SCHOOL CASE STUDY

Zespół Szkół Ekonomicznych Economic School

School name	Economic School Complex in Slupca / Zespół Szkół Ekonomicznych im. M. Jackowskiego w Słupcy
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Website	www.zseslupca.eu
Age of students	14-20
Number of staff	48
Area of focus	Learning spaces stimulating development of key competences

This school case study is part of Output 4 by the Novigado project
"Guidelines in Learning Space Innovations", available at the project website.

Co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union

Background, Context and Drivers to change

There were lots of sources and ideas among students, teachers, head teacher on how the school should be changed. A lot of ideas implemented were preceded by discussions, but also by polls and questionnaires among students. This is not only thinking about the building itself - students also took part in a competition called "A School with Climate" which aimed to change the surrounding area of the school. Worth to mention that our students were solely responsible for this project – implementing changes, designing the school area and preparing the final project.

While changing the learning space at school we also focused on students' and teachers' needs. The most important aspect was to "deformalize" the school – we want to create or modify school spaces to be more "user-friendly" for the school community, to stimulate good relationships, to boost educational motivation and creativity. We think good relations improve effectiveness of the educational process. A friendly and safe space is essential for developing creativity, exchanging experiences and reflections as well as for stimulating innovative methods of learning. Both students and teachers need a friendly space for cooperation and social coexistence, so the personal development would proceed in a proper direction. In the process of changes the whole school community was involved – students, teachers, administration personnel service and parents (parents participated in financing the equipment).

Flexible/innovative learning environment

Flexible Learning Environments (FLEs) are situated in few classrooms, in the advertising studio which includes a darkroom, in the nutrition lab, forwarding and logistics studio, as well as in the library.

FLEs are created to support students' co-operation and active learning (project work, real problem-solving tasks). The students have access to technology (tools, internet, apps, and platforms) to create a variety of educational materials – results of learning, e.g., movies, advertisements, campaigns, business plans. Special focus was given to design educational situations to develop competencies required in business/professional life (logistics studio with all programs and simulations; advertising studio with all hardware, software and professional photo/film equipment).

While creating such environments both furniture, ICT and lightening have been taken into account. Due to the fact that the school building dates back to 1960's, it is not always possible to change acoustics or shape the classroom space. The main factor considered, however, is the needs of students and teachers who advocate the change.

Student-centred pedagogy

Deformalizing student's educational space and the surroundings definitely supports the educational effectiveness of teachers, motivation of students and builds relationships among all participants in this process. Teachers became keen users of IT tools at school. They also started changing the space of classrooms by rearranging desks according to their educational needs.

Students more often work in groups, exchange their ideas and experience. They build positive relationships in classes and school, especially on practical vocational lessons and in such places as fitness studio, school shooting range or the assembly hall.

Some teachers started to work regularly with the project-based learning and design thinking methods. Students' social competences, critical and creative thinking are developed. Students take part in such projects like "School for Democracy", develop their photo studio, make short movies and develop art projects in the advertising studio (where they can use for example 3D printers, graphic programmes and plotters).

New spaces brought more intimacy in the school which improved relationship quality between teachers and students. New interior furnishings stimulate teachers to implement new ideas, technology and experimental methods of teaching.

An important aspect of the school's work are social projects carried out by students. The project work includes diagnosing problems, preparing a campaign to publish a given topic and encourage people to be active. Students have to form teams, use ICT and work out solutions. The school graduates are active citizens, aware of their competences, prepared for social and professional lives.

"School should be a friendly place, creating conditions for taking initiatives and strengthening students, engagement. It is important to change the thinking about the role of education and to spread a new philosophy of work among the whole group."
Karolina Rakowicz, Head Teacher

Use of technology

ICT plays a crucial role in the development of FLE therefore most of the classrooms are equipped with laptops with internet access, overhead projectors, and interactive whiteboards. The use of web resources and ICT equipment encourages the development of students' autonomy, team-work and productive learning. Moreover, the role of the teacher and the role of learners are modified. Learners are more prone to actively explore rather than listen and memorize. Consequently, students tend to take more control over the process of learning. While using ICT, more activities are enhanced by students and both learning and teaching become more practical than in traditional classroom. In our opinion, teachers using ICT tools are more collaborative and supportive towards the others and students.

ICT has a significant impact on many general subjects such as foreign languages, geography and art as students can be exposed to authentic materials found online, as well as on practical vocational subjects since they can concentrate not only on the authenticity but also on finding solutions to particular real-life problems. The collaboration with IT providers is possible mainly due to EU projects from which funds are obtained to purchase the equipment and services such as license, Wi-Fi access points.

Impact

Benefits

FLE generate benefits for the whole school community, including both teachers and learners; in some cases, it may also influence the local community.

Students:

- Even though class activities are time determined (i.e., task/project deadline) students work at their own pace more often
- Learners have a chance to work in small groups thus they build better relationships with different peers each time they are assigned to a task/project group
- Students have a chance to present skills they are best at, rather than concentrate on their weaknesses, consequently every student can feel important and needed in a group; better students can support those in need
- They can learn from their peers
- Students become more autonomous and creative.

Teachers:

- Are encouraged to use active methods and approaches
- Teaching process becomes more individualized and thus more effective
- Have access to different resources and materials
- Engage themselves in numerous workshops and trainings.

Flexible learning spaces (FLS) help to build a student-friendly institution and students' openness to innovative ideas and actions. Local community is more prone to participate in the initiatives advocated by our school. As a consequence, future students are more likely to choose the school with FLS rather than the schools not possessing such facilities.

Challenges

- One of the major challenges regarding the use of FLS was the teachers' fear of its influence on the learning/teaching effectiveness. One of the ways to overcome this fear was general training for the staff, as well as the possibility of individual training for the interested teachers. Yet, some teachers still believe that only the traditional classroom can develop students' skills and guarantee students' future success. However, more and more teachers are trying out FLS or its elements in their every-day work. Paradoxically, the pandemic period and remote learning have increased teachers' interest in new educational solutions, innovative teaching methods and the use of ICT. Both teachers and students are more willing to explore and experiment.

Images provided by Zespół Szkół Ekonomicznych Economic School

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