THE IMPACT STUDY OF ETWINNING PROJECTS IN ROMANIA

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Abstract: The article presents the impact study of eTwinning projects in Romania, particularly assessing effects in terms of pedagogy, teacher professional development and pupil learning, and analysing the factors that contribute to, or constrain, successful participation in eTwinning projects. The study provide a good understanding of the eTwinning action using a wide range of methods in qualitative research: interviews with eTwinning teachers in the school, interviews with non-eTwinning teachers and Head teachers/heads of department within the school, focus groups with eTwinning project participants among school pupils, focus groups with representatives of parents of pupils involved in eTwinning project(s), interviews with representatives of local education authorities, local communities impacted by the school and/or eTwinning activities.The research explores the views of participants in eTwinning in 3 schools at different stages and levels of involvement, from newcomers to experienced eTwinners. The study shows an interesting teachers' opinion with regard to the need of technology integration in the learning process. When eTwinning was launched in January 2005, its objective was enable school twinning as an opportunity for all young people to learn and practice information and communication technology (ICT) skills, as well as promoting awareness of the multicultural European model of society. The European Commission foresaw that eTwinning could be a major catalyst in intensifying the sorts of cooperation already underway among schools. Since the launch of the new platform in 2008-09, visits to the eTwinning portal have increased by over 300%, indicating a steep rise in interest among teachers.

Keywords: ICT, collaborative work, virtual platform, Europe.

I. ABOUT ETWINNING PROJECT

When eTwinning was launched in January 2005, its objective was enable school twinning as an opportunity for all young people to learn and practice information and communication technology (ICT) skills, as well as promoting awareness of the multicultural European model of society. The European Commission foresaw that eTwinning could be a major catalyst in intensifying the sorts of cooperation already underway among schools. Since the launch of the new platform in 2008-09, visits to the eTwinning portal have increased by over 300%, indicating a steep rise in interest among teachers. Registration continues to rise, and there are currently almost 100,000 registered eTwinners in 73,500 schools. Retention rates are good. More than 12,000 projects have been registered since 2005 and almost 6,000 projects are currently active.

1.1. Presentation of schools

The first school is located in Dej, a city with a rich tradition in technical education. In 1981, the school became High-School, which annually educates 1.000 students. There are 70 teachers who train them in the following form of education: high school-day classes, hinge school-evening classes, Post-high school.

The second school is situated in Vaslui, a county in an historical region of Moldova. Industry is underdeveloped and a large number of unemployed is here. Investment in the economy is almost nonexistent. The College has 942 students, a total of 32 classes, 60 teachers, and two classes of math-intensive computing on each level of education

The third is a private Secondary School located in Bucharest, recently founded and supported by a foundation. School has a number of 140 pupils. There are 10 school clubs (journalism, IT, mathematics, Shadow Theatre, music, climbing, ecology, etc.); Domestic and international academic competitions, contests (Cambridge YLE, KET and PET, Kangaroo, Smart, etc.).

1.2. The case studies in Phase 1

In 2011, 3 case study schools were visited by the researcher to gather evidence and information for the case study research. The case studies will be developed into full narratives when they are finalized in Phase 2. In the interim, however, some issues emerging from the qualitative case study research so far is presented below, under the reporting heading

Policy and programming

Roles and activities

Outputs

Outcomes and impact

In 2012 will be the second phase of impact study. The schools that will require full visits by the CBRs have yet to be determined but the decisions will be based on the following criteria: more than one ongoing project involving a range of teachers and pupils in the school; a new project started in 2011; reported difficulties in starting up or engaging other teachers and / or pupils in the eTwinning projects; reported innovation or unexpected gains from eTwinning; significant changes (positive or negative) in the circumstances of the school that might impact upon eTwinning; willingness on the part of the school to participate in a full visit.

II. EXPECTATIONS OF ETWINNING

In the case studies there are examples of schools starting out with few expectations but that used eTwinning to experiment. Improving pupils levels of language and ICT were consistently mentioned as an expectation, and for the most part, these expectations have been met. These were often also linked to reducing isolation, and improving cultural openness. In the case of one school, they expected to be able to do pupil-to-pupil communication online, but in neither case was this expectation met due to ICT challenges (explored further below).

eTwinning Coordinator, S3: „*In school we work hard, there are many activities. When you have the chance to keep your work in a virtual space and to make available to other schools in the European community, the work takes a different value. ETwinning was above my expectations.*"

Pupil 1, S2: „*Our expectations were initially: To bind friends, acquire new knowledge about other countries, traditions and cultures, to change negative thinking about Romania.*"

eTwinning teacher 2, S3 : „*Children were not able to communicate effectively. I think it's a loss of eTwinning projects. Unlike Comenius, where there are motilities and personal communication (and can make friends). But we had access to very different ICT tools and this is an advantage*."

2.1. Role of ICT in schools before and after introduction of eTwinning

In visited schools, the lack of ICT equipment is a constraint on eTwinning activities: this includes, for example, slow internet speeds, only one computer per classroom, or all computers in a lab. This limits what activities can take place and how interactive they are or how many pupils can take part at once; it means it takes more time, and can be frustrating for the pupils.

eTwinning Coordinator, S1: „*The individual use of a laptop by each and every student describes a non-realistic situation under the social and economic conditions in Romania.*"

The teaching staffs find complementary solutions for their computer usage needs, especially since they mostly prepare their courses at home (designing the course, translating it into a didactic project, upgrading the content to be taught). Although teachers have individual needs, various working conditions can give rise to common problems: lack of knowledge on computers, lack of feedback, frequent changes in curriculum.

III. ROLES AND ACTIVITIES

3.1. Teachers' roles and recognition as eTwinners

Some or all of the eTwinning project teachers have little or no background in ICT, and little confidence, so they spend much of their own time self teaching and finding out more about the eTwinning site. Language teachers are often involved in eTwinning. However, in schools in Romania teachers stated they did not want to get involved because of common fears of communicating in English.

3.2. Involvement of school leadership in eTwinning

The school management is official supportive, though less so in practice; they want to be kept informed of the project but not actively involved. In part this may be because they do not have the time or resources to dedicate to the projects yet can see the benefits it may have for the pupils.

3.3. Cross-curricular activities

In schools curriculum areas additional to the main one are integrated into eTwinning because of the nature of the projects, rather than as a designed part of the delivering the curriculum of these subjects. Examples include history, geography, social studies, science, politics, art design and technology, literacy, economics, environment, maths, and sports. In a surprising number of the case studies, science is key focus (alongside ICT and language which are also covered), often in the form of health (e.g. stop smoking, food and healthy eating) or environment. In a Romanian school, teachers stated that cross-curriculum project activities are a standard part of course designs, and that ICT was used mainly to develop material for lessons, but now is used for documentation and communication in a foreign language.

3.4. Pupils profiles involved in eTwinning activities

Across the case study schools there is a wide range of ages and types of pupils. While the benefits of engagement in eTwinning are seen for children from a range of backgrounds, the gains for disadvantaged children are often highlighted, especially those living in poor communities. The most common eTwinning project activities are offline activities such as creation of materials offline (drawings, recipe books) which are then shared by mail or email, letters and emails to partner country or countries, and photo sharing with partner schools (uploaded by teachers). In case studies with older children eTwinning activities are often more sophisticated. For example, in a Romanian industrial school, the students in each country develop an architectural plan for their partner school, using ICT to create, e.g. floor plans, models of water and heating supplies and a financial plan. In one school, attempts were made to communicate via the Twinspace and this proved impossible: teachers felt that the lack of personal communication and friendship building in eTwinning projects was a limitation on pupils' experience, compared to projects in Comenius. Activities commonly continue outside the school as homework, and in one or two cases through pupils chatting with new friends on Facebook etc. However, in some schools pupils are not encouraged to continue online outside of the classroom because of internet safety concerns – the belief is that the teacher should always be present during eTwinning activities.

In some cases, mostly those with older students, pupils were engaged at all levels of decision making. Most commonly, however, there was little pupil engagement in project decision making or at project management level, on topics or partner choice, but some involvement in decisions about the individual tasks and how to address them.

eTwinning teacher 1, S2 : „*Theme of the project can be chosen. Students looking for material; organize content and present in a certain manner. In addition, language use is the most important. Students can apply existing knowledge to generate new ideas, create original products, and explore new possibilities.*"

IV. OUTPUTS

4.1. The effectiveness of eTwinning platform

All schools report difficulties, such as: Twinspace is unnecessarily complex; with too many features which teachers do not want and this makes it more difficult for them to understand. Recent changes have made it more difficult; Layout of the Twinspace is boring and/or inappropriate for the pupils; Uploading files and photos too problematic and slow. On the other hand, there are many advantages.

Teacher 3, S 2: „*People promote their actions through the eTwinning space. I found many proposals for mobility on eTwinning. In this way we can become known and interact with one other.* "

4.2. Outcomes and impact

eTwinning projects and Comenius School Partnerships. In one schools being involved in eTwinning has led to a Comenius project. eTwinning got the school. In a school, partners used information posted on the Twinspace to transform the eTwinning project into an Comenius one.

4.3. Improvement of teachers' ICT skills and confidence

Most commonly new ICT skills and confidence using computers is a significant outcome for teachers, especially those that had few ICT skills at the beginning of the eTwinning project.

Non eTwinning teacher, S3: „*There is a positive impact, but it is obvious when you are directly involved. From my point of view, I think sharing experience is the biggest advantage.*"

Teacher non-eTwinning, S3: „*The rapid development of ICT over the last years in our country has lead to important changes in the way pupils communicate and act. These changes have a significant impact on the learning needs.*"

4.4. Changes in teaching practice

These projects are developing language skills and digital. Very common changes among the case study schools include: Improvement of modern methods of teaching using ICT; Design methods and strategies for teaching concepts that support integration of research tools; Communicate on best practices related to interactive teaching strategies (blended methods: frontal presentation, individual study, e-mail and forum communication, concept maps, simulation, exercises, role play, project work in groups, practical application).

4.5. Professional development

Very common impact includes: Improved professional satisfaction and sense of achievement; improved foreign language skills and confidence to use them; Improved cultural awareness. Also very common, however, is the increased burden on teachers in having to use their personal time, and the requirement on their part to be highly motivated to learn about eTwinning and keep the project going. This, along with language barriers, is the most common reason for non-eTwinners not getting engaged. They express a knowledgeable appreciation of the viewpoints of persons representing foreign cultures; they encounter new creative ideas and activities; they develop the ability to effectively communicate with persons from a variety of backgrounds;

4.6. The impact on pupils interests, attitudes, motivation to learn

Teacher2, S3: „*Some students do not give their best in class. But in these projects are very active. I was impressed by their enthusiasm. In addition, 90 percent is their work.*"

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Pupil 4, S1: „*We were consulted by professor in the division of tasks, from organizing the realization of presentations, what to do less or no.*"

Pupil 5, S3*: „eTwinning is not necessarily about learning but also about socializing."*

Pupil motivation is frequently cited as a benefit of eTwinning projects - a way to engage students both in language and non-language subjects, primarily because they enjoy it. Autonomous and self initiated learning are also mentioned, mainly because they are using ICT, and often working on their own, and partly because of their increased motivation to go and find things out about the subject. Active participation/different teaching methods (breakdown of barriers between teacher and pupil) also contributes to this; improved self esteem and confidence. Others advantages are: Increasing intrinsic motivation for learning; developing critical and creative thinking skills; Developing communication skills and teamwork; Developing the ability to transfer and apply knowledge in practice; Building the documentation of multiple information resources

Teacher 2, S1: „The potential of such projects is enormous when we talk about collaboration and team work, exchange of ideas, learning by doing, group products etc., all these being practiced through participation in the project".

Teacher 1, S3: „The child can perform simulations and modelling in virtual laboratory, can create the world at "small scale".

V. CONCLUSIONS

eTwinning is recognized as a important thing with a social and cultural impact. eTwinning has been established to provide a flexible platform, space and concept that can accommodate schools at any level of both ICT and pedagogical competence and capacity. What the case study research is beginning to show is that schools and teachers can and will make of eTwinning whatever meets their particular circumstances, abilities and interests, and this is a logical response from such a very diverse range of country contexts, pedagogical traditions and types of school across Europe.

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