

Foreign Reserch
Чуждестранни изследвания

LEARNING MATURITY

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Abstract. This article presents the qualitative data analysis on the importance and the impact of learning activities conducted as a strategic partnership between four schools from Romania, Croatia, Poland and Slovenia where the target groups and direct beneficiaries have been students aged between 11 – 16 years old, teachers and staff of these schools. The collected data reflects personal points of views on how people grow up using non-formal educational strategies, how they are motivated to make some important changes in their life, to break some barriers in their carrier guidance and personal development, to break some invisible obstacles in relationships between people of different age, visions, ethnicity and culture.

Keywords: non-formal education; ethics; environment education

I. Introduction

The research is conducted in period 2016 – 2018 in four schools from Romania, Croatia, Poland and Slovenia; it has been focused on the topics of environmental protection and ethical thinking development educational strategies, as a response of a main need of Humanity: living together the Becoming, in harmony with all Terra Alive forms. In this moment, human being is the unique mammalian which destroys the natural bio-system and puts in danger the balance of Alive Terra, even he is aware by the fragility of the Universe balance; the human individual has become more distant, depressive and alienated by his inner nature, more disconnected by his soul and has lost the Ethical reasoning of the conscience. The research has been constructed and grounded on international prerogatives of Durable Development, on the need to give valid responses to a triple contemporary human crisis: Ecological, Social and Economic, but also on The Report of Club of Roma “Bankrupting Nature

– 12 Key messages” where it is mentioned that Europe should take as priority the planning for long term and rethinking of assessment system of the future values, to make well the thinks and promotes circular economy.

The topics of the research have allowed the development and reinforcement of networks, working in collaborative groups, sharing and confronting different ideas, practices, educational strategies, promoting non-formal learning and participatory education governance, improving transversal and key competences or digital ones. Its implementation has been based on researching, practicing and sharing different non formal methods in and outside of school, often in collaboration with local community. For educators and mentors, it brought a relevant and deeper insight in what active non-formal learning was and its impact on students’ motivation. As for the students, it has opened some new doors into the future, which is seen as precious in all its diversities, both natural and cultural, and is thus to be cherished and responsibly handled.

II. Discovering the world as “different but beautiful” by learning activities

In 2018 in all four schools (Romania, Croatia, Poland and Slovenia) there were done 2 focus-interviews, 1 with students and 1 with teachers. There have been collected important data about target groups perceptions on the project activities which have been implemented during 18 months. There was used a common questionnaire with 10 questions. The responses were coded (S-student and T-teacher) to protect personal data and identity of the respondent persons. Their analysis reflects some important moments:

Question 1. *What needs, worries and expectations did you have when you started this research?*

Teachers and students were excited about meeting the partners, seeing how other school systems work and finding out if they shared the same environmental values as the partner countries.

Teachers expected to share best school practices and wanted their students to expand their horizons as well as foster global awareness and international collaboration. A big part of the teachers from all 4 countries had to overcome their fear of speaking foreign language, while others expressed their worries about the project management (a large number of participating students, how to include project-based creative activities in the curriculum, managing other school staff to replace them in classes while they were on mobility activities), respecting deadlines and accomplishing all the tasks. Croatia: *“I expected: a lot of work, hard to coordinate my everyday job with the project obligations, new experiences, travelling and meeting new people and professionals, getting to know new methods, school systems, the opportunity to develop organisational and communicational skills”*.

The student’s concerns were related to their ability to communicate effectively in foreign language, to connect with others persons of different culture and lifestyle,

as hosts and guests, too. Croatia: *"I was worried if I would manage myself in a new country and environment. I expected to have fun while learning about new things".*

Question 2. In what way has the experience influenced you, what changes has it brought into your life and on what level (positive or negative influences)?

Both, students and teachers, learnt new things about sustainable development and ethical values of the contemporary life (recycling, care for natural resources).

Croatia: *"I spent more time teaching my students cross-circularly about the project topics (environmental problems, ecology, social relations, and healthy diet). I was surprised how some facts were taken for granted, not only by students but also by adults. I became more aware of some common environmental and social problems and learnt that, if we talk about them more often, we can really make a difference."*

Poland: *"I think that the project had a very positive influence because I broke language barrier and I talked to other students in a foreign language and as for environment I learnt about recycling and I started to segregate rubbish at home".*

Students pointed significant influence in understanding diversities between cultures, collaborative work, different ways to get to know one another and communicating without feeling pressure. Romania: *"I consider that this type of project can only have positive effects both on a cultural and professional level. I had the chance to visit a new country and compare the way people are there with the way we behave and I was glad to discover that the world is different but beautiful".* They have also developed their linguistic competences. All of them loved visiting foreign countries and making new friends; international experiences enriched their personal growth and strengthened their values.

Teachers pointed that this project had positive impact on their professional life, particularly in implementing new, different and non-formal methodologies. Some teachers have learnt how to organize their time better in regards to extracurricular activities, others have developed their IT and research skills. Some of the teachers were happy to realise that they can manage to run a workshop in foreign language by themselves. A teacher who does not speak English succeeded to communicate and break a language barrier by imitating others and with a little help from the students. Poland: *"I see only positive changes in me after the project. Personally, I am more opened to other countries and cultures, I developed my communicative skills in English. It also showed me that the students use English quite well and it increased my motivation towards language teaching and learning".*

Both students and teachers pointed that the activities were time consuming, for students mostly while they were hosting their guests during learning session. For teachers, the whole project was highly time consuming, namely project management (administration and paper work). Croatia T6: *"Positive: satisfaction with new experiences and methods, dynamics in my everyday work, better organisational*

and management skills, knowledge about project dynamics. Negative: less free time and a lot of stress”.

Question 3. Which were the most appreciated and the most useful activities, proposals and moments regarding your personal life as well as your professional orientation and development?

Both teachers and students stated that the recycling workshops held through the EcoPhyllia Club and EcoSophya Caravan were very useful and made them develop responsibility towards using natural resources. Romania: *„My favorite activity was the one where we had to design clothes using recycled materials and we got to see each contry’s traditional clothes”.*

Organization of some of the activities was a challenge but at the same time very rewarding for example flash mobs, educational cards, outdoor art classes, workshops, learning session abroad and activities connected to Semiotic of Alive Past. Poland: *“According to me the greatest and at the same time the most rewarding challenge was organization of the flash mobs. It was a new experience for us and it required the involvement of a lot of people: parents, teachers, students, local members of society. It turned out to be very successful”.* Poland: *“According to me the most useful were the Learning Sessions in partner countries and also the arrival of foreign students in our village. We could meet new people and integrate with them and learn their languages, culture, traditional dishes and dances. We had a lot of recycling classes”.*

Students, especially the ones from low-income families, pointed out meeting their peers from other countries and travelling to host countries as the most useful and appreciated experience. One student changed his personal beliefs about foreign countries once he’d been abroad and met many welcoming, friendly people. A girl enjoyed a discussion about the life in the future, which was held in a public library. Students also liked the positive synergy in Decorating School Wall teamwork activity in all learning sessions.

Question 4. What difficulties, unpleasant or unwanted aspects have you encountered during the learning sessions in the partner countries?

Some students had difficulties in communication because their hosts/guests didn’t know English well. Slovenia: *“One of my difficulties was the fact that my host’s parents didn’t speak English so I had a hard time communicating with them”.* Coordinating teachers had problems with project team members because a part of them change the job location. All teachers agree on the quality and diversity of the project, but in the same time they think it demands too much paperwork, which can cause a strain and adds a pressure to their job.

Question 5. Has this experience made you feel part of Terra community as a global community of the Alive (Why/why not)?

Both students and teachers answered “yes” to the above question. They stated that they felt part of global community of people who care about environment and

the future of our planet. There has been created a global community, but also local smaller communities with NGOs..

The research has contributed to the improvement of the school climate and forged stronger relationship between students and teachers. It has helped teachers to develop interdisciplinary approaches and connect teachers internationally, a fact which didn't go unnoticed by the students, who in teachers' opinion forged even stronger bonds with their international peers. Everyone agreed that people give meaning to our lives, people who we share our experiences with; nothing can compare to real, authentic connections.

Question 6. *Would you say that this experience has helped you build a virtual Terra community as a space of friendly human interaction, of sharing experiences, opinions and information (Why/why not)?*

Both students and teachers think that this project made a virtual Terra community. All students have stayed in touch with their peers from other countries. Croatia: *"We are still in touch with our new friends in virtual space. I think it's great"*. They met online before meeting in person. They interact on social networking sites and have created a Facebook group. They feel confident to talk about their personal issues. Language is not an obstacle to communication and they are happy the Internet provides easy access to their new friends.

Teachers pointed that this project made several virtual spaces where they shared their practices and experiences.

Question 7. *What is your opinion on promoting learning at school based on research of this type?*

Both teachers and students agreed that research learning methodology is a better way of learning than the formal one because students learn by doing and collaborating. Everyone is fond of implementing learning by doing and learning by having fun in the classroom because it provides opportunities for greater peer-to-peer collaboration, teacher-to-student mentoring, cross-disciplinary engagement and it requires students to accept more responsibility. Students gained an authentic perspective of life abroad. Poland: *"I think that project is more interesting than English and Biology lessons because we don't have to sit and listen but we can be more active in the process"*. They had an opportunity to learn about other countries and cultures as well as to appreciate their own community and culture more than before. It's also one of the best ways to learn and practice a foreign language.

Teachers are well aware that they had an opportunity to promote a dynamic classroom approach in which students acquire deeper knowledge through active exploration of real-world challenges. Romania: *"Non-formal activities help foreign language teachers but also students because it gives them the liberty to creativity, freedom of opinion and develop their communication skills in a foreign language without feeling scared about the grammar part of it"*.

Question 8. *Taking into account the activities you were involved in, would you be able to identify values and ethical norms for an Alive Future?*

Students and teachers, too, recognised the following core values: be tolerant, consider all living creatures equally valuable and give them equal concern and respect, buy locally produced goods, minimize waste and help saving the environment, adopt a more self-sustaining lifestyle, right on life and clean environment, importance of active citizenship in solving local and global problems, personal and community care for natural resources, recycling awareness, not having prejudices, being tolerant.

Question 9. *In what way has this activities helped you enhance your data analysing skills, including your critical, systematic and global thinking?*

Teachers and students agreed that this activities has helped develop their critical and analysing skills and made them aware of their systematic skills and how helpful they can be. Romania S1: „*Through my trip to Croatia I had the chance to rethink the critical ideas I had in concerns to our own country and people. There I saw the way they lived and what principle they live by seeing the way they lived and it helped me realize we aren't so different*”.

They both agree that the most enhanced one was the global thinking as they had to relate to people from different backgrounds and think of the environment on a bigger scale rather than locally. Regular monitoring and evaluation of project activities also adds to developing and strengthening our analytical skills, which are essential for critical thinking.

Poland: “*The main characteristic of critical thinking is creative thinking, learning and making decisions. Creative thinking is used for example in “Ecophylia Club” where students creatively use recyclable materials which usually end up in a bin. Primarily our students learnt a lot during the project especially making right decisions*”.

Question 10. *And lastly, if the whole experience was to be repeated, what would you change, what else would you have done but did not do?*

Most teachers wouldn't change anything. Students would like to have more free time during mobility/hosting so they can get to know each other better and spend more time together. Some teachers would change the contest rules (voting). The online debates should be done with web 2.0 tools like Tricider. Croatia: “*I would change the way of voting for contests (not FB likes). I would also changed the way the debates were implemented but I'm still not sure in what way. I would reduce paper work, if possible*”.

III. Conclusions

The activities had a positive expected impact on persons and organisations that have been directly (students, teachers) and indirectly (parents, decisional actors, NGO, libraries, business actors and other stakeholders which have been identified during the project).

Both students and teachers agree that the impact of the research on personal, professional and school life has been great; the level of competences has been improved in critical thinking, systemic (global and globalizing) thinking, ability to argue an ethical position, interpersonal, intercultural and foreign language communication, electronic communication in a virtual community and networking space, social entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial green action, a better knowledge of links and dependences between natural, social and economic environment of people community, understanding the role of ethics in daily human life and the role of human being as a unique, ethical form in our common Terra universe. Besides, project based activities have been more interesting for students bringing informal factor to studying usually difficult subjects. The openness to new cultures, languages and countries will surely pay off in the future when the students will have to make career choices.

This experience has managed to build a real and a virtual Terra Community, where all participants to be engaged in environmental issues and to collaborate on solving corresponding problems, using their critical, systematic and global thinking skills. They can all identify some common ethical values, among which are more often recognized: tolerance, right to a clean environment, personal and collective responsibility for environment and community, recycling mindset, active citizenship as one of the means of solving environmental problems. The activities taken had a strong influence on students (new knowledge and responsible lifestyle) as well as teachers who, without exception, say that this project has given a new impulse to their work and career.

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