Education affiliated to the Regional Directorate of Primary Education of Central Greece. The finding support came from private donors and the Latsis Foundation.

The second step was to design engaging learning activities that would enhance experiential learning. To meet teachers' teaching needs and pupils' interests, the school came up with three axes of the innovative programme: "Love of reading" (2nd and 3rd grade), "Environmental education" (4th grade) and "Physics" (5th and 6th grade). The emphasis was placed on the renovated schoolyard and the practices organised in it. Each teacher had flexibility to develop the programme in their own way and were encouraged to cooperate with each other.

In the "Love of reading" the teachers and pupils read and worked on 7 books on the concept of "difference" on topics of autism, difference in colour, blindness, etc. School had a workshop for creative

writing with participating writers, during which pupils wrote and published a book. They also created a card game based on the story, and the story about blindness was published in Braille alphabet.

During the “Environmental education” project, children work a lot in the schoolyard (e.g., constructing nests and feeders, researching the birds that are visiting the schoolyard). The school has also visited an environmental park, talked with ornithologists who taught pupils about the life of birds. The environmental project was cross thematic as it aimed to develop language, maths, folklore studies and drawing.

During the ‘Physics’ education, the schools also tries to use informal learning environments and methods. For instance, children created a theatrical play in order to understand how solar energy is turned into electric. The also visited wind-energy park to learn how the wind turbine can save energy.

The ongoing goal of the school is to improve cooperation among the teaching staff. The teachers’ cooperation is enhanced through regular meetings of all teaching staff involved in each grade (rather than a plenary meeting). For example, all teachers of all classes of Grade 1, including specialisations (e.g. IT teacher, PE teacher) and the headteacher meet once at the end of every term (trimester) and discuss the pupils’ progress and the innovative programme’s progress in general. This is an interesting governance tool and internal monitoring mechanism that is quite rare in Greek schools.

What we have achieved?

Pupils

According to the school leader, the school has reached the goal to improve learning levels (school performance in general), enhance cooperation among teachers and avoid conflicts among pupils to a great extent. The students’ social behaviour has improved and they were united by the common activities and taking care of the new school yard.

School staff also noticed that experiential learning also encouraged children in pursuing their interests and enhanced their talents.

Initiatives had a positive impact on group dynamics as children support each other more during playtime rather than inside the classroom. In addition to that, teaching staff noticed that pupils are more engaged with school and appreciate volunteering. These effects are particularly visible with the weaker and less confident pupils. The mixture of approaches applied during the class (e.g., drama education combined with physics) helps each student feel confident in the class - children who may not have been strong in maths or language but were good in arts and crafts, could still show their talents and felt motivated to learn subjects in which they had weaker results.

Teachers

The gradual process of developing teachers’ teams and collaboration helped school staff to understand the pupils’ progress better and learn from each other. Teachers became more relaxed and self-confident because of the support they received during this initiative.

The process of change: what helped us succeed?

School level

This innovation was a collective effort of the school leader, teachers’ union, students and their parents. School leader put the initial effort by organising and supervising the actual construction of the schoolyard.

The school invested lots of time to plan the projects in advance and dedicated additional time for the discussion among the teachers to reflect on the progress of the projects. Management of the school also

involved wider community into the projects, e.g., scientists (ornithologists, mechanics) and craftspeople (e.g. carpenter, workers).

Pupils and parents were in favour of the innovation. Parents of current and former students supported the school financially during the reconstruction for the school yard.

The proactive attitude of the school leader manages to find additional financial support from private companies that were part of school leader's social network.

Municipality level

The School counsellor, who oversees several schools in the country, has provided valuable advice during the implementation of innovation on variate of issues (such as methodological and administrative aspects of innovation).

National level

The school received additional support from the Latsis Foundation for project work and for the school trips. While school has received help from the parents' association, support from the municipality was quite limited.

Informal learning approach has been promoted by the educational stakeholders in Greece, as a way to enhance education quality and inclusive education. This policy discourse has helped to mainstream the measure and confirmed its importance among education stakeholders in Greece (Vavouraki et al. 2008).

The process of change: what limited us?

School level

Initial resistance and lack of confidence among teachers and parents that informal learning approach can work in improving their children's experiences was barrier. However, the fact that the project started from small groups of engaged teachers and gradually involved all other teachers who were able to learn from the experiences of their colleagues helped to overcome the initial resistance.

Overall lack of confidence and sense of experimentation among the teachers is linked to the high administrative burden on teachers and weak system of professional development. * Lack of the state financial resources available to school and limited flexibility of schools to use them is also seen as a barrier for innovation.

Sustainability of change

Since the introduction of informal learning approaches has been a team work, which involved school leader, teachers and the school counsellor, the innovation has been embedded into the school programme. Even now, when the support from the Latsis Foundation has ended, the practices continue to exist and teachers find other sources of support.

However, as the school leader supervises innovations, their sustainability relies partly on individual approach of the leader and her social network. School leadership is the key enabling factor, acknowledged by all participants, not only for the development of innovations but also for their sustainability.

To learn from innovations, teachers apply regular monitoring mechanisms through feedback and team discussions. Informal mentoring is an important learning tool: useful support was offered by academics and researchers to the school leader, especially when she first took office. In turn, the school leader offered informal mentoring opportunities to her teachers. Some teachers distribute questionnaires and interview pupils as a form of evaluation. The school leader monitors and evaluates the innovative approach by

observing whether the pupils are making progress, what parents say, what the image of the school is and to what extent others are trying to follow their example; however, this is not documented systematically.

What did we learn in the process? Key messages

Innovation is a long-term process, which requires personal commitment and collaboration between all the actors involved.

A good practice is to have a pilot period of innovative pedagogies of 2-3 months for goal setting, trials, re-evaluation of goals and feedback. Such a pilot, along with the subsequent implementation has to be accompanied by the through monitoring process.

Regular teacher training and support of the teachers in the classrooms is needed for the development and sustainability of innovation. This could be organised by the school counsellors of the region, in collaboration with universities.

The availability of the external advice during the implementation of innovative practices is key. Such role can be performed by school counsellors, researchers or experts.