THE IMPACT OF TEACHERS' PARTICIPATION IN ETWINNING ON THEIR TEACHING AND TRAINING

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Abstract: ETwinning programme enjoys great popularity and large participation of the Romanian teachers. The present study aims at investigating the teachers`opinions about the impact of eTwinning on teaching practices, as well as on teachers`training needs. Data for this study were collected through an online questionnaire distributed to 108 teachers that are actively participating in eTwinning programme. Analysis of the responses revealed a number of beneficial effects on teaching and training, mentioned by respondents. Among these benefits the creation of more supporting educational environment targeted towards better learning performance of students, developing differentiated learning activities, discussing with the students the role of knowledge and skills acquired in the classroom, in their personal life and /or professional assessment of students through alternative ways, better use of ICT for professional development.

Key words: eTwinning, teaching, surveys, in -service teacher training

1. Introduction

eTwinning is " a fundamental component of the European Commission's eLearning program, part of the Erasmus+ EU Programme for Education, Training, Youth and Sport, 2014" [2].

ETwinning program was officially launched in January 2005 in Brussels as the main action of the European Commission's eLearning program. ETwining grows in 2007, when the program is integrated into the Lifelong Learning, as part of the Comenius 2007-2013, coordinated by European Schoolnet (EUN) organization that unites 30 Ministries of Education in European countries. Romania joined eTwinning in October 2007, currently having over 12,000 registered teachers. Since January 2014 eTwinning has been part of the EU program Erasmus Plus.

The initiative of this action derived from the Barcelona European Council recommendations in March 2002. These recommendations [7] encouraged institutions and teachers to achieve school partnerships (twinning schools) in order to give their students the opportunity to learn through collaboration and to practice and improve their ICT skills .

The core of eTwinning is the etwinning.net portal, available in 25 languages, which since 2013 has had a new interface. Here teachers can register, search for partners, schools and consult specialized eTwinning publications. Students get involved in exciting projects that facilitate communication and collaboration between them and their peers in European schools on TwinSpace platform (adjacent - space platform exclusively for projects), where each project has its own space. ETwinning projects can start anytime during the school year, and may last between two weeks and two years. Under these circumstances, European collaboration becomes a permanent characteristics of everyday school life, in a safe online environment.

2. The research

The research was conducted in April 2013. 108 Romanian teachers, from different counties (the counties of Cluj, Suceava, Mures, Alba, Salaj, Braşov, Olt, Galati, Constanta, Arges, Satu Mare,

Bistrita, Sibiu, Hunedoara, Prahova, Giurgiu) took part in the research. They were all active in eTwinning projects and had 1 to 5 years experience in the field.

Research question

The questionnaire focused on getting an answer to the question: "What are the benefits of teacher participation in international collaborative eTwinning projects on their current activities (design, implementation and evaluation of teaching) and on their training? Predicted response (research hypothesis) was that the systematic involvement of teachers in eTwinning projects:

a) increases the quality of project activities lesson, teaching and assessment activities undertaken

b) changes the perspective on vocational training, by identifying new professional development directions .

In addition, subjects were asked about the difficulties and limitations of online collaborative eTwinning projects in teaching practice. [1]

Method

To study the needs of teachers in the use of eTwinning projects in teaching practice we used a questionnaire [3] created with the specialized help of TEHNE (Center for Innovation in Education) and ISE (Institute of Education Sciences) [10]. The questionnaire consists of thirteen items, six demographic items and seven on the topic.[4] Eleven questionnaire items were taken into consideration in the present study, while the rest of the items will be discussed in another study.

Results

94% of 108 respondent teachers involved in the research were women. Respondents were aged between 26 and 51 (Figure 1) and had between 1 and 5 years experience in eTwinning programme.
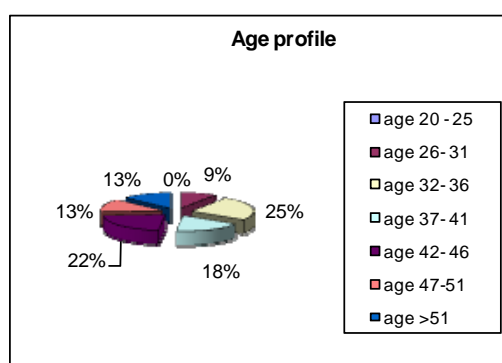

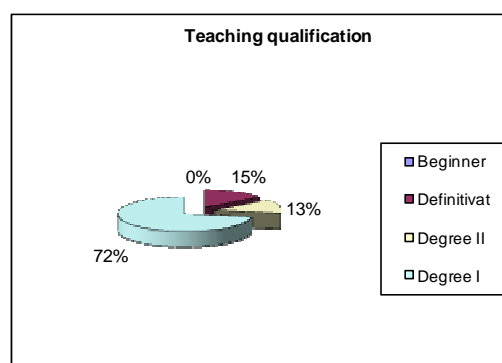**Figure 1.** *The age profile of people surveyed*

Figure 1. *Teaching qualification of people surveyed*

We found that the 20-25 age group is not represented, showing that eTwinning is not very well-known by very young teachers. The age groups best represented are the 32-36 year olds followed by 42-46 year olds. It is the period of full maturity, the teachers have sufficient experience, being prepared for the challenge of collaborative projects. An additional argument in favor of these statements is the high percentage of teachers with a teaching degree I (72%), while the beginners are not represented (Figure 2).

Urban public education is better represented than the rural one, due to the schools competition in the area, and to the IT literacy, as in the last decade, urban schools have been provided with new technology , internet connections education software and teacher in-service training. Only 11% of rural schools benefit from the same supportive environment that is absolutely necessary to carry out eTwinning online projects (Figure 3). Secondary school teachers seem to be most interested in participating in eTwinning projects (33% and 31%) (Figure 4).
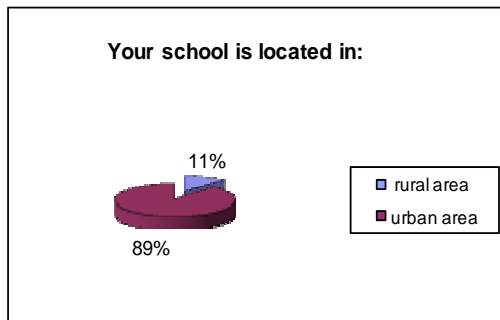
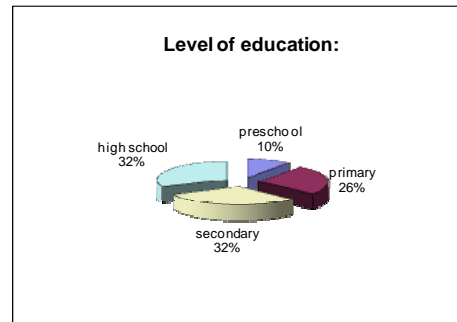**Figure 3.** *The environment in which the school is located*
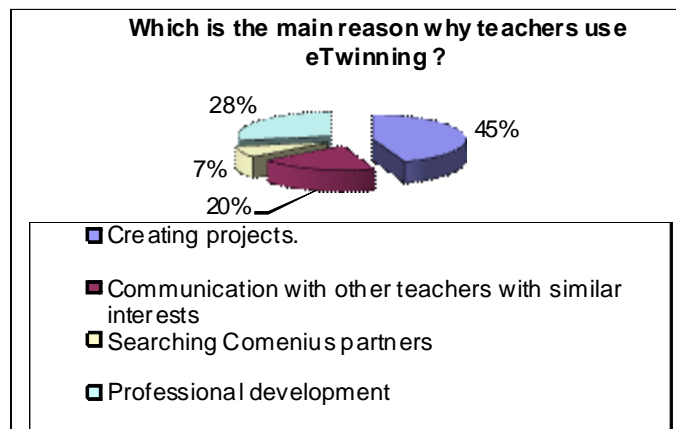

Figure 4. *Level of education*

Figure 5. *The main reason why teachers use eTwinning*

The main reason teachers use eTwinning portal is that of creating and working on educational projects (45%). Professional development , communication and exchange of ideas with other teachers in Europe through online courses, teachers' rooms, groups (28% respectively 20%). Looking for partners to initiate Comenius (Erasmus Plus) is poorly represented, only 7% of surveyed teachers responding affirmatively (Figure 5).

Subjects' responses to the questionnaire items are presented in the following.

Item 1 (item 10 in the questionnaire) asks teachers to assess to what extent eTwinning can broaden their perspective on the profession and can facilitate the acquisition of knowledge and skills presented in Table 1.

Table1. *e-Twinning impact on professional issues*

To what extent do you consider that eTwinning contributes to:	Better knowledge of other educational systems (10_1)	Strengthening the sense of belonging to a professional community (10_2)	Supporting the new roles of teachers in the context of new, technology-assisted education (10_3)	Assumption by teachers, to a greater extent, of the role of training students (10_4)	Linking the formal curriculum with interesting and motivating teaching activities (10_5)	Makes it easier teachers work (10_6)
Strongly agree	87 (81%)	85 (79%)	87 (81%)	72 (67%)	85 (79%)	45 (42%)
Partially agree	21 (19%)	22 (20%)	19 (18%)	36 (33%)	22 (20%)	54 (50%)
Partially disagree	0 (0%)	1 (1%)	2 (2%)	0 (0%)	1 (1%)	9 (8%)
Strongly disagree	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

The qualitative representation of the data presented in Table 1. shows that the 10.6 item has the lowest rate of total agreement.
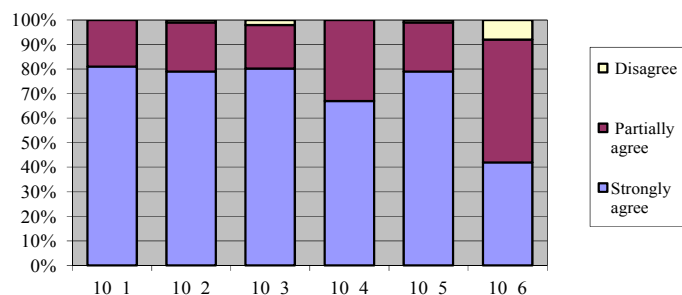
Figure 6. *ETwinning impact on professional issues*

ETwinning, as the subjects involved in the research consider, facilitates knowledge of other education systems (87%), strengthens the sense of belonging to a professional community (85%), supports the new roles of the teacher in the context of new, technology -assisted education (87%), motivates teachers to assume a greater role in students training (72%), links the formal curriculum with interesting and motivating educational activities (85%). However, 54% of the respondent partially agreed considering etwinning projects somehow too demanding and complex (Figure 6). This moderate attitude is mainly due to the difficulties of integrating eTwinning project activities in the Romanian curriculum .

Item 2 (item 11 in the questionnaire) requires teachers to appreciate the changes in the teacher-student relationship, brought about by the participation in eTwinning programme (The changes refer to the design of learning situations as well as the evaluation and the use of technology in the classroom). Subjects' responses are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. *Changes in teaching practice / teaching brought about by the participation in eTwinning*

Item 2	After participating in eTwinning, please rate the changes in your teaching practice	To a large extent	To a medium extent	To a small extent	Not at all	I can not appreciate
11_1	Improve collaboration with your students (a good teacher-student relationship)	82 (76%)	25 (23%)	1 (1%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
11_2	Improve your ability to design educational situations (formulating objectives, choosing teaching methods, evaluation design school)	57 (53%)	42 (39%)	9 (8%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
11_3	A greater focus on interdisciplinary connections	83 (77%)	21 (19%)	4 (4%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
11_4	A better connection with non-formal learning activities suggested **by** students	82 (76%)	26 (24%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
11_5	More emphasis on new pedagogical elements (student centered, key skills training, etc.)	81 (75%)	25 (23%)	2 (2%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
11_6	Introduction of methods and strategies in educational situations that you design and carry out	79 (73%)	25 (23%)	4 (4%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
11_7	Creating more meaningful educational situations, better performance-oriented learning of the students	71 (66%)	32 (30%)	5 (4%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
11_8	Enriching the content and themes of the formal curriculum	59 (55%)	43 (40%)	6 (5%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
11_9	Providing more opportunities Constructivist learning (collaborative tasks etc.) So the students can meet new and complex challenges associated with most professions nowadays	84 (78%)	22 (20%)	2 (2%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
11_10	Deployment of differentiated learning activities (groups of students, by level, the skills, etc.)	70 (65%)	35 (32%)	3 (3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

11_11	Discuss with students the role of the knowledge and skills they acquire in your class in their future life and professional career	65 (60%)	38 (35%)	5 (5%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
11_12	Support / encourage the students to be self-directed learners	84 (78%)	22 (20%)	1 (1%)	1 (1%)	0 (0%)
11_13	More emphasis on the use of ICT to support teaching of the classes	84 (78%)	21 (19%)	2 (2%)	0 (0%)	1 (1%)
11_14	Set learning tasks that will get your the students use ICT	79 (73%)	23 (21%)	5 (5%)	0 (0%)	1 (1%)
11_15	Better planning and implementation of school evaluation. Refer to methods, techniques and various assessment tools, tailored to the educational situation.	52 (48%)	47 (44%)	9 (8%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
11_16	Assessment of students through alternative ways, more accessible and closer to students.	72 (67%)	28 (26%)	8 (7%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

The qualitative representation of the data presented in Table 2. points out that the items 11_2, 11_8 and 11_15 recorded the lowest percentage of total agreement from teachers.
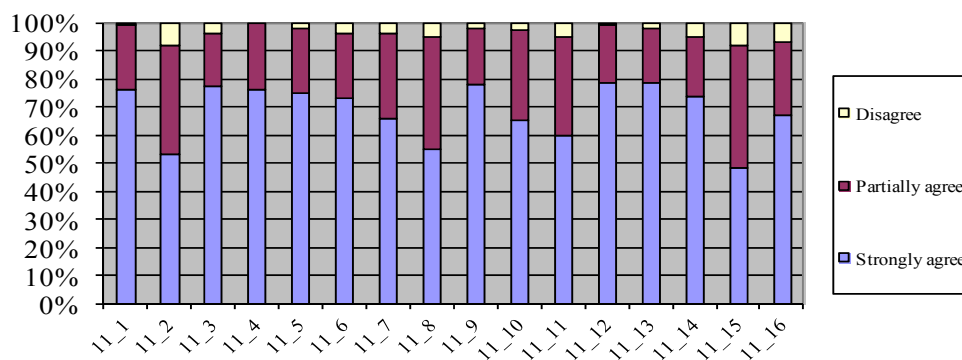
Figure 7. *Changes in teaching practice, occurred after participating in eTwinning program*

Teachers who worked on collaborative projects, on eTwinning platform, found an improvement in the teacher-student relationship, and a better connection with non- formal learning activities, suggested by students (76%). Getting students to fulfil collaborative tasks that prepared them for life, encouraging student autonomy in learning, frequent use of ICT in teaching are changes that each teacher found after participating in eTwinning projects (78%). Educational situations were improved by introducing new methods and strategies, and learning tasks were formulated in such a way as to promote the use of ICT by students (73%). With increased participation in eTwinning projects, attention given to interdisciplinary links also increased, (77%) as well as new education elements, such as student-centered learning strategies, key skills training, etc. (75%) .

Creating more meaningful educational situations, targeted towards better learning performance of students, developing differentiated learning activities, discuss with students the role of knowledge and skills acquired in the classroom, in their personal life and professional career, or alternative ways of assessing students, more accessible and closer to them were other changes that most teachers responded positively to (60%). We found, however, that a significant part of respondents is more reserved regarding these changes (from 26% to 35%). They say that these changes are somehow visible through eTwinning projects. They rated these changes as medium.

Minor changes were recorded in the planning of learning situations, in the formulation of objectives, choice of teaching methods, planning school evaluation (53%), enriching content and themes in the formal curriculum (55%).

In terms of planning and implementing school evaluation by using various methods, techniques and educational evaluation tools, only 48 % of surveyed teachers said that, this was due to their participation in eTwinning , while 44 % gave a moderate response in this regard (Table 2, Figure 7).

Item 3 (item 12 in the questionnaire) asks teachers to appreciate the changes that the participation in eTwinning operated on their activity in terms of continuing professional development, which are presented in Table 3.
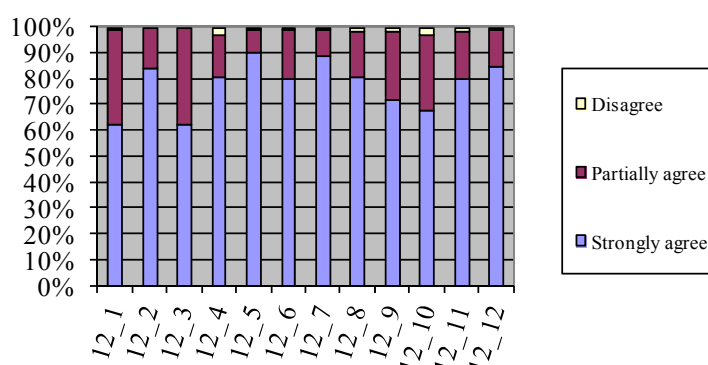
Table 3. *Changes at the professional level in terms of continuous development*

Item 3	After participating in eTwinning, please assess your activity level changes , in terms of continuing professional development	To a large extent	To a medium extent	To a small extent	Not at all	I can not appreciate
12_1	A better perspective on the responsibilities and your contribution within the school activity	67 (62%)	39 (36%)	1 (1%)	1 (1%)	0 (0%)
12_2	Greater attention to quality of the projects you make	91 (84%)	17 (16%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
12_3	More attention paid to the importance of pedagogical principles in creating and conducting learning activities	66 (61%)	40 (37%)	0 (0%)	2 (2%)	0 (0%)
12_4	More emphasis on collaborative activities with teachers in school or in other schools	88 (81%)	17 (16%)	3 (3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
12_5	Better view of the participation in collaborative educational projects	97 (90%)	10 (9%)	1 (1%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
12_6	A new perspective on the role of education partners to attract your students	86 (80%)	21 (19%)	1 (1%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
12_7	Several cooperation activities with teachers from other countries for cultural and linguistic exchanges	96 (89%)	11 (10%)	1 (1%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
12_8	Several cooperation activities with teachers from other schools to share teaching experience	88 (81%)	18 (17%)	2 (2%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
12_9	A perspective endorsed in the selection of activities that add value to educational situations that you design for your students	78 (72%)	28 (26%)	2 (2%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
12_10	Using the results of the assessment activities to improve teaching	73 (68%)	31 (29%)	4 (3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
12_11	More confidence in the new technologies	85 (79%)	19 (18%)	3 (2%)	0 (0%)	1 (1%)
12_12	Better use of ICT for professional development (information search, search partners, etc.)	91 (84%)	15 (14%)	1 (1%)	0 (0%)	1 (1%)

The qualitative representation of the data presented in Table 3 points out that the items 12_1 and 12_3 recorded the lowest percentage of teacher agreement.

From the perspective of continuing professional development there was a better orientation towards the participation in collaborative educational projects (90%) and closer collaboration with teachers from other countries for cultural exchange and language (89%). According to the respondents, increased attention to the quality of completed projects , and improving ICT skills for information search , search partners, etc. were evident (84%). Changes in relationships with other teachers in the school or in other schools and conducting collaborative activities or exchange of teaching experience become visible after participating in eTwinning (81%). 80 % of teachers who developed at least an eTwinning project have a new perspective on the role of attracting partners for the education of students and 79 % are confident in new technologies. In the selection of activities that add value to designed educational situations ,teachers who answered the questionnaire said they had acquired a more competent perspective (72%) and use self-assessment to improve their own professional activity

(68%) . Only 62 % and 61 % of respondents said that eTwinning gave more insight into the responsibilities and contribution to the school activity, and more attention paid to the importance of pedagogical principles in creating and conducting learning activities (Table 3, Figure 8) .

**Figure 8.** *Changes at the professional level in terms of continuous development*

Item 4 (item 13 in the questionnaire) refers to the limitations of conducting collaborative online eTwinning class projects that are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. *Limitations of online collaborative teaching eTwinning projects*

Item 4	What, in your opinion, limits the development of collaborative educational eTwinning projects in your class/ classes?	Strongly agree	Partially agree	Partially disagree	Strongly disagree
13_1	There is a large discrepancy between the current way of working and the eTwinning projects way of working	17 (16%)	50 (46%)	32 (30%)	9 (8%)
13_2	Your discipline curriculum does not fit in eTwinning activities. (Contents not likely to be addressed collaboratively at a distance.)	11 (10%)	29 (27%)	38 (35%)	30 (28%)
13_3	ETwinning work mode is not suitable for your students (students have different expectations and are accustomed to a different way of working.)	7 (6%)	24 (22%)	24 (22%)	53 (49%)
13_4	Your students were disinterested and did not get involved in undertaken eTwinning projects	5 (5%)	18 (17%)	34 (31%)	51 (47%)
13_5	Parents have different expectations and your students are accustomed to a different way of working	12 (11%)	19 (18%)	42 (39%)	35 (32%)
13_6	Your fellow teachers` attitude is contrary to the collaborative spirit of eTwinning .	14 (13%)	30 (28%)	31 (29%)	33 (31%)
13_7	There is a big discrepancy between what the Romanian curriculum allows (contents, expected results, standards and evaluation methods) and what eTwinning proposes	21 (19%)	36 (33%)	35 (32%)	16 (15%)
13_8	eTwinning projects results are not recognized as school performance. (There is no clear evidence of improving school performance as a result of participation in an eTwinning project)	11 (10%)	23 (21%)	34 (31%)	40 (37%)

The qualitative representation of the data presented in Table 4 points out that the items 13_1 and 13_7 recorded the highest percentage of total agreement of teachers.
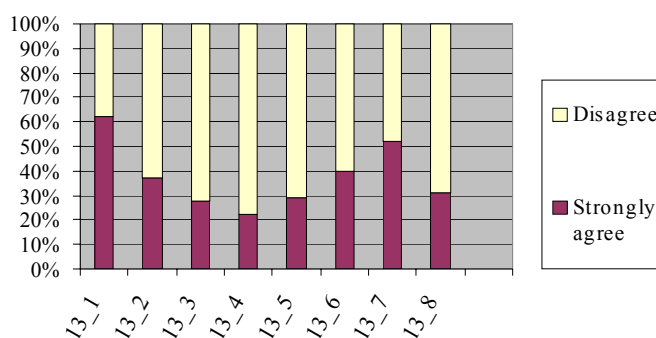
Figure 9. *Limitations of online collaborative teaching eTwinning projects*

eTwinning online collaborative projects have limitations when conducted in classrooms. A large number of teachers participating in these activities agreed that class work and eTwinning projects work are quite different (62%). The international practices , content , the expected standards and the assessing modalities are different from those standardized by the Romanian curriculum (52%).

However , respondents considers that the Romanian education curriculum can be easily adapted to the eTwinning activities (63%), and eTwinning mode is suitable for students (71%), students are interested and involved (78%) , with the support of parents (71%).

An obstacle in the development of eTwinning projects is the attitude of fellow teachers when it is contrary to the collaborative spirit of eTwinning (60%). 68% of surveyed teachers acknowledged that the school results are better in case of student participating in eTwinning projects (Table 4, Figure 9).

Discussion

Analyzing the results of the survey we came to several conclusions, regarding the effective changes in teaching practice in case of teachers that were involved in eTwinning international collaborative projects. Among these conclusions , three stand out as the most important, as they require reflection on one`s own teaching practices, and involve identification of proper measures meant to improve the current situation, and to support the most valuable experiences.

- Romanian teachers exchange professional experiences working in collaboration with colleagues in European countries. As a result they systematically implement skill-forming and student-centred approaches in their teaching activity. Thus, they capitalize the newly acquired knowledge in their class work. Certain changes have been noticed. More and more emphasis is put on practical teaching rather than on didactic discourse. But the process of change is slow and it will take some decades until the world education ,which is in crisis now, will undergo a firm paradigm shift. Not much has changed in the planning of learning situations, in the formulation of objectives, choice of teaching methods, planning school evaluation, enriching contents and themes, in the formal curriculum planning.

- More attention is given to the quality of the projects and to collaboration with teachers from other countries for cultural and linguistic exchanges. One reason may be winning awards and implicit recognition of their training at European level. The fact is that there is an increase in the quality of projects from year to year. Valuable projects involve subjects achieved through close collaboration between partners, both students and teachers from different countries. The focus is now on the introduction new methods and strategies in learning situations, giving students collaborative tasks, the use of ICT in teaching and learning, assessment through alternative ways, selecting endorsed valuable activities, learning foreign languages.

- Using eTwinning activities for self-evaluation and adjustment in teaching . Regarding the evaluation, there is a discrepancy between the Romanian curriculum and eTwinning projects

content. However, the Romanian teachers show real interest in alternative assessment methods because, as eTwinning teachers, they need to expand their opportunities to collaborate and learn. These alternative evaluation methods are considered to be more suitable to individual characteristics and age of students. For example, some teachers adopt different teaching methods, techniques, tools suitable for each learning situation, so the evaluation becomes more relevant. Also the results of the teaching-learning activities are more consistently used by teachers to adjust teaching.

3. Conclusion

ETwinning is a model of successful program that develops year after year through a well thought out marketing policy that combines various volunteering strategies which focus on different target-groups of people (from competitions, publications, prizes, free classes to rooms of teachers, groups and so on). The common goal of all these efforts is to achieve a uniform European quality education that improves the quality of education in Europe through cooperation [9] and exchange of ideas. All these objectives are to be achieved through ICT .

We must add that eTwinning is a means to promote the latest directions in education set by the European Commission using all that its platforms offer (classes, groups, exchanges - mobility, campaigns, etc.)

Since Romania joined the European Union, the access to European resources, including eTwinning portal, has become free. Here Romanian teachers have exchanged ideas, shared experiences and visions with European partners on the progress of a project and participated in training courses, in laboratories, published and read articles about new trends in education [5], [8]. Countries like Finland, UK, Sweden, Poland have rich experience in developing projects and introducing them to the class, as an alternative to traditional lessons.

ETwinning portal guides through its applications, achieving uniform collaborative projects in terms of design, offering the same register format. An additional motivation for participating teachers is the fact that they receive national and European certificates of membership as well as European awards that recognize the quality of their work and that of the students involved in the projects [6].

While acknowledging certain limitations of their involvement in eTwinning, such as lack of support from the school, the difficulty of establishing collaborations in school, lack of time for the participation, difficulties related to the integration of new acquisitions in the discipline, etc . Romanian teachers agree that the use eTwinning is motivating and stimulating both for them and their students, and it also contributes to their professional development.

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