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Study on policies promoting innovative pedagogies that are effective in tackling low achievement in basic skills

Final report

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Executive summary

Why this study?

Much has been written about low achievement in basic skills in Europe, especially since the first PISA 'shock' of 2000 when the spotlight was thrown on students' achievement of competences in literacy, numeracy and science, and the high percentage of low achieving 15 year olds in these areas in Europe. Member States can choose a range of routes to tackle this issue. Some characteristics which influence student achievement in basic skills are not easily addressed by policy measures. However, other factors such as teaching approaches and the quality of teaching are aspects that are more easily shaped by policy. Therefore, the central authorities of Member States can put in place measures seeking to innovate or seek to stimulate innovation in relation to these aspects in an effort to tackle low achievement.

Not enough is known about the potential of educational innovation to tackle low achievement and how policies can promote innovative pedagogies as part of the effort to raise achievement in basic skills. Therefore, this study seeks to explore to what extent innovative pedagogies are part of the effort to improve achievement in basic skills in European Member States and reflect on the link between policy and innovative pedagogies. Using a combination of existing data sources (current literature and international surveys such as the Teaching and Learning International Survey and the Programme for International Student Assessment) and primary data collection (a mapping of policies and measures resulting in country fiches) this study brings together the currently available evidence on policies and measures that support and promote innovative pedagogies in order to raise achievement in basic skills –in particular for low achievers. It also expands the available knowledge-base through the collection of primary data for the production of eight case-studies of specific initiatives to promote the use of innovative pedagogies.

What are innovative pedagogies?

There are many definitions of which teaching practices can be considered to be innovative pedagogies. At the core of these definitions are two distinct features: teaching practices which are 'new' and are employed in an effort to 'improve outcomes'. Whilst 'new' might seem to imply that these pedagogies have to be pioneering, 'new' can be contextually defined. That is, innovative pedagogies do not have to be original, they also encompass those pedagogies which have proved effective in one context and are transferred to another setting. They are not original or new per se, but are innovative in the context or situation in which they now take place. Therefore, the following definition of innovative pedagogies was utilised for this study:

Definition of innovative pedagogies

The concept of innovative pedagogies for the purposes of this study should be understood as something 'new' to a given context in terms of teaching practice with an emphasis, whenever possible, on identifying those which have proven to be effective. Innovation can be based on the adoption of pedagogies which are more or less available in another context whether it is a country, region, school or to a particular teacher or can refer to the introduction of something completely new.

The use of innovative pedagogies in Europe

There are pockets of innovative practice taking place in the classrooms of European Member States. However, widespread adoption of innovative practice is not extensive. Evidence from international surveys of teachers' beliefs and practices (Teaching and Learning International Survey: TALIS) highlights that across the EU

teachers of literacy, maths and science do not feel rewarded for being innovative in their teaching practice. Examining the change in teaching practices over time reveals that 'traditional' pedagogies are still prevalent. The perception of time spent in lecture-style presentations has not diminished during the last decade. However, and whilst traditional styles have not been replaced by innovative practices, there has been an increase in active pedagogies such as relating lessons to real life, individualisation, self-directed work and the use of group work. Some Member States have also substantially increased the frequency of joint teaching.

Exploring the existing evidence base relating to what works, improving the quality of teaching is a characteristic of high performing education systems. The statistical relationships between the degree of innovation and student outcomes are indicative rather than causal due to the nature of the available data, but suggest a positive relationship. Zooming in to specific practices that are innovative, pedagogies with the strongest evidence in favour of their effectiveness on the basis of the literature review were web-based science learning environment, game-based learning, collaborative learning and small group work and project-based learning.

Policy measures promoting innovative pedagogies

It is rare for the central authorities (national or regional) such as Ministries of Education to impose specific teaching practices. However central authorities do play a role by providing guidance on how subjects are taught in the classroom and the supporting structures and mechanisms to generate, identify, pilot, scale-up and disseminate innovative pedagogies. No Member State has a specific strategy in place to promote the use of innovative pedagogies as a means to tackle low achievement in basic skills. However, the basic skill strategies (or similar strategies) of some Member States are concerned with teaching practices. Some of these outline measures to promote the use of innovative teaching practices. Regardless of whether they are part of a national strategy, various measures to promote innovative pedagogies are found in the Member States of the European Union. Without these supports, including teacher preparation to use innovative teaching methods, innovation cannot take place and be scaled up. All the measures mapped during the course of this study are supported by the central authorities and can be found at three levels, the macro (system), meso (school) and micro (classroom) levels. However, the mapping also reveals that evaluation of these measures is limited making it difficult to identify effective supports. The categorisation of measures at various levels is heuristic and represents the best fit of the measures identified, but it is acknowledged that some measures will appear at different levels within some country contexts. The table below outlines the various levels, the basis for categorisation, the types of measures within that categorisation.

Table E1. Categorisation of central authority supported measures promoting innovative pedagogies

Level	Basis for categorisation	Types of measures
System	Systemic level measures can be characterised as those measures which seek to reimagine the educational system and bring about systemic change.	Guidance through curricular documents Curricular reform Reforming school types
	The central authority supported measures intending to promote innovative pedagogies which fall under the system level are universal measures intended to promote innovative pedagogies amongst all schools and teachers within the educational system.	Investing in capacity building of research institutions Teacher training

Level	Basis for categorisation	Types of measures
School	<p>School level measures can be characterised as those measures which aim to offer identified schools the opportunity to change or innovate as distinct from those that involve systemic change.</p> <p>The central authority supported measures that fall under the school level are intended to support specific schools rather than being universal in nature (or universal to a given 'type' of school). In practice, this often means that schools (or school leaders) must apply or be designated for these types of supports.</p>	<p>Networking opportunities</p> <p>Pedagogical experts/specialists (external/internal)</p>
Classroom	<p>Classroom level measures aim to change what happens in the classroom in terms of how students are taught. The central authority supported measures at classroom level are intended to support teachers to innovate but are not systemic by nature. Rather, these are measures which teachers can draw on to innovate their practice rather than being 'top-down' and universally supplied to teachers (i.e. the curricular guidance).</p>	<p>Repositories of innovative pedagogies (top down and/or bottom-up)</p> <p>Repositories of innovative pedagogies specifically for low achievement</p> <p>Individualised support programmes for low achievers</p>

Source: ICF based on data collected by ICF for the production of country fiches

Success factors

Whilst the evidence base for effective policy making to promote the use of innovative pedagogies is thin, this study identified some promising approaches and supporting mechanisms for the implementation of the system, school and classroom innovation. These measures were examined in-depth through the case-studies of specific initiatives in order to understand the success factors which contribute to the effective stimulation, incubation and diffusion of innovation. Factors identified through the research broadly reflect evidence from the literature. **Strong leadership** from all levels (system, schools and teachers) is required to develop and disseminate innovation. This can include supportive policy frameworks at the system level, a positive culture of innovation in school supported by school leaders, and commitment from teachers to take the lead in trialling, developing and sharing results and experiences. Utilising **early adopters** of innovation who are champions of innovative approaches can be key to persuading others of the benefits of new methods. The **use of incentives** can also attract both schools and teachers to try new approaches, such as free training or additional resources. Early adopters may convince others to consider innovative approaches, however for those who do choose to embed innovative practice the supporting structures mentioned in table E1 above can be invaluable. This can include ongoing support from pedagogy experts or specialists who can be both external and internal to the school; it is the opportunity to consult specialists who can provide the support they need to innovate. Other supporting structures include networking opportunities, training, and resources.

Conclusions and recommendations

Countries are implementing a range of efforts to tackle the issue of low achievement in basic skills amongst the student population. Whilst some countries do explicitly place importance on teaching (and quality teaching specifically) as part of their national level strategies to raise achievement, in most countries there is little evidence of a systematic approach to promoting innovative teaching. This is not to say that countries do not promote the use of innovative pedagogies, but it is rarely specifically in response to tackling low achievement. Therefore, this report for the most part highlights efforts to promote innovative pedagogies in general. A further hurdle to identify effective policies is that measures which have been introduced are commonly not specific to innovation, but encompass many other aspects. Therefore, whilst there is broad evidence that teachers are being encouraged to innovate in the classroom, policies are broad in nature and there are few targeted policies or measures which are specific to promoting innovative pedagogies in basic skills.

Evidence base and dissemination

The principal challenge when identifying the contribution of policies to promote innovative pedagogies is the lack of supporting data. At the time of writing comparable EU level data for all Member States indicating the extent to which innovative teaching practices are implemented is not currently available. Crucially, data linking the introduction of these practices to improved student outcomes is lacking.

Furthermore, this study found very little evidence of monitoring policy or measures and their effectiveness in persuading teachers to change or innovate their practice. Given that measures commonly are broad by nature rather than specific to promoting innovation also presents a barrier to evaluating or monitoring their effectiveness. Many policies are relatively recent in their implementation, and as previously stated, it will take time to observe the results of their implementation.

Nevertheless, the evidence base can be strengthened. There are some positive examples of partnership between the central authorities, pedagogical personnel and researchers in order to improve the knowledge, research, practice triangle, as illustrated in the project case studies. Stronger links between these stakeholders can be effective when stimulating and disseminating effective innovative pedagogical approaches.

The piloting and trialling of new approaches (or transfer of practices to new contexts) should build in an assessment of the impact and evidence of effectiveness. This needs to be coupled with a dissemination strategy to share the results.

A range of dissemination mechanisms such as networks, conferences, web portals and teacher training were identified in this study. Furthermore, many of these mechanisms exist in Member States even if they are not specific to innovative pedagogies. The central authorities should enhance the use of these existing platforms to reach teachers, particularly those who are reluctant to innovate. Furthermore, these activities should involve all key stakeholders, not only teachers, bringing together schools, universities, policy makers, curriculum specialists, pedagogical experts etc. This would create a complete feedback loop between these essential players in the educational system.

Leadership

Even though teachers are the key decision makers and implementers of innovative pedagogies, strong leadership from school leaders and from the central authorities is needed to support innovation. Effective leadership from school heads is critical.

Investing in the development of the right leadership and management skills and capabilities of school heads can help in establishing a culture of innovation.

Central-level (national or regional) support for innovative pedagogies can bring about widespread change across the educational system. A national strategy that sets out priorities and supporting measures for innovative pedagogies can create an enabling environment. Alternatively, appropriate objectives should be included in existing educational policies and strategies. Importantly, innovation should not only be seen in terms of ICT strategies as is the case in some countries – effective pedagogical approaches of all types should be supported and promoted by the central authorities.

Direction and support from the central authorities can be effective at diffusing effective approaches, the caveat being that this guidance should not be prescriptive and has to partner with schools and give teachers the space to have ownership and build innovations into their practice to meet their own needs. Autonomy does empower teachers, but schools and teachers need to be supported to develop and embed innovative practices which requires leadership from the central authorities.

Outreach

Some EU countries have made significant efforts to disseminate information to teachers and engage them in activities to develop and embed innovative pedagogies. Primarily this is through networks, training and pedagogical resources made available on 'what works'. However, there is little evidence of outreach activities. Given that support for innovative pedagogies is not always a priority among key stakeholders (from policy makers, to school leaders to teachers and beyond), they make not actively seek out innovative practices or the supports to implement them in the classroom. Policies which reach out rather than being reliant upon its target audience to pursue innovative pedagogies may be most effective. It is also worth considering targeted approaches to reach out directly to schools with most disadvantaged and lowest achievement in order to ensure appropriate supports are in place. One identifiable approach to outreach found in this study is the use of 'early adopters'. That is, peers who have successfully utilised innovative approaches take on the role of 'innovation champions' in order to persuade their colleagues of the benefits, values and evidence of impact of innovative practice.

Scaling up

Scaling up requires a comprehensive evidence base and a strategy in place to disseminate results. At all levels there is a need to take a gradual, long-term view. Change will not happen overnight, teachers have a lot of demands on their time and will need a **long time-frame to innovate** and innovative practice will take time to diffuse throughout a school amongst personnel. At the system level innovative pedagogies will take time to be embedded into the curriculum, teacher training and other measures.

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