

PROJECT BASED LEARNING IN AN INTERCULTURAL ENVIRONMENT THROUGH ETWINNING

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***Abstract:** The purpose of this report is to present the perspectives of including eTwinning into the educational curriculum of the pedagogical students in "Angel Kanchev" University of Ruse. It also outlines the opportunities for development intercultural interactions between future teachers from different countries through project activities in a multicultural digital environment using the resources of the eTwinning Platform.*

***Keywords:** eTwinning, Intercultural education, Project-based learning, Digital education*

INTRODUCTION

The need for developing skills for work in a digital multicultural environment is imposed by the introduction of the competence approach in education in response to the integration of the nine European key competences at all levels in the education system. Given the conditions of global social isolation and in order to ensure the functioning of all social and economic systems, educational institutions had to respond to the challenge of adapting the effectiveness of organizational structures to the introduced distance learning and the use of digital education resources.

In a time of when the process of globalization is limited in all spheres of life, the digital platform eTwinning is an opportunity to implement intercultural interactions in the education of pedagogical students.

Grounds for the integration of the digital eTwinning platform in the educational process of pedagogical students

The European directives in education are linked to the introduction of new measures to promote key competences and digital skills, which include recommendations on common values, inclusive education and the European dimension of teaching. The European Council's proposal aims to promote quality education for all students, "so that children can learn about both the common European heritage and European diversity and understand how the EU works. In order to achieve these goals, the Commission plans to take steps to increase virtual exchanges between schools, in particular through the successful e-Twinning network, and to stimulate school mobility through the Erasmus + program." (https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/bg/IP_18_102)

The Digital Education Action Plan, which outlines ways to help schools and education systems better to adapt to life and work in an age of rapid digital change, includes:

- better use of digital technologies for teaching and learning;
- developing the digital competencies and skills needed to live and work in an age of digital transformation;
- improving education through better data analysis and forecasting.

At national level, the new measures on using digital skills in a multicultural environment, proposed by the European Council, appear to be included as part of the necessary competencies for acquiring professional qualifications of "preschool teacher" and "primary school teacher". This, respectively, requires updating the curricula of teachers' initial training in terms of developing certain knowledge and skills for:

- creating, organizing and managing a supportive, inclusive, safe, multicultural, interactive educational environment;
- creating a culture oriented towards tolerance, cooperation, mutual assistance and fair evaluation;
- use of digital educational environment for children in conditions of distance pedagogical interaction;
- planning, organizing and implementing activities related to diversity issues;
- helping children to recognize and pay attention to manifestations of discrimination, prejudices and stereotypes when they appear in the group;
- application of a variety of approaches, methods and strategies for realization of interdisciplinary connections and integrity in education;
- use of information and communication technologies in the process of learning in an online environment through developed digital media competencies;
- application of normative documents related to the implementation of inclusive, intercultural and civic education in practical pedagogical activities;
- application of methods, techniques, tools for educating qualities such as tolerance, respect, empathy, goodwill, etc. ; (Draft Ordinance on the status and professional development of teachers, principals and other pedagogical specialists).

In response to the priorities defined by the Ministry of Education for change and inclusion of digital skills and skills for work in a multicultural environment, during the current school year in the curricula of Preschool and primary school pedagogy and Primary school pedagogy and foreign language Ruse University programmes was introduced a new elective discipline - *Management of the digital educational environment with e-Twinning*.

The **purpose** of this report is to present the opportunities for students to work with the eTwinning platform and to outline potentials for developing and optimizing intercultural interactions between future teachers from different countries by implementing project activities in a multicultural digital environment through the Platform resources.

EXPOSITION

eTwinning was launched in 2005 as a result of a recommendation from the European Commission to set up a tool to promote online communication between schools in Europe, as well as to help teachers develop their ICT and language skills using a specially designed portal. From 2007 to 2013, the activity is part of the Comenius Sectoral Program and the European Commission's Lifelong Learning Program. During this period, eTwinning, launched as a virtual platform for projects between teachers from different European countries, developed into the largest secure social network for teachers and at the same time a reliable database of projects and partnerships under programs such as Comenius and Leonardo da Vinci. Since the beginning of 2014, eTwinning has been part of the new European program for education, training, youth and sport, Erasmus +. According to the Center for Human Resources Development, the eTwinning platform has more than 835000 registered teachers, 210824 schools and more than 110000 national and international projects in Europe. In the current 2020 global pandemic, the European Commission has recommended the eTwinning Platform as a tool for sharing educational resources among educators in Europe by launching a new group "eTwinning in closed school".

The eTwinning activity functions as an informal digital social network, a place for synchronous and asynchronous online collaboration. It also provides tools for continuing professional development through webinars, trainings, themed classrooms, common interest groups and more. Through participation in project activities, emphasis is placed on "learning by doing", teamwork, strengthening the connection between the classroom and real life.

Steps to integrate eTwinning into the education of pedagogical student

In 2012, eTwinning launched an internal initiative targeting colleges, universities and teacher training institutes in several European countries. Its aim was to introduce eTwinning

activities to pedagogical students.

Since 2019, future teachers were given access to eTwinning Live. The platform and its tools (Portal, eTwinning Live and TwinSpace) offer pedagogical students a practical application of 21st century skills, introduction to innovative teaching methods in a multicultural environment, project and international pedagogical experience. It also gives priority to digital citizenship.

The initiative related to teacher training institutions is expanding its scope. In May 2019 in Brussels representatives of educational institutions from all over Europe gathered at a seminar and discussed possibilities of integrating eTwinning in the education of pedagogical students. The event focuses on solving problems related to improving the curricula of pedagogical specialties and enriching the pedagogical experience of students by including eTwinning disciplines in order to enhance digital and cultural competence by developing and implementing projects between students from different European countries.

The eTwinning initiative has more and more examples showing that the introduction of eTwinning in the education of pedagogical students is extremely valuable for them and for the educational institutions. From the practical application of 21st century skills to participation in joint international projects, the initiative is an example of how eTwinning can help to develop the new generation of teachers.

The contribution of eTwinning to initial pedagogical training provides:

- acquaintance with the project training and its introduction;
- multidisciplinary work and development of ICT and language skills;
- European, international and intercultural experience;
- development of professional skills (project management, goal setting, planning, teamwork);
- analysis of professional practice: exchange with teachers from other educational systems. (<https://www.etwinning.net/bg/pub/newsroom/highlights/etwinning-workshop-for-teacher.htm>)

In 2018, the first training of pedagogical students in the field of project development and management through eTwinning was held at "Angel Kanchev" University of Ruse. A series of trainings followed, through which students got acquainted with the resources of eTwinning Live and Twin Space and the opportunities it offers for integrating innovative pedagogical methodologies and digital tools in teaching learning content and organizing children's free time in preschool age and primary school students.

Intercultural interaction and project development in a digital environment through the eTwinning platform

Recognizing the benefits for future educators to gain access and the right to develop international projects in the eTwinning platform during their pedagogical training and in response to the perspectives for developing knowledge and skills for working in a digital multicultural environment imposed by educational requirements at national and European level, in the curriculum of the pedagogical specialties at "Angel Kanchev" University of Ruse a new optional discipline *Management of the digital educational environment with e-Twinning* was introduced.

The aim of the course is to acquaint students with the theoretical and applied aspects of project-based learning through the e-Twinning platform. Emphasis is placed on the possibilities for integrating the project method in the educational process in preschool and primary school age through the use of digital educational resources. Students get acquainted with the technological model of planning and implementation of project work, as well as with the criteria for evaluating the project presentation and project product. The advantages of the e-Twinning platform in relation to the opportunities for intercultural interaction with pedagogical students from other countries are outlined.

Expected learning outcomes - upon completion of the course students must have the necessary knowledge and skills for successful planning and implementation of project-based activities in the educational process through digital resources and tools of the e-Twinning platform.

The course content will contribute to developing certain knowledge, skills and competences:

Knowledge: to have extended and in-depth theoretical knowledge about planning and developing a project idea in a digital environment.

Skills: to apply logical thinking and show innovation and creative approach in planning project tasks and activities, realizing the set project goal; to look for student partners from national and international universities for joint work on topics in the field of preschool and primary school education; to apply the principles of intercultural education; to have skills and attitudes for constructive interactions in a multicultural environment.

Competences: to show the ability to analyze in a broader or interdisciplinary context in order to integrate knowledge, skills and competencies in different disciplines in the project work; to assess the need for professional development through the possibilities of the web-based trainings in the e-Twinning platform.

CONCLUSION

Participation in international project work will enable future teachers to engage in intercultural interaction with colleagues from other universities, to share practices, to collaborate and exchange ideas. The direct interaction between students from different countries will realize the essence of intercultural education, related to the acquisition and development of a set of knowledge, skills and competencies, "which will lead to a change in thinking, rejection of confrontation with other cultures, to the creation of attitudes towards reciprocity and cooperation." (I. Ivanov, 1999, p. 44)

Pedagogical students will acquire skills for applying innovative methods and approaches, including the technology of application of project-based learning, through project development and management, skills to plan project work in the educational process with children and students taking into account their needs and interests.

The opportunities for personal professional development in the eTwinning platform through online-based training events, webinars, European and national seminars, thematic groups and teacher rooms, experience in intercultural cooperation and interaction, will contribute to building students' confidence in using educational resource in their future pedagogical practice.

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