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## EDUCATIONAL INNOVATIONS IN PRIMARY EDUCATION: THE AWARD-WINNING PROJECTS OF THE “INSTITUTION OF EXCELLENCE AND PROMOTION OF GOOD PRACTICES” ACTION

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**Abstract:** Many different sectors perceive innovation as a problem since we are living in a period when both technological and societal change is occurring at a quick and dynamic pace. As an illustration, innovative ideas and technologies are rapidly absorbed in the fields of entrepreneurship, research, health, and industry. These ideas and technologies shape significant organizational and production changes, with the objective of discovering new ways to solve problems and/or enhance products and services. In a perfect world, an innovation would act as a catalyst for a new cycle of learning, which would ultimately result in a more extensive change and ongoing development inside an organization. With the goal of fostering and incorporating creative teaching techniques, improving educational outcomes, and eventually better preparing students for social integration, novel educational initiatives are being proposed as an essential component of the curriculum for elementary and secondary school. The purpose of this study is to present a unique theoretical-conceptual framework that was utilized as the basis for the development of an analysis and visualization scheme for creative educational efforts. The study questions center on the broader significance of educational innovations for elementary schools and are as listed: What educational background aspects in the implementation of projects by the "Excellence and Highlighting of Good Practices" institution influence the inventive activities that lead to excellent practices? What are the creative components that contribute to the effectiveness of an educational initiative, resulting in favorable outcomes for students, instructors, and the school? What is the level of sustainability and integration of the educational innovations in the schools that have adopted them? What challenges arise in adapting and transferring practices within each school? The application of this scheme to the analysis of the educational projects that were awarded in primary schools as part of the "Institution of Excellence" initiative showed the distinctive characteristics of innovative programs as well as the variables that promote their long-term viability and incorporation into school practices. The characteristics of the projects that were analyzed lend themselves to qualitative analysis. The purpose of this analysis is to highlight, in a real environment, the multiple aspects of innovative characteristics, where they exist, as well as to clarify the conceptual categories and to gain a deeper understanding of the educational processes. Additionally, the limited number of 11 projects does not lend itself to the finding of broad patterns, but rather to the construction of a thorough image for each case and by highlighting features that are similar to all of the projects as well as distinctions between them. The leadership of the action coordinator, the utilization of information and communication technology and appropriate school infrastructure, the culture of the school, the climate of collaboration among teachers, educational leadership, the incorporation of actions into school policy, as well as school networking and participation in European programs are all essential components.

**Keywords:** educational, innovation, curriculum, school practices

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In our current day, rapid technological and social advancements present innovation as a significant issue across several sectors. Creative ideas and technology are rapidly integrated in entrepreneurship, research, health, and industry to drive significant organizational and production transformations, aiming to innovate solutions and enhance products and services. An innovation ideally acts as a catalyst for a new phase of learning, leading to wider change and ongoing growth inside a firm (Serdyukov, 2017).

Education evolves slowly compared to other sectors or systems, despite its aim to improve students and equip them for life (Galvis, 2018). Schools, especially colleges, have not made substantial changes to their organizational structures, curriculum, teaching aids, pedagogical practices, or assessment systems. Most professors still use traditional methods, emphasizing teaching topic via lectures, employing unique teaching materials, and assessing students with written exams (Nicholls, 2018).

Education must improve traditional methods and include novel approaches that align with the current needs of the twenty-first century and meet student expectations (Fourati-Jamoussi et al, 2021). Novel things, innovative educational resources and environments, fresh pedagogical methods, and imaginative ideas are very beneficial for enhancing educational experiences and expanding learning opportunities for both students and instructors. Educational systems worldwide today prioritize the spread of educational innovations, as shown by several sources. The European Commission's Europe 2020 strategy focuses on promoting growth to transform the European Union

into a competitive and unified society (Hosseini et al, 2021). Sustainable development must be both inclusive and accessible to all individuals. The EU aims for smart growth via enhanced performance in education, research and innovation, and digital society (Ramirez-Montoya et al, 2022).

## **2. OBJECTIVE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This research is based on the premise that there exists a wide range of innovative teaching and learning methods, and that many educators actively want to investigate and introduce new ideas (Lopez-Belmonte et al, 2023). The educational system has not yet developed effective techniques and procedures to promote and disseminate these ideas to inspire and support other educators. Research on the context of inclusion, difficulties, assessment of educational results, and conditions for including educational innovations in compulsory education has produced limited results, despite the country's strong focus on educational innovations.

This effort aims to gather data from innovative programs in primary schools as part of the "Institution of Excellence and Highlighting Good Practices in Primary and Secondary Education" activity . Two unbiased assessors evaluated the action proposals anonymously and without bias. The evaluation criteria emphasized innovation-added value, learning outcome, pedagogical value, applicability-contribution, and content.

The research aims to establish specific criteria for evaluating innovative projects to emphasize their innovative features and evaluate their sustainability and feasibility in a broader context beyond the school environment. The research focuses on highlighting the creative elements of the awarded projects and the factors that contribute to the dissemination and integration of educational innovations into school practices, building on the previous theoretical discussion.

## **3. MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The research analyzed 11 educational innovation projects implemented in primary schools. These projects were acknowledged by the Ministry of Education for their quality and promotion of excellent practices in Primary and Secondary Education. The initiatives being analyzed were selected from the repository of award-winning projects in the best practices collection (Petridou & Trimbou, 2023). This source provided comprehensive information and relevant materials for each project, such as descriptions, presentations, marketing, and educational resources.

Novel innovation criteria were created for evaluating the awarded projects, drawing on a theoretical framework and comprehensive review of existing literature. The researchers developed a distinctive framework to gather, describe, and evaluate creative attributes using the CIPP model, which emphasizes project design and implementation . This framework is extensively used for evaluating projects, programs, persons, items, organizations, and systems in many areas such as education, research, development initiatives, and transportation safety (Lefkos & Kanyhis, 2021).

The model's fundamental elements, represented by the acronym CIPP (Papadimitriou & Sofos, 2019), are structured based on four dimensions: context, inputs, processes, and products. We used a modified version of the approach (Tsanakas et al, 2018) that has been successfully applied in evaluating European projects at both the developmental and concluding stages. We have included a fifth component that focuses on the project's long-term sustainability and overall benefit to schools.

## **4. RESULTS**

The research presented focuses on analyzing innovative educational projects implemented in Greek primary schools, utilizing a detailed framework for examining various aspects of these initiatives. The first project, "English Meets Art" at the 1st Primary School of Eleftherio-Kordelio in Thessaloniki, integrated disciplines such as English, art, music, and theater, engaging students with the local community and international peers in Kenya. This project, in its third year, demonstrated sustainability by being incorporated into the school's strategic plan and enriching the school library.

The second project, "Pineios River Sends an SOS," addressed an environmental issue at the Taxiarchon School in Trikala. It combined environmental education with other subjects, employing technology and collaborative methods to produce digital and printed materials. Despite limited dissemination, the project received support from the school administration, indicating potential for ongoing impact.

The third project, exploring diversity and racism through De Bono's Six Thinking Hats, was conducted at a mountain zone school in Zakynthos. This innovative approach combined various subjects, engaging students creatively and collaboratively, resulting in a presentation event and recognition in European programs and awards.

The fourth project, "Solving Environmental Problems with Comics," at the 4th Primary School of Kalambaka, focused on environmental education and language through collaborative comic creation. However, this project lacked a follow-up, indicating a potential area for improvement in terms of sustainability.

The fifth project, "Human Rights in My Classroom: All Different, All Equal," at the 37th Primary School of Larissa, aimed to raise awareness of social inequalities and respect for human rights. Despite its creative and community-engaging approach, it lacked a legacy of innovative actions within the school, suggesting a need for more structured integration into the school's ongoing practices. These projects highlight the diversity of innovative approaches in Greek primary education, illustrating the challenges and successes in integrating and sustaining these initiatives within the school system.

The sixth project, "I Formulate Thoughts, Execute Actions, Adopt Attitudes," undertaken by the 2nd Experimental Primary School of Rhodes, focused on environmental education and language, emphasizing sustainability and positive attitudes. Involving all students and teachers over 1.5 school years, the project fostered peer teaching, creativity, collaborative learning, and community engagement, producing a collection of fairy tales, an environmental board game, digital content, and a blog, highlighting the experimental school's policy for implementing innovative actions.

The seventh project, "As Long as There Are People," by the 5th Primary School of Kilkis, aimed to introduce students to NGOs and promote European values through interdisciplinary approaches in social and political education. With 19 students and a duration of 20 teaching hours, the project involved experiential and collaborative methods, leading to community-engaged actions and a school-wide openness facilitated by a teacher's initiative under the European Teachers4Europe program.

The eighth initiative was a collaborative effort among schools in Serres to create a local history textbook, linking local and national history through the cooperation of 10 educators and various local entities. This project employed modern historical teaching methodologies and interdisciplinary approaches, resulting in a comprehensive Serres history manual enriched with online material references.

In Thessaloniki, the 9th project by DELASAL College focused on creating a short film, enhancing students' understanding of cinematic storytelling and various educational domains through experiential activities and collaboration over six weeks. This project culminated in a film that participated in a national short film contest, aligning with the school's strategic approach to educational innovation.

The 10th project, centered around a theatrical adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Match Girl" by the 3rd Primary School of Samos, showcased artistic expression through theater and dance, involving the entire school community and local sponsors, enhancing student collaboration and local community engagement, although lacking a sustained innovative impact.

Lastly, the 11th project from the 23rd Primary School of Heraklion, Crete, aimed to build knowledge about the natural environment and its protection, integrating environmental studies in a project-based, collaborative, and exploratory learning context. This initiative, involving collaboration with the Natural History Museum of Crete, resulted in a presentation of the students' work and educational materials, despite lacking ongoing sustainability.

These projects underscore the diversity of approaches and thematic focuses in Greek primary education, reflecting various degrees of success in integrating and sustaining innovative educational practices.

## 5. DISCUSSIONS

The examination of the 11 pioneering educational initiatives chosen for their excellence in the "Excellence Institution and Highlighting Good Practices in Primary and Secondary Education" program offers significant insights into the present condition of educational innovation in Greek primary schools. These projects are evaluated on creativity, learning outcomes, pedagogical value, application, and content to showcase how schools are using innovative teaching techniques and curricula to improve student learning and engagement. The projects showcase several innovative strategies, including multidisciplinary approaches, technological integration, community participation, and artistic expressions. This variety indicates the presence of a wide range of new teaching and learning methods inside the educational system. Several studies emphasize the significance of involving students in active learning, collaborative tasks, and community involvement. This method is in line with contemporary educational approaches that prioritize student-centered learning and real-world applicability. The different levels of sustainability and alignment with the school's strategic intentions among the projects highlight the difficulty in ensuring that innovative practices are not isolated efforts but instead become deeply rooted in the school's culture. This component is essential for the enduring influence of these breakthroughs. The projects often have a solid educational base, including techniques that encourage critical thinking, creativity, and active learning. Nevertheless, the specific influence on learning results is not clearly addressed in every instance, indicating a want for more thorough assessment methods. Information and Communication Technologies are widely used in many initiatives, indicating a shift towards digital literacy and the incorporation of technology in education. Further research is needed to determine the impact of technology on improving educational results. Various examples demonstrate the advantages of linking educational activities with the local community, promoting

a feeling of relevance and practical application for students. This method also fosters the development of social skills and civic consciousness. Utilizing independent evaluators and anonymous peer review to evaluate initiatives highlights the significance of objective assessment in discovering and acknowledging successful creative approaches.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The examination of these programs highlights the possibilities and obstacles of incorporating new approaches within the Greek educational system. The advances and innovative ideas are visible, but there is a need for systematic support, constant assessment, and an emphasis on sustainability to guarantee that innovations have a lasting influence on education.

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