

Reports from the Field: Primary School in Brazil Using Finnish Innovation Pedagogy to Create Meaningful Online Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: ISO Colégio in Paraíba, Brazil, implemented Finnish innovation pedagogy from Turku University of Applied Sciences (TUAS) as a pedagogical strategy in their new primary school in early 2020. The implementation started in class teaching but due to the pandemic, it was transferred online, still using the new pedagogical approaches. Experiences by teachers and pupils have so far been mostly positive. Management has been satisfied with the overall success and plan to continue with innovation pedagogy as a strategy.

Keywords: pedagogy, online learning, Brazil, Finland.

Introduction

The Aim of the Project

In February 2020, ISO Colégio (ISO) opened a new primary school in Paraíba, Brazil, that offers pupils and families in the region an opportunity to use a new, more active way of learning using a pedagogical approach of Innovation Pedagogy from Finland. Finland's good results in PISA were already well-known in Brazil and there had been great interest in Finnish methods in the local education arena (Väljjarvi et al, 2007). Some key features of the Finnish education system of interest to ISO were student-centeredness, equality, support, assessment and pedagogical solutions. In Finnish schools, students are active learners, who work in constructive interaction together with others (National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014, 2018).

Trust and good relationships in all school work are, in addition to what is listed above, key features in the Finnish education system. Finland has highly qualified teachers based on the competitive and academically challenging teacher education system. This enables the teachers to have professional autonomy for teaching and development (Sahlberg, 2015). The system develops a strong trust in teachers' capacity to take the responsibility for the best of their students' learning. The cooperation between TUAS and ISO school showed this trust and willingness for a good relationship from the very beginning of a mutual path.

ISO had started collaboration with Turku University of Applied Sciences (TUAS) in autumn 2019 to adopt Innovation Pedagogy (Kettunen et al, 2013) as the pedagogical strategy of the new school. Innovation pedagogy is based on collaborative, active learning that supports creation of innovations



and development of innovation competencies for future working life and society, both in class and online (Innopeda.fi, 2020).

The aim of implementing innovation pedagogy at ISO was to introduce a new, more active way of learning using pedagogical methods and ISO wanted to use the approach from the Finnish education system as a framework. The new pedagogical strategy was first implemented onsite in the premises of the new school in February 2020. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the strategy was implemented in online learning as well, starting from April 2020. ISO is the first school in Brazil to implement the pedagogical principles of innovation pedagogy in basic education at the strategic and operational level.

The Context

ISO provides private basic education in Paraiba, in the north-eastern part of Brazil. The school has been operating as a primary school since February 2020. The number of students in the new school was 460 as of February 2020. The number of staff was 210, including 56 teachers. The region relies on tourism as its main income, and GDP was R\$ 62.387 mi (IBGE, 2017). In December 2019, the state of Paraiba had 4,868 basic education schools with 548,659 enrolments, and, of this total, the municipal network was responsible for 66.9% of schools, followed by the private network with a 19.1% share (INEP, 2019). Most schools in the region still use traditional methods of education, focusing on teacher-led, lecture-based sessions without active or interactive elements to engage the pupils. Also, assessment is still summative and based on end-of-course final exams.

Whilst distance learning is common in higher education, especially in remote areas of Brazil, enabling access to education, online learning and teaching is not yet part of primary education. What is more significant in this case, online learning is not currently fully accepted as part of formal education at the primary level, and only 50% of studies completed online during the pandemic is counted towards the official transcript. Another factor contributing to this case is digital readiness, which, in Brazil, is not at as high a level as in Finland. The pandemic has shown the importance of digital readiness in business and society, and Finland was number one out of 28 EU member states in the most recent (European Commission, 2020) Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI), thus making readiness for online studies more accessible, too. For example, according to 2018 data, only 27% of Brazilians had a portable computer at home (CETIC, 2018), whilst 81,6% had access to internet (IDADOS, 2020).

Introducing the pedagogical strategy at ISO involved a development process, which included, among others, teacher training and systematic consultation meetings to ensure fulfilment of Standards and Guidelines of Quality Assurance (Joshi et al, 2019) for implementing innovation pedagogy as a pedagogical strategy. The process started with a development plan that would introduce innovation pedagogy in different parts of the school, including management, learning environments, teaching and assessment. The development plan was created in collaboration with ISO during a visit to Turku, Finland, in autumn 2019. Introducing online teaching and learning was planned to be implemented at a later stage of the development process but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it had to be brought forward.

The next step in the plan was to train the new teachers hired to teach in the school. Two Innopeda® Trainers from Finland held an intensive training week in Paraiba in December 2019. The purpose of the training was to equip teachers with principles and methods of innovation pedagogy. The teachers

were already experienced in basic education and had a primary school teacher's degree, but were not familiar with innovation pedagogy or Finnish education approaches at a deeper level. Most of them had no experience of online teaching, either. The teachers were highly enthusiastic and took active part in all activities and development tasks during the intensive week, as well as in the online part of the training that continued until early spring 2020.

The school opened in February 2020 in the new premises, where learning environments were designed modelling those in Finnish primary schools to enable active learning. Moreover, teachers were ready to implement new ways of teaching and assessing the pupils using principles and methods of innovation pedagogy, coupled with updated knowledge on Finnish basic education.

The Character of the Innovation in Learning

Some of the new concepts to teachers, students and parents alike were student-centeredness, informality, active and interactive approaches, different ways of assessing, as well as giving and receiving feedback. In the Brazilian context, they were not used to allowing room for equal interaction and open communication in the classroom between teachers and pupils. Moreover, most of the teachers had not used activating teaching methods or different ways of assessing, especially process-like, continuous assessment and feedback. Pupils had not assessed their own work before, nor their peers' work. Activities done in the classroom and outside of the classroom, including home, were new concepts to all parties. Innovation competencies, similar to transferrable competencies, were also new as learning objectives to all. Teachers started implementing these new approaches in class teaching, and were supported in that process by the Innopeda® Trainers online. Managers of ISO were also actively involved in the development process and supporting their staff in their new role.

In the first few weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic, the situation in Brazil seemed to be under control and schools remained open. However, as the situation worsened, schools in Paraiba were forced to close. Initially, all teachers were sent on anticipated annual vacation of one month, with the plan of returning to work after that. However, after returning from leave, it became clear that teaching and learning would have to be transferred to the online environment.

Since ISO had only recently opened, the premises that were designed for onsite teaching were not yet equipped for fully online implementations. Moreover, some teachers and pupils lacked equipment suitable for online studying. ISO had to react quickly and acquire an online platform to transfer the newly implemented approaches of innovation pedagogy, and decided to select Microsoft Teams as their online learning environment. TUAS Innopeda® Trainers supported ISO managers and teachers throughout the process of transferring their education online, and offered consultation and shared experiences of online learning practices during the pandemic from experts in Finnish basic and higher education.

Teachers quickly adopted new ways of creating active and interactive learning online, created videos to engage the pupils and gave access to learning materials via online means. They began collaborating with pupils in the Teams environment in both synchronous and asynchronous ways. Parents were kept informed via email, whatsapp, an online agenda and phone calls about each day's activities, tools, expectations and requirements, as well as ways of assessing the pupils.

The Impact on Development, Including Evidence

In the first few weeks of school, when pupils were still studying at the new school premises, they reported they had enjoyed school more than ever before, with some even stating they did not want to leave the school, something quite unheard of in many other school contexts. Moreover, pupils seemed to adapt to online studies quickly, and were keen to do the activities given by their teachers. Pupils were proud of the work they had produced and were able to see results.

Some parents were unsure about the success and reliability of the new pedagogical strategy and shared concern over a possible lack of teaching or unfamiliar assessment methods. Some, on the other hand, were excited with the change and were ready to move forward with the new world of online education. Some families did not have suitable devices for online learning at the beginning, which slowed down their participation. The pandemic also affected some families in terms of economic and health issues, which, in turn, had an effect on the pupil's participation in online education.

Teachers shared feelings of initial anxiety and stress over the new role and using new methods and approaches, but also felt tremendous feelings of success and confidence in making a difference in reshaping education. They felt proud of producing high quality online education under such time constraints. Managers of ISO were overall satisfied with the implementation of innovation pedagogy in both onsite and online contexts in such demanding times.

Plans for Future Work

The steps taken at ISO school to overcome the crisis of COVID-19 have been laborious and have demanded commitment from the school management and teachers. However, going strongly online in an unexpected situation will also help the school in the future to ensure quality, equity and well-being in education, especially if a second wave of the virus occurs. According to OECD (2020), next steps should foster the approaches that bring schools and homes closer together and foster the autonomy of students to manage their own learning.

ISO plans to continue implementing innovation pedagogy as a pedagogical strategy in both onsite and online contexts, as well as implementing a feedback and development system to ensure their internal quality management. Collaboration with TUAS continues with the next steps of the development process. Further training will be required for online teaching and learning, as well as technical skills related to online teaching. Evaluations and research will be conducted on both onsite and online implementations in the near future to fully see the impact that utilising a new strategy has had on learning results, student satisfaction, the professional competence of teachers or regional development, to name a few. Importantly, ISO continues to support teachers and pupils in their journey to a new way of learning, inspiring them to gain new skills in innovation competencies and to approach education in a more active manner. Collaboration with families and the surrounding community is important, and they hope the change in education they have started may make a difference in the future of the region as well.

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