CONTRIBUTION OF TEACHERS’ NETWORKING TO THE SUCCESS OF EUROPEAN PROJECTS

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Abstract

In this article we checked the contribution of teachers' networking to the success of European projects. Many STEM teachers from EUN countries participate in a networking events within the framework of European projects which are related to STEM teachers’ professional development. There are different models of teachers networking: online networking and face to face networking. Also, face to face networking can be a one day event or longer event spreading over several days. During networking events, teachers collaborate together in formal and non-formal ways, create professional communities, which are related to education issues in general and to STEM content in particular.

In this study, we checked the views of 70 teachers and interviewed 10 teachers about their views about networking events and their contribution to the success of European projects. Most of the teachers have positive views about networking events and claim that this kind of events contribute not only to their personal interest in teaching STEM subjects, but also to their professional development. Also, teachers mentioned contribution to their personal skills such as self-confidence and communication. However, face to face networking events were considered by teachers as more effective than web-based events. We found that networking events contribute to success of European projects, because teachers who participate in this kind of events fill more involved in the project. They meet colleagues from different European countries, share ideas and practices one with others and build a common platform that is based on the common wish to succeed in a process of a special project with their students.

Keywords: networking, collaboration, STEM teachers' Community

Introduction:

During the last decades networking events in the professional world have become very common. This is also the case within the teaching profession. One definition of networking, is that it is an important tool for professional development and career management. Many think that a teacher’s career has very limited possibilities, however, networking events can help teachers promote themselves in personal and professional ways. Teachers can contribute to others and be affected by their peers in a way that will open their horizons to a new world of experience and possibilities. The definition of “networking” can be considered as a human capital that includes individuals. There is a connection between individuals that has three steps: acquaintance, accessibility and barter. Networking allows accessibility to
resources such as: information, influence and support.

The teaching profession is known as a lonely one. Most of the time, the teacher is by himself/herself in a class of thirty- to forty teenagers as a “lonely wolf”. Of course, at school there are breaks, but they are too short for a real networking process and most of the time, teachers are so busy at school with their duties that they don’t have the time or the will for meeting with their colleges. European STEM projects can be considered as an excellent platform for these kind of events. Networking events that refer to these projects usually happen out of school. Teachers can choose by themselves in which project or event they are going to participate thus ensuring their emotional availability for these kind of events. Also, networking events of European STEM projects are content oriented, so teachers can meet many colleagues from their own field.

Gatt (2009) in their article “Networking School Teachers to Promote Better Practice in the Teaching of Science across Europe”, claim that regularly teachers do not have the opportunity to share and collaborate on projects with other education professionals, as their daily routine confines them to their school premises. Networking conferences organised by the Comenius 3 project ‘Hands on Science’ (http://www.hsci.info/), for example, differed from academic conferences in that they provided a platform for teachers to share their successes in teaching different aspects of science, particularly through the promotion of the use of experiments and other hands on approaches. The engagement of support using coaching, mentoring and networking activities may assist in the transfer of teacher learning to pupil learning, resulting in greater impact within the classroom experience of pupils and the increased potential to raise standards and attainment (see Joyce & Showers, 1988; Oldroyd & Hall, 1988; Wallace, 1996; Swafford, 1998; Rhodes & Houghton-Hill, 2000). The potential benefits of coaching, mentoring and peer-networking activities within schools stem from the requirement for close partnership between colleagues within an environment of trust, safety, support and mutual respect (see Ponzio, 1987; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; WestBurnham & O’Sullivan, 1998, Harris, 2000, 2001; Thompson, 2001).

The study

In this study we collected the views of 70 teachers from 31 European countries about the influence of teachers’ networking on success of European projects. Most of the teachers (78%) are experienced teachers who have been working for more than 11 years in educational system as STEM teachers and educators.

In order to collect the data, we used a Google form questionnaire with questions based on a Likkert scale (with 1 = disagree; 5 = agree). We also carried out interviews with STEM teachers during face to face events.

Outcomes

We asked teachers their impressions regarding the following statements:

1. I think that networking meetings contribute to my interest in teaching STEM subject
2. I think that networking meetings contribute to my professional promotion
3. Networking meetings with my colleges increases the amount of ideas that I can share with my colleagues and that my colleagues share with me
4. There is no difference for me between networking meetings and online meetings with
my colleagues

5. Contribution of networking meetings is equal to contribution of online meeting to the progress of the project

6. Networking is great for sharing ideas and knowledge.

7. By regularly networking, and pushing yourself to talk to people you don’t know, it will help increase your confidence

8. Networking is a great opportunity to exchange best practice knowledge.

In their answers teachers agree that networking events have an impact on their professional development and their personal skills as well as self-confidence and communication. However, networking face to face events have a greater impact on teachers than an online events.

In Figure 1 we show the average responses from the teachers to the previous 8 statements.

![Figure 1: Teachers’ views on networking events in European STEM projects](image)

In their answers to interviews, teachers agreed that networking events contribute to success of European STEM projects. They attribute this kind of contribution into two categories, personal and professional.

From the interviews, we provide here a selection of teachers’ statements about personal contribution of networking events:

“international friendship making possibility”

“teaching tolerance, understanding different point of views”

“It’s a great way to meet like-minded people, get new motivation and energy, share ideas, set up new contacts etc. “

“networking is a chance to share not only expertise but also a way to team work. Several time during a networking event I had the chance to plan new lessons, projects or I could improve my skills because of the interaction/help/input of some colleague. Online meetings are good, but they are more content oriented... During networking meetings you can also find synergies with colleagues that come, in my opinion, only when you’re able to go over contents. I appreciate very much also when a colleague share something in which he/her is expert, because I believe that he
could already test and validate that lesson/methodology, tip...

“Good friendship between teachers is also a way to fortify the network because we know that we can trust and on a colleague and refer to him/her if necessary (and this is something that is impossible to achieve through online meetings!”

“I like it! It is interesting for my job, for myself. Great ideas! New friends who have similar interests.”

“Opportunity to share my knowledge and to learn a lot from others. Not only about education, but also about their lives, countries, societies... then with this face to face meetings I am growing as a person, and it makes me a better human being and thus a better teacher.”

In their answers some teachers mention important social skills such as friendship and teamwork, skills that were demonstrated during networking events and contribute to their professional skills and work in European projects.

Social networking is as important for teachers as it is for others. There are a number of ways that one can take advantage of networking: Sharing ideas, possible partnership with other schools, possibility of future professional development, getting information. Sometimes the most important things to know and recognize, happened at the non-formal meetings that are an integral part of every networking event.

And as for the teachers’ statements about the professional contribution of networking events:

“Networking helps to focus. It is important to get information, how to increase the success of STEM-activities. You can hear from others with lots of experiences, which activities will work and which not. In addition to that it empowers to create new activities, which can be shared with teachers all over Europe. That’s great.”

“Makes me think about education globally. I feel like the part of something bigger than only leading my students through the curriculum requirements. By sharing and working with other educators I can not only widen my view of the world but also feel how enriching the working with other people is, and so I am even more motivated to help my students develop working in groups skills. And I constantly remind myself how it feels to learn new things from others, so I do understand the process of my students development better.”

“The chance to open new fields of thinking, exchange new and different ideas learning new concepts and develop new skills such as the use of English.”

“Networking helps share ideas and keeps me motivated as a professional.”

“Working within a community of practice, sharing ideas, learning with and from others. Creating professional opportunities within the group.”

Most of the teachers in their answers combine two categories and refer both to personal and professional benefits and contribution of networking events to success of European projects.

Conclusion

Scientix is a great “umbrella” for a large number of European STEM projects. These projects have a lot of networking events, online events and face to face events as meetings, workshops, summer schools and academies. Many teachers from European countries participate in this events. Most of the teachers are experienced teachers who are willing to
increase their interest in teaching STEM subjects, add diversity to their professional skills and knowledge. Also, teachers who participate in these events are open mind to a different cultures and ideas. The combination of personal and professional skills demonstrated during networking these events, makes these events contribute to success of European STEM project.

In this study, most of the teachers mention greater contribution of face to face events, than online events. More than two decades ago, online communication became popular in education. A major need in distance education is that of providing human communication and interaction as well as well-designed learning materials. Thus communications technologies, particularly computer-based communication, or what might be called ‘networking’, have gradually become established as part of the delivery infrastructure of distance education (Duning et al,1993) However, Magid., Tal & Kalli (2011) in their study with students claimed that “life interaction” between students in out-school learning activities, more interest students than online interaction with their peers. Apparently, going back in time, today not only students, but teachers prefer face to face human interaction which contains personal skills that affect professional skills and knowledge. Meetings remotely, are necessary but cannot be a substitute for face to face human interaction. Each project is only the beginning of the emergence of a new project, every encounter is the possibility of finding new project partners. Of course, if the project is considered a success, and that he truly was, requires interaction and meet future project partners.

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