

Name: School innovation in Europe: making students more engaged into learning processes through reorganised learning spaces, timetables and educational activities in the Comprehensive School Giovanni XXIII of Acireale

Location: Sicily, Italy

About our school

Location: Catania, Sicily

Established: in the 1990s by merging the primary school of Acipatani with the secondary school Giovanni XXIII. In 2012, other school annexes were added to the structure, which is now comprised of five nursery schools (among which a regional kindergarten), five primary schools and one secondary school between the north and the south area of the city

Status: public school that provides ECEC, primary and secondary education for pupils from 6 to 14 years old

Number of pupils: 753 (in 2016)

Website: <http://www.icgiovanni23acireale.it/>

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Why did we innovate?

The school is located on a large area with a diverse socio-cultural and economic context. The socio-economic status of students' families is generally below average. The school is comprised of eight annexes, all located in different areas of the municipality, some of which are rather far from the city centre. The school has always been perceived as disadvantaged considering the high unemployment rate of the population of the area, the low level of socio-cultural awareness, and the presence of many students with special learning needs (SEN). Up until three years ago, the rates for students failing a subject and for students dropping out of school were rather high.

Before 2011, the school was not perceived as a safe place, where pupils can get high quality education or develop. This resulted in lack of motivation among students enrolling into school. Furthermore, this demotivation subsequently resulted in difficulties in learning (such as paying attention, focussing, and in assuming responsibility, positive roles, and personal commitments). Last reorganisation of schools in the region in 2012 resulted in an increase of the students' population and in organisational challenges. Therefore, after a year of monitoring and evaluation teachers and newly elected school leader decided to implement innovations. In the light of this context, the main objectives of the school were set to: promote active participation of students, their families and external partners; foster inclusion; nurture autonomy and a sense of responsibility. To reach these goals, the school decided to adopt active, interactive, and innovative approaches to education, and thus reorganised its timetables, spaces, and educational activities.

Our innovations

In 2011, a new school leader started managing the school and, following the first year of monitoring and assessing the situation, suggested introducing innovations in their nursery, primary, and secondary schools. The new school leader used her previous experience as a teacher and manager in a prestigious school in Biancavilla, such as use of school gardens and yards, administrative excellence in managing self-evaluation, and the common assessment framework.

Nursery school: outdoor schooling

The Nursery school, based at the annex San Domenico Savio in Santa Maria delle Grazie, has introduced outdoor schooling, after signing a network agreement on with schools from other Italian regions. This included agreements on innovation, trial and research for outdoor schooling in addition to joint project management, active research and outdoor academy creation. The aim of outdoor education is to stimulate sensory experiences by encouraging direct contact with nature in the form of outdoor learning. The school has grown a small vegetable garden on which pupils can work, and has provided safe areas to carry out outdoor activities.

Primary school: bag-less school

The primary school in via Firenze introduced the Scuola Senza Zaino (bag-less school) model to its first, second, and third year classes. The school has joined the international network of Senza Zaino, which is coordinated by the comprehensive school G. Mariti of Foggia in the Province of Foggia.

In this school, students only wear a light purse to hold their personal belongings and a notebook for homework tasks while school is furnished functionally with advanced learning tools. Pupils in SZ schools meet in a circle in the square, where they decide the activities for the day. The teacher then supervises while they work autonomously in pairs or groups to reach their goals. This phase includes practical activities such as playing with educational toys or using domino to learn to factorise numbers. Teacher supervises and corrects mistakes and the learning outcomes are then assessed. This approach is based on the theories of constructivism and of the global curriculum approach.

Secondary school: workshop rooms and flipped classrooms

In 2015, the school principal and teaching staff at the secondary school in Via Firenze have decided to join Avanguardia Educative, and to implement its ideas: workshop rooms and the flipped classroom. They also introduced teaching through scenarios and the 3.0 classroom with tablets for every student, which was sponsored by the regional education fund. The innovative process started with the creation of disciplinary workshop rooms and the implementation of afternoon hours, with the dual intent of supporting the learning of students and the motivation of teachers, while responding to the families' organisational needs.

Disciplinary Workshop Rooms is a revolutionary idea as in Italy students stay all day in one room and teachers move from class to class. Rooms are organised according to a subject, and they can be refurnished based on a subject taught. Teachers are no longer working in an undifferentiated environment, and can personalise their working space based on their functional teaching needs in terms of furniture arrangement, tools, books, devices, software, etc.

In flipped classroom, time and self-study activities are reversed or "flipped". In practice, activities can take many forms, but generally involve students preparing for a class by watching a pre-recorded lecture or undertaking assigned reading and activities, followed by the "lecture" time being used for interactive discussion, problem-solving and other activities with a teacher. As such, the role of a teacher shifts from being the "sage on the stage" to the "guide on the side". Advantages of this approach include an increase in interaction between students and teachers and collaborative working between students; an increase in student engagement and a shift from passive listening to active learning.

What have we achieved?

Students

According to the school leader, the learning environment for students has improved. Innovations had a direct effect on students: they have become more engaged, active, motivated and better focused. It was also observed that students have become tidier as they leave classrooms much cleaner than before.

Teachers

According to school staff, implemented measures changed the disciplinary workshop room environment as well as usual practices of teachers, and contributed to their overall reflection of the school functioning and teaching process.

The school staff felt they have become more motivated due to stimulating spaces for teaching and learning.

School as a whole

In the last three years the Ministry of Education has evaluated school performances based on INVALSI (Vales), with schools submitting a self-evaluation report as well as an improvement plan taking into account satisfaction rates from students and their families. According to the latest evaluation results, the school performance improved and is now in line with the national average.

New approach made it possible to cut school hours and offer optional curricular activities (foreign language classes, music classes, sports).

The school has also introduced new teaching positions focusing on innovation.

The process of change: what helped us succeed?

School level

Voluntary teachers, together with parents, helped the school to convert classrooms into workshops by painting walls and corridors as well as upgrading the furniture during the summer months.

Community level

The school works closely with parents and local authorities, but their support is not of financial nature. The school has a Parent Board, and its statute was approved by the School Board and submitted to the Municipality's office. One of the functions of the Parent Board is to raise funds to support the implementation of the school's strategy.

The City Council Member from Acireale created a WhatsApp group with the mayor, Council Member and School Principals of Acireale to communicate faster.

National level

The INDIRE website section on innovations in education (AE) was a great resource and inspiration for the school. The school adopted two of the objectives proposed by AE (creating new learning spaces and re-organising the school's timetable), and decided to introduce three ideas: workshop classrooms, a unified timetable, and the flipped classroom. Overall, the collaboration with AE is very significant, as the platform provides the school with teacher training through webinars, guidelines on innovation, teaching tools, a national network and an online community for good practices, and webinars for principals.

Concerning relations with Universities, the school communicates with some universities (Bologna, Bari and Catania) with regard to other innovative approaches for nursery and primary schools, such as the

kindergarten in the forest or the bag-less school approaches. On the subject of secondary school innovations, on the other hand, there is no collaboration with universities.

The process of change: what limited us?

School level

The obstacles to the project were mainly financial, as the school did not afford the furniture and tools necessary to implement its innovations as well as the cost of training, which is essential in promoting change.

As part of the school community is less open to new practices with a high average age of the teaching staff, and it slows down the process of innovation.

Municipality level

Outside community has a general negative perception of the school. Many associate the aim of inclusion with the lower standards of education quality and view this school as a place for difficult and demotivated students. This image also attracts lots of children with special educational needs to this school.

The new Municipal administration cannot yet provide solutions to the needs of schools, which have been neglected for at least ten years. Therefore, the issues of building and green-space maintenance, heating, transport, communications, furniture, and subsidies remain unresolved. The buildings, furniture, and workshop tools present considerable deficiencies, and there is no Internet connection or wiring in the school buildings.

Sustainability of change

The school has a strong leadership (the school leader, deputy school leader, and a number of motivated teachers) with a clear vision. It is also part of national networks, which set a standard for activities and require specific training. Furthermore, the teaching staff is becoming more accepting of innovation, as more and more teachers embrace change. Moreover, the school is gaining recognition and visibility due to its good practices in the innovation process.

The Ministry and local authorities, however, are not providing funds to foster and develop innovations, which might hinder future maintenance of these innovations.

With regards to observation and evaluation, the specific programmes have not yet been implemented, and the school is currently using the national evaluation system (VALES). The school introduced changes only recently, and has thus focussed on planning and introducing innovation, rather than evaluating it. Its leading group is elaborating solutions to monitor and evaluate results. Specifically, it is adopting the method that the school leader used in her previous school. Furthermore, the teachers who are part of AE are attending a national seminar on tools for evaluation and monitoring.

At the moment, the Acireale comprehensive school is the only in the region experimenting with these innovative approaches with some other schools interested in the implementation. The school has not yet worked on dissemination, but management is certain that measures are easily transferred to other contexts.

The school plays an active role in publicising their work and AE initiatives in the media; hosted the workshop for results dissemination. Furthermore, the AE platform has proved to be useful tool to spread innovations and build capacity of schools across the country to experiment.

What did we learn in the process? Key messages

It is important that there is a shared vision among all the teaching staff and relevant training opportunities are provided to them.

Strong leadership and participation in national networks were crucial to keep innovations sustainable in all school branches.

Stable resources in terms of funds, technology, personnel and structure are necessary to implement innovations in education.

Adding value to the role of school leaders as education leaders rather than managerial leaders is important.

Continuous support to organisations such as Avanguardie Educative, identifying innovative education objectives and teaching methods and the best practices at a national level is crucial.