

ETwinning Projects: Capturing the Experiences of the Teachers Involved Through Collaboration and Interdisciplinarity

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Abstract: In today's multicultural environment, education is called upon to take on other important roles in addition to the role determined by the State. Through interdisciplinary, collaborative and key assistance, teachers use ICT to break away from the rigorous Curriculum and try to experiment with new methodological approaches using teaching practices and introducing innovations in education, such as the European eTwinning program. With the help of an online questionnaire, we explored the experiences and feelings of teachers who actively participated as partners in an eTwinning program. Studying the results of the research, we found out how important the program is for both teachers themselves and their students during its implementation, but also the need to implement another one in the future.

Key words: ICT, collaboration, interdisciplinarity, creativity, culture

1. Introduction

New curricula in compulsory education seek to develop the student's self-confidence, self-esteem, personality and responsibility so that he or she can develop positive attitudes and behaviors in his life (Veikou, Siganou & Papastamouli, 2007). The modern school in a demanding multicultural environment is called to take an active role by providing the student potential apart from the necessary knowledge and all the essential quality characteristics that will make him a responsible active citizen in the future. The innovative eTwinning program successfully supports this need and has won so far the trust of the educational community, pupils and students, parents and society at large.

2. What is ETwinning

ETwinning is considered a European action in different schools from several and different European countries have the opportunity to collaborate using ICT tools. The ultimate goal of this collaboration is for all involved, especially children, to benefit on a pedagogical, social and cultural level. Collaborating schools can exchange views on the topic or topic they have chosen to engage in, get to know each other, develop new friendships, and learn all together based on a framework of interaction, partnership, and contribution.

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The eTwinning gives the opportunity to teachers staff of Primary Education (pre-kindergarten, kindergarten and primary school), Secondary Education (High School, Lyceum, EPAL, EEEEEK, EKFE, SDE) but also “Secondary Education” EPAL Apprenticeship Class) to enroll themselves. In addition, the Educational Project Coordinators can be registered with the role of Pedagogical adviser, by stating the PEKES of their area. The age of the children who can participate should be from 3 to 20 years and over. An online platform is available for all staff (teachers, principals, etc.) who work in schools in European countries and their purpose is to create and implement various projects with their students, collaborate, communicate, consider that are members of an amazing learning community in Europe.

ETwinning has been in operating since January 2005 and continues to this day, with more than 230,000 teachers from the whole Europe working together. The number of participating schools is estimated at more than 110,000 from 32 European countries. From 2014 and on, eTwinning consists a mandatory pillar for the implementation of the Erasmus+ program, it also strengthens its role, it is now the most important for its support in terms of cooperation. Nowadays, eTwinning is considered to be the largest network of teachers in the history of education.

The responsibility for this action lies with the Central European Support Service (CSF) and a network of National Support Services (CSFs), such as the Hellenic eTwinning Service, which is operated by the Research Academic Institute of Computer Technology.

In conclusion, eTwinning is the Community for European schools, where teachers have the opportunity to participate, register, use the online tools offered by the online platform of this action. In this way, they will be able to exchange ideas, meet and communicate through this platform, share practices, work collaboratively, interact, and implement interesting projects with each other. Finally, many schools in different and several countries can be supported in their “twinning” through the internet (<http://www.etwinning.gr/etwinning/etwinning>).

3. Pedagogical Goals — Benefits

The action of eTwinning with its capabilities gives the opportunity to implement innovations and creative learning in teaching process. Thus, teachers and their students, through the implementation of projects, manage to cooperate with other schools, exceeding the limits of the conventional class and acquire a European dimension. According to Galvin et al, 2006 there are five themes of added value in eTwinning: Authentic Learning, European Dimension, Collaboration, Use of New Technologies, Teacher Training and Professional Development.

4. Teacher Involvement

By participating in a project and eTwinning activities, the teacher has not only the opportunity to evaluate his/her skills, but also esteems awareness and development in terms of pedagogical, collaborative and at the same time his skills at a digital level. By implementing such a project, he explores and achieves new educational practices, puts into practice his concerns and at the same time applies all the techniques and knowledge he has already acquired. His goal is to complete successfully his work and be evaluated by claiming its quality reward with the Quality Label of either the National or the European one. It is useful to point out that as in environmental education programs, so in eTwinning programs due to the volunteerism that characterizes them as well as the fact that the teams are self-directed, have the strong stamp of teachers through which they incarnate their passion (Georgopoulos, 2014). The school, respectively, aims at its European orientation by trying to create its “culture”

or “common value system” according to Pasiardis (2007). In doing so, by implementing such programs, it succeeds in being open to the educational community and the world at large.

5. Use of ICT Tools When Implementing an ETwinning program

ICT use in the educational process was not introduced early. In the beginning limited to using office applications. However, over time, ICT applications began to be introduced that significantly supported the implementation of innovative programs, such as eTwinning. Today, with the rapid development of ICT and the internet and communal web applications, they contribute positively to the implementation at almost all stages and to the effectiveness of innovative programs. After all, eTwinning is based on this philosophy in which the use of ICT is an integral part of the teaching and learning process and a good supporter of the teacher involved in the implementation of innovative programs harmonized with the Curriculum (Andreadis, 2019). Both teachers and students come into contact and develop skills with several tools of the eTwinning electronic platform as well as other ICT tools such as moodle, wikis, digital videos, web 2.0, blogs (Kampylis et al., 2013). ICTs, of course, are not the goal of teachers participating in eTwinning, but they are the auxiliary means to make the lesson more interesting, overcoming the limitations of the Curriculum and the classroom in general. It is essentially considered a kind of electronic twinning of cooperating schools, enhancing this online collaboration (Papadakis, 2015). Students have the opportunity to communicate with their classmates in Europe, argue, learn at the same time with them and gain knowledge from them as well. The learning that takes place is experiential and the goals of such a program are specific. The use of ICT in the implementation of an eTwinning program as well as modern methodological approaches and teaching techniques, such as teamwork and experientialism, have shown a positive sign in the final produced educational project.

6. Projects That Have Been Implemented

In the last two years we have implemented two eTwinning projects. In the 2017–2018 school year, the title of the project was "They lived happily ever after" and its theme was diversity. Not only we did consider our participation in this project as a form of challenge against the more general adversities we face in daily teaching practice but also an invitation to our participation in a large company that consists of 9 schools and 21 teachers in total. Through this project we wanted to sensitize students about the diversity but plus the behaviors that sometimes develop, to highlight the other way, of orthopedics and good practice, make them creatively see through the eyes of diversity.

In the school year 2018-2019 the title of our project was "Interacting with culture" and its subject was to present and be familiar with all the customs, traditions and in general the culture of the cooperating schools. The works addressed to children and Primary Education teachers with the involvement of all grades of Primary School. A bridge of communication and cooperation was created in both programs between general primary schools and specialists respectively. The goals set from the beginning in both projects are considered to have been achieved to the maximum extent with the main goal of children and teachers to enjoy the whole trip gaining new knowledge and experiences different from those of the School Curriculum and building new friendships.

7. Purpose of the Research — Research Questions

Completing the current school year, the program “Interacting with culture” we thought about our future involvement in another eTwinning program and the views and perceptions formed by the other partners of the program. That’s why with the help of the Google forms tool we created an online questionnaire in which we invited some of our partners to answer questions related to their demographic and professional data but at the same time to explore their views on the program they implemented collaboratively in relation to their students, parents, the educational community of their school, their assessment of the result as well as to investigate their future participation in a new program with the same partners. It consisted of a total of 22 questions that had the following forms: short answer — yes/no choice — Likert five-point choice — more than one answer (Cohen & Manion, 2000). It was structured in three parts. The first concerned demographics (questions 1–2). The second part concerned studies and the work situation (questions 3–7). The third part was about exploring the subject, that is, examining teachers’ experiences and feelings about their active participation as partners in an eTwinning program (questions 8–22). The questionnaire was sent by e-mail on June 17, 2019. All six teachers responded on the same day. Six teachers, five female teachers and one male teacher participated in the small-scale random sampling survey. From the evaluation of participation in the research, we excluded only our partner teacher who serves in a school in another European country (Cyprus). We made sure to have a representative sample from different educational environments (N. Karditsa city and countryside / N. Larissa city and countryside).

8. Data Analysis — Research Results

The data analysis of the present micro-research was performed with the help of Microsoft Excel (Cohen & Manion, 2000). The data were presented in the form of pie charts and column graphs. After carefully studying the data of the micro-research we can be led to the following findings: six primary school teachers, five women and one man participated. One teacher PE11 (P.E.), four teachers PE70 (Teacher of Primary school) and one teacher PE71 (Teacher of Special Primary school). Three teachers belong to the age group “46 years and over”, two teachers belong to the age group “31–45 years”, while one teacher belongs to the age group “up to 30” years. Five of the six teachers are permanent, while all the six of them have been worked in public education for up to 20 years. Regarding their studies, all six of them have Certification ICT1 and/+ ICT2, speak a language at least B2 level and six, as well as that they have attended annual training for at least 400 hours, five of six. Then, four of six teachers have postgraduate degree, one teacher holds a second degree and finally, one teacher of six attended the School. Five of six teachers work in multi-seat schools (4/th and above). Regarding the question “how did you learn about eTwinning” five of six teachers responded from other teachers, while one in six responded from service circulars. To the question “how many times have you participated in an eTwinning program” three teachers answered more than three times, one teacher was his “first time” while another teacher “from one to three times”. Four of six teachers answered positively to the question “whether they have attended a seminar on the implementation of an eTwinning program recently or in the past”. All the teachers answered that their experience from the eTwinning program they implemented this year was “excellent”. They also considered their cooperation with the other partners of the program “excellent”. To the questions “whether the material and technical infrastructure of the school and the Directorate similarly helped in the implementation of the program” five of the six teachers answered positively. As far as concerns the question “whether the parents saw positively the

participation of their children in the specific program” the six teachers answered “yes”. Regarding how the students saw the implementation of the specific program, one teacher answered “nice”, three teachers answered “interesting”, and two teachers answered “important” (Figure 1). To the question “if the teachers of the school they serve were interested in the program” three of six teachers answered “yes” and the other half “no”. Regarding the question “whether they would provide assistance to teachers in their school in the future regarding the implementation of an eTwinning program” the six teachers answered affirmatively. The penultimate question was “whether in the future they would implement another eTwinning program” and everyone answered affirmatively (Figure 2). Finally, in the question “what does eTwinning mean to you” we received the following answers from all six teachers: “It gives many opportunities for cooperation between students and teachers, but also exchange of experiences and knowledge. Experiences, creativity, acquaintance with other cultures, collaboration, friendships. A great learning platform for both children and teachers. An excellent opportunity through the implementation of a project for everyone to learn, to cooperate in a different way from that of the classroom, a kind of electronic twinning between school units. To feel that they are members of a school community in Europe. Collaboration, acquaintance, communication. Gaining new experiences and interests. Cooperation, solidarity, good practices.”

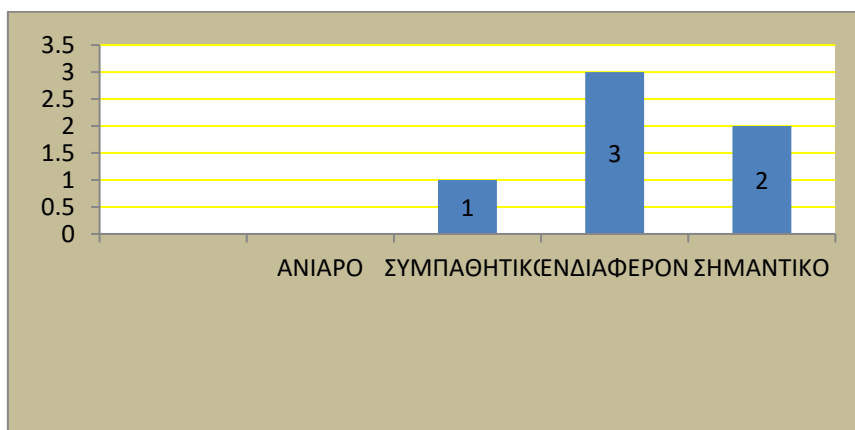


Figure 1 How the Students Saw the Specific Project That Is Being Implemented?

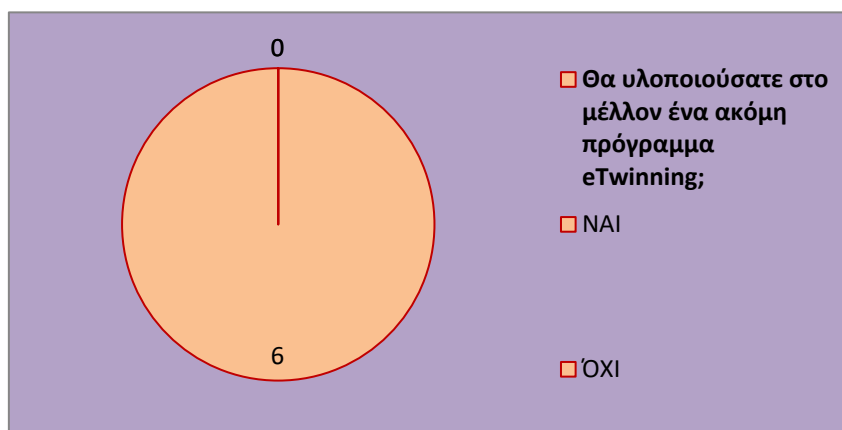


Figure 2

9. Conclusion

The anonymous quality and quantitative questionnaire was used as the dominant and exclusive tool for research and data collection. Its creation was achieved by extracting information, both from bibliographic research and the suggestions, remarks and apt remarks through interactive discussion with teachers who had little or no teaching experience and are acting teachers. In creating the questionnaire, we selected open questions, which would allow us to collect the necessary qualitative data of the research and closed type in order to obtain the quantitative characteristics of the specific research. Concluding the short, limited in scope and size of research with the ability to expand the findings into a potential sample nationwide, we could conclude that participating in innovative programs, such as eTwinning, offers pleasure, energy, imagination and creativity to the teachers involved. Collaboration, interdisciplinarity and cooperation between the teachers involved in the different school units in a wider European context as well as the participation of students can only give a positive sign both to the final produced educational product individually and collectively and in education in general. So there are teachers who leave the security of the Curriculum and take steps to innovate in the teaching practice aiming in harmony with both the journey of knowledge and the final destination. The use of ICT, the communication of teachers and students with the help of electronic media and the joint production of a final material causes the need for the teacher involved to continue to experiment, to taste different educational cultures, to make friendly relations, to become a bridge builder power to highlight the need for a portion of teachers who want to discover new frontiers in education as healthy standards of good practice. And most importantly, to multiply as enhancers for other teachers who want to be involved in this process in the future.

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