

# INNOVATE SCHOOLS: THE DIFFERENCE

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**Abstract:** *Schools are currently facing considerable challenges, as the paradigm of today's society is very different from the view for which most education systems were created. It's beginning from this principle that many schools in Portugal seek to modify, adapt and improve their teaching practices. Another of the principles that guided this study is the search for good examples at European level. It's important to create an innovative school culture, marked by collaborative work, openness of school to families, the surrounding environment and a commitment to shared leadership that ensures the sustainability of the innovative culture.*

**Keywords:** *Management, Innovate, Learning process, School.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The current paradigm of the society in which we live allows us to see that many schools and school systems seek answers to the challenges of the present and the future. Innovative schools represent a theme that interests many of the teachers in office, such as parents, pupils and society at large. This interest comes from natural curiosity, from wanting to understand how some schools choose different strategies and after a few years they can achieve good results. With a media outlet interested in education-related topics, where schools are often presented that risk and become success stories, the theme of innovative schools is now of considerable relevance.

The present study, on the theme of Innovative Schools, has as object of study the empirical knowledge of seven school principals or groupings of schools from six different countries. Of the interviewees, we have two Portuguese directors, a Finnish director, a Norwegian director, a Dutch director, an English director and a French director. We sought, keeping the theme of study, the Innovative Schools, that the sample had the representativeness of different currents of teaching, from the north to the south of Europe.

Respondent No. 1 is the director of a group of schools in Portugal, of Portuguese nationality and with more than 16 years of experience in school management. Its leadership and grouping of schools (EAs) are recognized at national level for innovation and the bold measures they take to reform the school's education policy. It should be noted that this type of posture has been valid for the director and his AE got a wide media coverage at national level (E1).

Interviewee No. 2, of French nationality, is the director of an experimental school, which belongs to the Federation of Innovative Schools in France. This school was founded 35 years ago, with the aim of combating school failure. In this school, management is shared by the entire

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school, and the director is selected, on a rotating, rotational way by his peers. The watchword for this school and the principal is collaborative work (E2).

Respondent No. 3 is a Norwegian principal, recognized for the risky and innovative way he introduced the LEAN methodology for improving quality in his school. It is internationally recognized by users of this quality improvement methodology. The LEAN methodology is an integration of methods and tools developed in the 1990s in the industrial sector and, in particular, in the automotive industry. This strategy is now used by several schools, but this principal's school was a precursor in its use. In his interview, the principal repeatedly mentions a question that always asks his teachers when he wants to do something new. The question is, „... *why we should do this and why we should not do it*”(E3).

The fourth interview was conducted with the director of the EA in Portugal. The director, of Portuguese nationality, has extensive experience in school management and has followed many of the reforms that have taken place in the Portuguese educational system in the last 20 years. The AE she directs was once a pilot school and, according to the principal, is always open to conducting academic studies, as was the case in this investigation. The most relevant phrase uttered by the director was as follows: „*I believe that knowledge in innovation is important for us to make good choices and is fundamental in any school*”(E4).

Interviewee 5 is a director of Dutch nationality and has considerable international experience in school management. This director, fruit of her experience, has several very interesting quotes in her interview, being the difficult choice. Still, by its relevance has to be pointed out the phrase where the director says that what she considers most important in an innovation. For the director is „*(...) added value for the community, with the development of innovative social projects that contribute to the environment. Innovation exists to improve the world and to do so we must start with our community*”(E5).

Interviewee 6 is a young director of a Finnish international school in an eastern European capital. Finland, with the success that is recognized to its educational policy, exports its Finnish school model to several countries in the world. It is within the framework of the relationship with the family that we have selected a first sentence of this director. It is noteworthy when he mentions that „... *parents are very interested in coming to school, they know they are always welcome*”(E6).

The seventh principal interviewed, is a principal with extensive experience in school management and is currently director of a school of the European Schools System. This system is part of the institutions of the European Union and its model, its configuration and organisation are extremely innovative, essentially in terms of the linguistic richness it provides to its students. This director states that „... *innovation is considered important when it can make the school a better experience for students*”(E7).

## 2. REVISION OF THE LITERATURE

It is in this chapter that, through the information obtained by the research carried out, the theme of Innovative Schools is intended to be contextualized. Thus, the bibliographic research fell on national and international sources, in the field of research and literature within the contexts under study. Research on doctoral and master's theses on the issue of innovation in education was also taken into account, because „*(...) all research work is written in a continuum and can*

be situated within, or in relation to, currents of thought that precede or influence it” (Quivy and Campenhoudt, 2005: 50).

The theme of Innovative Schools is considerably present in our daily lives, even if it does not explain, it appears implicitly in most topics related to education. As a starting point for bibliographic research, key terms were defined that are today the greatest challenges of school leaders. Equity, inclusion, educational success, entrepreneurial pedagogy, active methodologies, pedagogical differentiation, formative evaluation, the relationship between school and family are topics addressed daily in our schools.

## **2.1. Innovation**

Innovation has to be seen as an endless process, an attitude, a way of being, because it is an endless action, which must be in constant evaluation. It should also represent a conscious, intentional and deliberate change, led by innovative intentions and should not be exclusively linked to the introduction of technology.

## **2.2. Innovation in Education**

The concept of innovation in education is not much different from the one mentioned above. For Goldberg (1995) it is a „(...) planned and scientific process to develop and implement in the captive Edu System change, whose possibilities of occurring frequently are few, but whose effects represent a real improvement for the system” (Goldberg, 1995: 198).

In the field of education, we can see that innovation presents itself in different dimensions. From the macro dimension, with policy makers using the intention to innovate in their discourses and through legislative intentions, at the intermediate level, with school management thinking of a new school, better adapted to its students, to the micro level, with the teacher innovating daily in their pedagogical practices.

Being commendable legislative initiatives, they are often conditioned by the difficulties of varying order faced by schools today, because „recent international surveys draw attention to the gap between what education systems would like to do and what they do”(Perrenoud, 2002: 1).

It is in this context that innovative leaders can make a difference. Several of the directors interviewed, within the scope of this study on Innovative Schools, report that „*innovation is not done by Decree-Law*”. In schools, their entire educational community has to believe in these measures so that they can succeed. This is how we move on to an intermediate level of intervention.

## **3. WHY TO INCORPORATE INNOVATION IN THE MANAGEMENT OF A SCHOOL?**

The identification of the various competences determines the concept field on which it is possible to establish the action logic of each school where entrepreneurial pedagogy is a strategy that will allow the learner to have freedom to perform your choice, because it will take over all the control of the development process and its aftermath, analyzing the feasibility and your ability to generate self-realization, always according to your degree of maturity through exercises that accompany it always.

### 3.1. What importance innovation has for the principal and the school?

From the cross-sectional reading of the answers to the question of the importance of innovation, we found that all the directors interviewed consider this theme very important, presenting as arguments the fact that innovation allows them to be updated with what is happening in society or that it allows them to provide students and teachers with a different experience of school.

Innovation is also used as a strategy to improve the quality of school functioning, in an almost business vision, supporting good options. But as the school is a distinct institution, innovation is presented by most principals as important to students, training students prepared for a world in permanent change, favouring innovative minds.

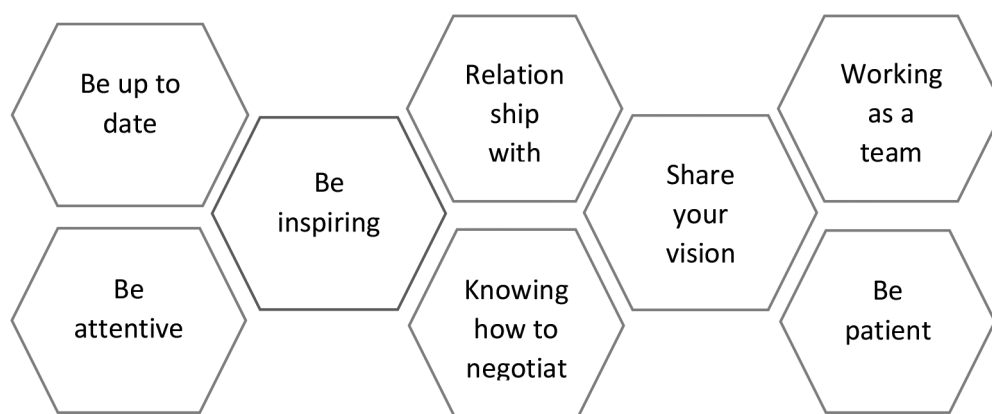
The most relevant citation presented in the answer to this question and which also reflects the opinion of the majority of respondents was as follows:

*„I believe that in a world in constant change and with an enormous amount of information that we have to deal with, we need to invest in creativity and innovative minds to succeed in the world”(E5).*

### 3.2. The skills that an innovative leader should develop

The competencies indicated by the interviewees as fundamental to an innovative leader are the relationship with the other, the ability to negotiate, to share with others their vision of the school being inspiring, being patient, betting on teamwork, knowing how to build a good team, but always following the process closely. You have to be interested, always keeping up to date with what is happening, betting on your professional training.

*„(...) the most important competencies are the relationship, the way it relates to people, the ability to negotiate, negotiate in all situations, in the noble sense of the word, as a positive aspect and, fundamentally, patience that is something that people do not have, things cannot be done overnight, you need to be patient, know how to wait for what will happen with the measures that will be implemented” (E1).*



**Figure 1.** Key skills for an innovative leader

Source: Own source

### 3.3. What mechanisms or practices exist in the schools of the interviewees to promote an innovative attitude?

From the analysis of the answers, we can conclude that there is no development of specific mechanisms or practices for the promotion of innovation in the culture of schools.

*„What we have is very generic, because we are an experimental school and our entire structure is innovative, both at the administrative level, where we are an establishment with its own management”(E2).*

What is mentioned by the majority of respondents is that the big bet is made in the culture of the school, being it the tool to develop in the school community an innovative spirit. It should be part of the attitude of students, teachers and families.

The English principal interviewed in the context of this study, says that he tries to instil in his teachers the idea that his school should try to get to where no school was.



**Figure 2.** Promoting an innovative attitude

Source: Own source

### 3.4. Relevance attributed to the establishment of partnerships

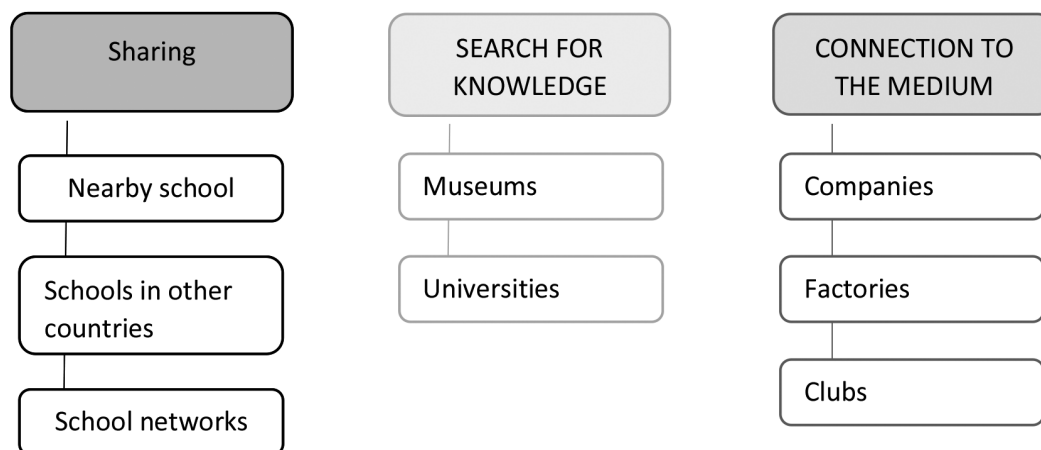
The theme of the importance of establishing partnerships is considered by all directors as fundamental. Almost the schools indicate partnerships, with the institutions that are in the environment, with universities, museums, with other schools or with factories that are close to the school. Partnerships with universities have a special character and are seen as an important asset:

*„The academy is fundamental to scientificize what we are doing a little empirically”(E1).*

These links are presented as very important for education to become more relevant, seeking most directors a great openness to the outside.

*„Teachers set up projects taking into account the structures that are close to the school (...). Making connections with the environment is very important to make education relevant” (E3).*

The creation of networks of schools that cooperate, share experience and help each other is pointed out by the interviewees as a good partnership.



**Figure 3.** Types of partnership

Source: Own source

#### 4. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Since Innovative Schools are a considerable complex theme that can be studied at different levels, the study participants were asked what other variables can influence the introduction of innovative practices. Thus, the answers to this question suggested the deepening of the importance of the students' action, the importance of resources and the safety and the well-being of the community as promoters of an innovative attitude. Another theme that we should consider relevant for future research is the approach of innovation as an instrument for improving procedures, the organic structure of the school and working conditions, both for students and teachers. From this perspective, the Norwegian interviewee's school, which bases its internal functioning on the LEAN methodology, may be a relevant object of study.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

Some final considerations need to be made, summarizing the results obtained. The main motivation of the interviewees is to improve the pedagogical process, leaving organizational issues or working conditions behind the background. Only one of the directors interviewed presents a vision directed to the improvement of procedures, to the reorganization of work spaces, starting from a vision of continuous improvement with the introduction of the LEAN methodology in his school. The principal confesses that his school has „(...) more in common with factories and the private sector, than with other schools” (E3).

Based on the results obtained, we found that for the principals the involvement of teachers and families is crucial for the realization of the dissemination of innovative strategies. Being two members with an important weight in the educational community, they can also act as a difficult obstacle to transpose.

Formally, the director must bet on assertive communication with the EEs, building for this the best instruments to pass the information clearly and effectively. It should also promote moments of clarification, such as holding general meetings where the principal presents his vision of the school. The active involvement of families in school bodies should also be taken into account, as it allows participation in decisions and appropriation, by representatives of parents, of school culture.

But an informal approach to families, creating a sense of belonging to the community, should not be discouraged. EE should feel welcome at school. A culture of closeness between parents and teachers should be cultivated, as well as with school leadership. The directors interviewed attach a real importance to this strategy and reinforce the bonds informally through moments of conviviality, with the holding of parties, concerts and maintaining a daily contact of proximity.

It is through a combination of these two approaches that a very important plan for school leadership must be achieved, to have the trust of families. An interviewed director states that „(...) from the moment parents trust the school, it is possible to develop any project and parents are there to support” (E4).

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## ADDITIONAL READING

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