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**TRANSNATIONAL SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS SUPPORTED BY ICT. BENEFITS
FOR LEARNING**

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Abstract: *Education faces a continuous reform aimed to modernize the system as a whole and particularly the teaching and learning practices. The pressure for reforming education is sustained by the social changes, mainly determined by the technological progress. Pupils, teachers and parents' mobility, the economical and cultural globalization and the increasing use of information and communication technology (ICT) in almost all the aspects of everyday life are influencing the school transformation. In this context, the needs for communication and collaboration, for exchange of ideas and for harmonizing the education between countries are obvious. ICT-supported school partnerships are a suitable solution to transfer practices, to export education practices / models and to support mutual learning. An important European Action – eTwinning, part of Comenius – Lifelong Learning Programme proved its benefits for supporting school transformation and for influencing teaching and learning. This paper analyses the role of ICT-based partnerships for changing the school and the learning process, with a particular focus on eTwinning school projects. During the 5 years of implementing eTwinning in Romania, more than 8000 teachers from around 4000 schools, high schools and kindergartens were involved in over 10.000 partnerships with schools from Europe. At European level, more than 150.000 teachers joined this initiative and benefit from being part of a European teachers' community. eTwinning targets schools, teachers and pupils, and in a broader sense, the whole education system. But teachers are the main actors in making partnerships work. How prepared are they for initiating, managing and evaluating ICT-based partnerships? What type of competences do they need? What motivates them, what type of support is needed and from whom?*

Keywords: *school partnership, eTwinning, ICT-based education, education projects*

I. TRANSNATIONAL SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS SUPPORTED BY ICT

If twenty years ago, international cooperation in education was more like a purpose, nowadays it became a daily practice for the majority of schools in Romania, a routine behaviour and a needful tool. This happened on one side due to the international support for educational cooperation and on the other side, to the use of ICT, making partnerships possible with low consume of time and resources. The use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in education rapidly increased, influencing all the components of the education system - curriculum and didactic practice, teacher training, development of schools, educational policies or administration of the education system. Pupils, teachers and parents' mobility, the economical and cultural globalization are other important factors pushing the change of education. The school and its actors are more and more connected to the worldwide education trends, due to the high speed of information flow and the great availability of communication brought by ICT.

1.1. Why promoting school partnerships?

Already in the '80s, the Council of Europe recommendations on educational visits and exchanges of pupils (1980), promoting the awareness of Europe in secondary schools (1983),

European cultural identity (1985) and the European dimension in education (1989) encouraged the member states to foster cooperation in education and to include it as part of their curricula. “Supported at national and international level, educational exchanges have enabled hundreds of thousands of young people to discover Europe and establish personal ties.” [1]

The programs launched by the European Commission (Socrates – 1995, Leonardo da Vinci - 1994, followed by the Lifelong Learning Programme – 2007 – and other initiatives) significantly increased and improved the exchanges and dialogue between education institutions, teachers, pupils and decision-makers. These programmes are implementation tools for the European policy in education and training set out in the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training – ET 2020 [2]. The aims are to:

- make lifelong learning and mobility a reality;
- improve the quality and efficiency of education and training by enabling all learners to acquire the basic skills and competences needed for their employability;
- promote equality, social cohesion and active citizenship through quality, and inclusive education;
- enhance creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship at all levels of education and training by promoting the development of key competences at all levels of education and to encourage cooperation between all sectors of education, training and the world of work.

1.2. ICT- based educational cooperation. An example of good practice – eTwinning

eTwinning is probably the most popular and successful European initiative promoting school partnership through the use of ICT. It was launched on 14 January 2005, with the initial purpose of facilitating partnerships between pre-university education institutions and becoming later a professional community, bringing together over 150.000 teachers from Europe. eTwinning Action is part of the Lifelong Learning Programme – Comenius. In Romania, it was launched in October 2007. From the very beginning, teachers and pupils demonstrated high interest and enthusiasm for getting involved in cooperative projects with their European colleagues.

What eTwinning meant in 2007? What benefits were foreseen for teachers, pupils, schools and, in general, for the Romanian education system? Why was it worth to implement it even if the human and material resources available were obviously insufficient? The “2007 answers”, equivalent with the expectations of the implementing team, shaped the today reality:

- almost half of pre-university education units in our country registered on the portal eTwinning.net (around 4500 schools and kindergartens);
- more than 9000 teachers registered;
- over 3000 finalized school partnerships and over 1100 are in progress;
- more than 270 teachers received the European quality label for their projects;
- over 700 projects received the national quality label;
- over 130 teachers participated in professional development workshops organized by educational institutions in various European countries, conferences or contact seminars;
- methodological resources developed and distributed;
- over 3000 teachers from Romania participated in online training organized at European or national level;

The above listed achievements provides a brief overview, without covering all the activities, results and effects of eTwinning Action in Romania.

II. LEARNING BENEFITS OF TRANSNATIONAL PARTNERSHIP USING ICT

ICT-based education meant a complex phenomenon of transformation of learning environment and practices [3]. Studies revealed the positive effects of using new technologies in schools: increasing pupils’ interest in learning, better frequency of classes, better school results. From a pedagogical perspective, there is a direct causal relationship: increased interest in learning brings better school attendance and than improved learning outcomes [4]. Information and communication technology is

beneficial in many ways, inducing transformation processes in different layers, from an overall school development to teachers' professional development with effects on teaching practices, class climate and pupils' learning.

2.1. Making learning more attractive

“The natural curiosity of young people to set out to discover the world is one of the most powerful motivations to learn about the political, economic, cultural and historic situation of their fellow citizens in other countries. Learning about others, it is inevitable that they should ask themselves questions about their future role as individuals and as social beings in their own national settings.” [5] Teachers participating in eTwinning projects noticed that pupils' motivation for learning improved. Pupils expressed a strong interest to work on collaborative projects and to use ICT. Teachers updated their teaching methods to integrate ICT tools, thus becoming more effective and motivating not only for pupils involved in a particular project, but also for other pupils and teachers in school, which started to get interested in such activities [6].

Learning is more interesting due to the use of ICT which is very much appreciated by pupils, and due to the less formal learning environment and the diverse tasks. Working in projects with colleagues from other countries is a challenge for pupils and has a double meaning: learning is accompanied by social interaction and communication, by intercultural knowledge and dialogue. eTwinning has shown that pupils are eager to learn, if they are encouraged and guided carefully [7].

2.2. Making learning more relevant

Successful eTwinning projects are created by teachers and their pupils. Involving pupils in project planning is a pre-requisite for developing relevant learning tasks. The complex and diverse projects target the development of the key-competences. The communication in foreign languages is taken for granted as each project must involve at least one school from another country. English is the most used language, but other languages including those of neighboring countries are also used.

Transnational partnerships provide pupils a framework for practicing the communication in a foreign language and foster the utility of learning it. Pupils learn using technology – Internet, email, PowerPoint presentations, media files etc. eTwinning has the advantage of promoting not the simple use of ICT, but the creative and responsible one. Through creative entrepreneurship education projects, pupils acquire basic skills and knowledge, from general issues (personal budget) to very applied topics such as starting a business, simulation of a business, verification of the legal and administrative steps for setting up a company etc. They also learn to present their learning outcomes in online portfolios. All of these are important achievements for their later professional insertion.

2.3. Making learners more involved

Progress has been made to involve pupils in eTwinning projects. At the beginning, many projects aimed just the exchange of information and sharing the results obtained by each country team, organized and posted by teachers. Along with accumulating experience, projects became more collaborative, pupils being more involved all the stages and working together with their European colleagues: setting up learning tasks, creating and solving problems etc. Teachers encouraged them to assume new responsibilities, to reflect on their own learning, to assess their work and their colleagues' work, to identify issues that need improvement.

2.4. Making learning more sustainable

Pupils learn by doing, by working in teams with colleagues from schools abroad, communicating in foreign languages and using ICT. This way, the projects target both basic skills (language development, math, etc.) and transversal competences (learning to learn, social and civic skills, etc.). Some addressed issues of a specific subjects, others are cross-curricular. For example, learning a foreign language through physics, chemistry or mathematics have increased the sustainability of learning due to multiple links and connections between acquired knowledge and skills. Individual documentation activities have been replaced with discussions and experiments conducted with colleagues in the partner country. Pupils' involvement, cross-curricular linkages and transferable skills are pre-requisites for sustainable learning.

III. TEACHERS' INTEREST IN TRANSNATIONAL SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS

The number of projects initiated by Romanian teachers placed our country on the first positions of the European statistics, after Poland, France, Italy, Spain and UK (which implemented eTwinning since 2005, while Romania joined in 2007).

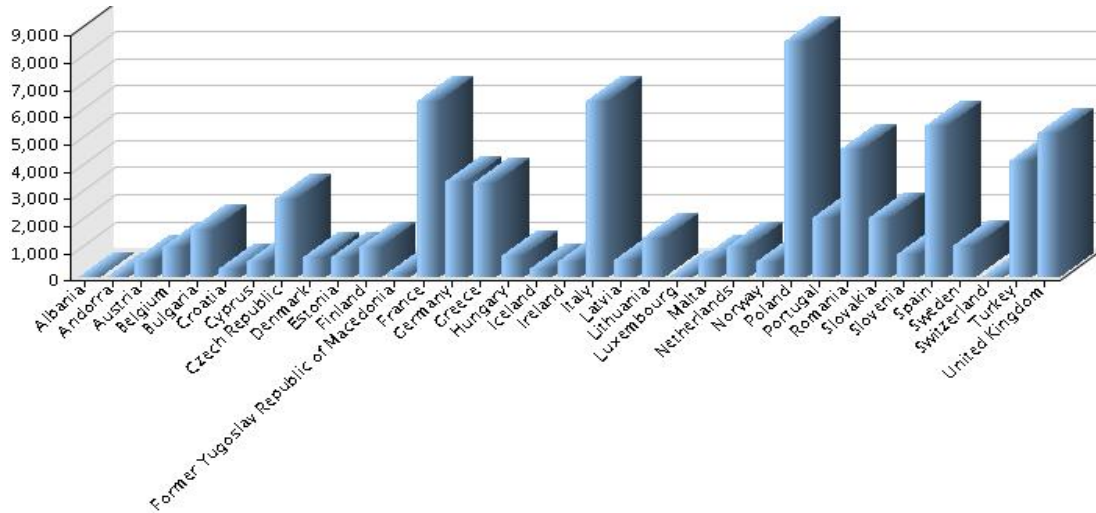


Figure 1. Number of eTwinning projects registered before 01.06.2011 (Source: www.etwinning.net)

At the end of 2011, over one quarter of Romanian schools registered on eTwinning portal had ongoing partnerships (as founders). This rate of involvement situated our country on the 5th place in Europe, after Poland, France, Turkey and Spain.

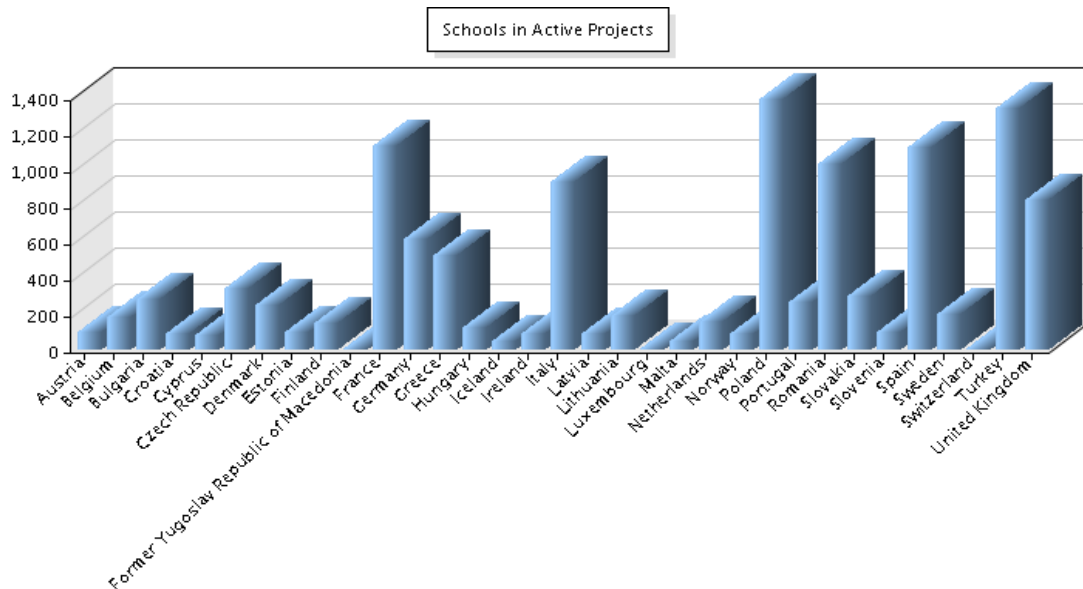


Figure 2. Schools in Active projects (Source: www.etwinning.net)

Romanian teachers understood its great value and converted their skills and interests into creative and relevant projects. How prepared are they for initiating, managing and evaluating ICT-based partnerships? What type of competences do they need? What motivates them, what type of support is needed and from whom?

3.1. Opportunities for customized professional development

Professional development of teachers is a continuous process of lifelong learning, training, acquiring or improving skills and an effective way to reach a certain maturity and wisdom in the teaching profession [8]. eTwinning provides multiple opportunities for professional development, both through formal training activities – professional development workshops, contact seminars, conferences, online labs and events – and through nonformal and informal learning – dialogue and exchange of experiences, communication and learning by doing. Each project is a learning opportunity for those involved - teachers, pupils, principals, trainers, etc. The results and benefits are diverse: knowledge and comparison of education systems and teaching practices, exchange of ideas, transfer of creative practices, diversification of learning situations, access to new teaching materials (PPT presentations, blogs, wikis, web pages, other applications), practicing and improving language skills in real contexts, etc.

3.2. Recognition and professional satisfaction

For teachers, the recognition and professional satisfaction are important mechanisms for keeping their creativity and motivation engaged [9]. eTwinning proved the importance of symbolic rewards. The certificates received in the framework of this Action do not meet the bureaucratic criteria for granting a certificate recognized by educational authorities. In this context, it arises the question of the value of different certificates: National and European Quality Label, European Prizes, other diplomas (such as “Project of the Month) etc. There is a single answer of the symbolic value of these certificates to provide recognition of the work.

3.3. Teachers’ training and development needs

To be "eTwinner", teachers need some additional skills, besides the consecrated competences. They need to learn how to manage a project, how to work in team, to take responsibility in a partnership and to comply with the Netiquette, to use ICT for teaching, to motivate pupils and to always be willing to learn. Thus, training of personnel who will be involved in teaching in an e-learning program has two dimensions: technical, relating to use some tools of the computer, and a pedagogical dimension [10]. The technical aspects relate to proper use of ICT tools for teaching - such as discussion forums, chat, wiki, blog, marking and labeling tools, collaborative documents and spreadsheets. The pedagogical dimension is more complex and aim to develop pedagogical skills in relation to ICTT-based learning environment:

- learner-centered approach (using virtual learning platforms);
- promote collaborative learning in online environments (social eLearning and virtual learning communities of practice etc.)
- support remote and predominantly written communication;
- online assessment of pupils;
- motivate distance learners etc.

In service training - often invoked as a solution - can not consistently cover the full range of educational training needs. There is a need for pre-service training to keep pace with the rapid evolution of teaching and learning supported by ICT.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

ICT-supported school partnerships are a suitable solution to transfer practices, to export education practices / models and to support mutual learning. As an example of good practice, eTwinning reveals the benefits of European cooperation in education, the need of teachers and pupils to connect with their colleagues from abroad and to learn together.

eTwinning is an initiative vivified by the teachers and pupils. It is based on their interest and needs and not on formal procedures or written agreements. It proved the importance of symbolic rewards of teachers. The teaching profession has a peculiar character, personal fulfillment being strongly supported by professional satisfaction and social recognition (as the statement allegedly

belonging to Napoleon, "the most amazing thing I have learned about war is that men will die for ribbons.").

eTwinning.net is more than a portal, it is a professional network, a community of practice. It offers a wide range of educational resources, posted by teachers from all the participating countries. These resources are, on one hand, a way of promoting their own results and on the other hand, a path of mutual support and sharing of tested practices.

Relevant and quality transnational partnerships require teachers new skills, but more important, require constant willingness to learn, openness, responsibility and commitment for their mission, their entire work being genuinely child-oriented.

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