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# Teachers on the possibilities of cultivating regional traditions within the eTwinning framework of international collaboration of schools

**Abstract:** This article is a presentation of the author's own research findings conducted on a study sample of  $N = 65$  teachers of junior secondary schools and primary schools. The aim of the study was to answer the research problem referring the teachers' views on the possibility of creating and cultivating regional traditions with the application of tools and methods offered by the eTwinning Portal for international school cooperation.

**Keywords:** regional education, tradition cultivation, international collaboration of schools, eTwinning, project method

## Introduction

Regional education has always been an important part of school curricula. Today, the knowledge of the region and culture includes the awareness of the local, national, and European heritage, as well as the importance of their place in the world. In the era of European integration, it is important to understand the cultural and linguistic diversity of individual countries, cultivating and nurturing both manifestations and forms of regional cultures. The in-depth understanding of one's own culture and a sense of identity may be the basis for an open attitude towards different cultures and respect for diversity (Gilleran & Kearney, 2014, p. 38)

eTwinning is a European initiative that aims to provide support to teachers in terms of establishing contacts enabling them to get to know one another, as well as the exchange of ideas and extensive collaboration within the framework of a social networking site (Crawley, 2012). An important aspect of eTwinning is the fact that the projects always entail the exchange of traditions and values typical of particular cultures. The assumptions revolve around the idea that the greater the scale of information exchange, the more knowledgeable the students become about the cultural diversities of other societies, and thus become more European. It can therefore be claimed that eTwinning makes an important contribution to European education, especially in the field of foreign languages and cultures. eTwinning has proved that European education does exist, and has established itself for good in the school core curricula (Van de Craen, 2008). The action has already taken a permanent position in the projects under the Comenius program, and has been integrated in the Lifelong Learning Program. It is learning a foreign language with respect for different cultures which makes up Europe and constitutes the heart of all the Comenius actions. Languages and culture are at the root of the majority of eTwinning projects, regardless of whether it comes to subjects such as physics, history, music, or mathematics (Gillera, 2008). The assumptions of the projects implemented within eTwinning focus on the perception of the future of Europe from the perspective of the younger generation which will shape the future (Crawley, 2008).

The authors of the quoted reports come to the conclusion that teachers are in a possession of both tools and opportunities to form attitudes and skills which will help young people to shape this future reality in an open and unbiased way, with the application of the modern media, which are successfully and with satisfaction deployed by younger and younger pupils and students.

eTwinning launched by the European Commission in 2005, includes a wide community of schools across Europe. The eTwinning project offers a platform for cooperation between school staff (teachers, school principals, librarians) from one of the European countries, who communicate, collaborate, develop projects, share information and ideas, as well as initiate creative and inspiring educational activities on this platform. The eTwinning action promotes school collaboration in Europe through information and communication technologies (ICT), offering support, tools and services, so that schools can easily create short-term and long-term partnerships in miscellaneous fields. The eTwinning Portal ([www.etwinning.net](http://www.etwinning.net)) is in this action the main meeting place and workspace. It is available in 26 languages and brings together nearly 230,277 members and over 5,462 projects carried out by two or more schools across Europe. The website provides online tools to enable teachers to find partners for cooperation, to establish projects, to share ideas, to exchange the examples of the best practices and to start an immediate collaboration taking advantage of various tools specially tailored to particular needs (Danosh, 2015).

An extremely important role in the whole idea of eTwinning is performed by teachers. According to Stanisław Juszczuk, a contemporary teacher should be characterized by professionalism in terms of being prepared to work within the scope of pedagogical, psychological, and methodical areas (Juszczuk, 2013, p. 21). What seems to be extremely valuable with regard to the issue of my own research is the concept of Czesław Banach according to which the teacher should be a source of knowledge for learners, a source of ethical values, as well as life and social experience in the changing world, moreover, they should induce the activity of learners and enhance their development (Banach, 2004). The teacher is above all involved in the developmental changes of school and education, culture, and social life (Banach, 2000). The effectiveness of any action taken by the teacher depends largely on their personality, their competence and motivation for didactic and educational work (Juszczuk, 2016). One should also mention that the important factor here is the teacher's openness to new technology and the ability to adapt to the changing conditions, educational challenges, as well as the flexibility to follow the interests and needs of the students, who are in every respect digital natives (Prensky, 2001). In the actions implemented within the eTwinning collaboration of schools, the teacher plays a key role as the initiator of the activities, the coordinator of children and youth's work and the inspirer, constantly motivating the students to participate in various projects, including those dedicated to regional education and cultivation of traditions.

In this paper, regional education is understood as a process of educating and upbringing as well as shaping human identity associated with their land and culture. According to Łucja Staniczek, regional education can be referred to as an integrated process of shaping and stabilizing the attitudes towards the heritage of the past and the contemporary issues of one's own region, which aims to contribute to the preservation of cultural continuity and its inclusion into European culture (Staniczek, 1996). Therefore, let us have a closer look at teachers' opinions regarding the possibility to create and cultivate regional traditions using the tools and methods offered by the eTwinning platform for international collaboration.

## Methodological assumptions of the research

The aim of the research was to answer the research questions on teachers' opinions on the opportunities to create and cultivate regional traditions using the tools and methods offered by the eTwinning platform for international collaboration. In this study the specific research problems were formulated as follows:

1. Is the teacher able to cultivate regional traditions taking advantage of the eTwinning platform? If yes, in what way?

2. What kind of projects in the field of regional education and cultivating traditions are implemented in schools?
3. What are the competences the students acquire when working on the eTwinning international collaboration projects?
4. What are the advantages of implementing the themes of tradition and regionalism in the context of international collaboration of schools in the eTwinning project?
5. How does the teacher motivate the students to participate in the eTwinning projects?
6. Do any difficulties occur when implementing the eTwinning projects? If yes, what kind of difficulties?

In order to find answers to the formulated research problems the diagnostic survey method was selected, within the frames of this method the research technique of an individual, public, categorized interview, based on the author's interview questionnaire, was applied. The study sample consisted of  $N = 65$  teachers, including 45 junior secondary schools teachers (69.2%), and 20 (30.8%) primary schools teachers working in the Province of Silesia. All the teachers constituting the research sample were actively involved in the tasks relating to the implementation of the projects within the eTwinning program as the coordinator or were co-operating with the teacher responsible for the coordination of eTwinning in their institution at various stages of the project. In the course of the quantitative analysis of the research findings, so as to illustrate the teachers' opinions better, the authentic quotations were used, which will be cited in the subsequent part of the text.

## Cultivating regional traditions in eTwinning — the teachers' reflection

The teacher using the tools offered by the eTwinning platform in the course of their daily work or as a part of extra-curricular activities developing students' interest can in a diverse and interesting way cultivate regional traditions. Among the possibilities offered by the platform perceived by the teachers, one can distinguish the ones focusing specifically on the development of cognitive function — in terms of the acquisition of the knowledge of cultures and traditions. According to the teachers interviewed, *the objective of many eTwinning projects is to get to know other cities of Europe and their cultures*<sup>1</sup> (the authors' own

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<sup>1</sup> The quotations of the teachers' opinions obtained in the authors' own research will consistently be written in italics throughout the whole paper and followed by the information in brackets — the authors' own research.

research). *Thus, during the preparation of the projects on regional education, the teachers focus on the aspect of learning about and getting acquainted with the cultural diversity of the partner countries in Europe.*

The teachers emphasize that in the context of continuing the tradition with the application of the eTwinning tools, the emphasis is on the knowledge of their own culture and traditions, with simultaneous cognitive curiosity about the identification of the partner countries traditions. *Each region has its own history, monuments, sights, and tradition. We want to boast about our city and get to know other European cities. It is a unique experience for children and teachers* (the authors' own research). The above quote highlights the work of the teachers and students in the preparation of the projects, as well as the experience of sharing the effects of the accomplished work. The teachers, especially foreign languages teachers, put a stress on the language competence development which is entailed by regional education, and remark that in the framework of collaboration with partner schools both: *languages and cultures may differ, therefore the idea of eTwinning is to strive for teaching children different languages while learning about other cultures* (the authors' own research).

In primary and junior secondary schools, teachers implement a number of different projects, and in the area of the interests arising from the research issues the most important are especially the ones devoted to regional themes and cultivation of traditions. Among the project themes mentioned by the surveyed teachers the following ones deserve special attention:

- “My City” — a project focused on the characteristics of the city/region in which the students live, with regard to the specific cult sites and regional traditions;
- “Kids Can Cook! European Cuisine Project”— a project addressing the issues of European cuisine, especially dishes specific to a particular country/region. Students of Silesian schools presented the typical Silesian dishes (both daily and connected with various holidays) in the form of photos, posters and short films;
- “Christmas Traditions: Differences and Similarities” — a project focused on the description of the distinctive customs and traditions of Christmas cultivated in the region, including the aspect of the comparison in terms of the differences and similarities between their local traditions and the ones cultivated in the partner country;
- “Top 5 of My School” was, in turn, a project that focused on the description and presentation of the five most important events in the life of the school, especially school traditions and local customs cultivated in the given institution.

The scope of the projects quoted included mostly the content focused on the issues of regional traditions. The teachers emphasize, however, that even if the project is not entirely dedicated to the issues of regional education the

content devoted to cultivating the traditions of the region is always interwoven with that.

In the opinion of 97% of the interviewed teachers eTwinning in particular develops students' cognitive competence oriented at getting to know the culture of both their own country and the partner. To visualize the data, it is worth quoting a selected citation acquired in the course of the research: *curiosity about the world and contacts with peers make students rediscover what surrounds them* (the authors' own research). According to 77% of the teachers, the implementation of the projects within this international cooperation develops students' media competence, especially in terms of the desired use of technology in education. The statistical data are supported by the teachers' quotes obtained in the study: *eTwinning is an educational program of the European Union which promotes the application of information and communication technologies (ICT) in European schools. Students and teachers use the Internet in cross-border collaboration* (the authors' own research), and hence they learn of and get to know the cultural diversity through the use of the new media. As many as 75% of the teachers have also expressed the view that in the context of eTwinning students also develop social and language skills through the establishment of international relations with the students from partner schools and the continuous exchange of messages — to quote the respondents: *the students primarily interact, exchange information and learning materials from a variety of disciplines (arts, geography and science) using communication skills in foreign languages* (the authors' own research). To comment upon the data obtained in this study, it can be concluded that in the framework of the eTwinning international collaboration students acquire and improve a number of competences relevant both in the educational process, as well as in their personal development.

The implemented themes of tradition and regionalism in the international collaboration of schools in the eTwinning project fulfills many positive roles and is characterized by an array of advantages. The teachers (68%) pay particular attention to the possibility of the presentation and acquisition of the knowledge important due to the core curriculum in a creative and unconventional manner, which is different from the traditionally accepted model of conducting lessons: *the students while working together in partnerships are aware that what they are doing is unique. Learning becomes creative, not imitative* (the authors' own research). Consequently, the respondents (59%) notice that *eTwinning broadens the scope of educational opportunities offered to students, and motivates them for opening to Europe* (the authors' own research). This shows that besides the indicated values, the possibility of the project implementation is in itself a motivating incentive for students, reinforcing the behavior aimed at the process of learning of diversity. As many as 32% of the respondents expressed the opinion that the projects carried out by students develop in them a sense of diligence and responsibility for the work to be done: [students' own

footnote] *learn responsibility for their own work and commitments* (the authors' own research). With the implementation of the themes devoted to the issues of regional traditions, as noted by nearly 31% of the teachers: *the students have an opportunity to learn about the cultural values of their region but also the culture and traditions of other European countries*. A heart-warming summary of these analyses is the quote of one of the teachers, very actively involved in the idea of eTwinning, who, beyond the qualities of the project participation essential for students, also sees the ones relating to teachers themselves: *eTwinning is an opportunity for teachers to promote the idea of regionalism and cultural heritage while broadening their own horizons* (the authors' own research).

Students' motivation to learn has been a major concern of the Polish school. It seems, however, that the offer and the idea of education with the use of eTwinning is an effective solution to the educational problem areas. While preparing particular projects, teachers have a wide range of tools and opportunities that motivate students to participate in the work. In the opinion of 89% of the teachers the use of the new media itself, especially the Internet, evokes students' activity: *students and teachers use the Internet in a cross-border collaboration* (the authors' own research). Moreover, in the opinion of 71% of the teachers, the opportunity to establish contacts and friendly relationships with other students from partner schools makes students *enthusiastic about projects* (the authors' own research), thus, a subjectively perceived value which comes from the commitment, puts in operation the intrinsic motivation of students. In addition, as the teachers mention, *students interact, exchange information and materials, which greatly motivates them to learn and open to Europe* (the authors' own research). According to 62% of the teachers another motivating factor is also a kind of flexibility in the project preparation, which is the possibility to modify and customize various elements to the students' specific needs and interests. The teachers understand this category in the following way: *the tasks are adapted to the abilities of each student. Taking advantage of the project method is especially important in junior secondary schools. The project flexibility or the possibility to customize the theme and the duration of the project to students' needs, as well as the possibility to make modifications at any time, significantly affects the project implementation and motivates students to work* (the authors' own research).

Undoubtedly, in the implementation of the eTwinning projects there also occur all sorts of difficulties. In the opinion of 34% of the teachers the greatest difficulty is the lack of a universal belief in the value of distant learning (the authors' own research), in spite of the many activities and promotion, this form of education is still a niche when it comes to the Polish educational system (Hyla, 2007). The teachers surveyed (14%) also expressed the opinion that *in the implementation of the eTwinning projects the greatest difficulty is the lack of students' interest in cultural multidimensionality, fears and aversion to others*



*and strangers due to the large ethnic homogeneity of our society* (the authors' own research). This obstacle can be offset by a variety of educational activities focused on changing the attitudes and oriented at the development of cognitive curiosity among children and adolescents.

## Conclusions

The world wide web offers teachers an ever wider range of services which are useful in the educational process of students. They are a subject to a continuous improvement, and a variety of modifications (Siemieniecki, 2001). The modern teacher directs the work of students, providing them with the conditions for self-study and individual knowledge acquisition, personality development and attitudes formation (Bednarek, 2002; Juszczak, 2003). Modern technologies also allow of a direct contact in the real time between the teacher and the student regardless of the distance which separates them (Kubiak, 1997). As noted by Nagórski, distant learning can perfectly complement traditional education (integrate with it), hence supporting the learning process (Nagórski, 2000). Undoubtedly, the implementation of the projects under the auspices of eTwinning European collaboration of schools fits perfectly in these postulates. The research findings show that the implemented projects are diverse in terms of difficulty — from the easy ones to the more advanced ones. Thus, both the beginners in eTwinning as well as the experienced teachers can find something on the platform which meets their needs. The projects are tailored to the level of primary and junior secondary schools. Yet, one needs to bear in mind that curricula are different in different parts of Europe, and that in each country there also exist different educational contexts. Collaboration within eTwinning means opening up to the international dimension in teaching. In this context, the proposed project themes are an inspiration and can be adjusted to the needs of two or more schools. The primary role of the teacher is to adapt a variety of ideas and their synchronization with the ideas of the collaborating partner schools (Crawley, 2008). Thus, according to the research, teachers modify some content and basically interweave the threads of the issues centred around regional education with, making children and youth realize the richness and multidimensionality of the cultural heritage of the region, as well as the need for its continuation and multiplication (Szczepański, 1995). Therefore, undoubtedly, teachers working with the project method within the eTwinning platform support their students in the discovery of their cultural identity and their place in the world, enabling young people to explore their own cultural heritage, values, and regional content (Staniczek, 1996), which is directly in line with the demands of regional education.

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