

reviewers that whilst the results of this project were clear, there was too narrow a focus. This narrow focus was particularly in relation to the proposed curriculum that would have been developed and it was highlighted that greater integration of curriculum themes and subjects was necessary in order to provide a wider and more equitable concern for the project. In terms of the quality of the consortium, the proposal scored fairly highly on the application evaluation scale, it was noted by the reviewers that the consortium “has a lot of competence in the field of gender education and possesses the skills to manage an international project”.

The fact that schools were included in the application provided a robust context of the “scientific experts” in everyday life, but the panel wanted to see a) a greater distinction between “Genderide” and a previous project that similar partners in this group had undertaken and b) the distribution of tasks aligned more closely with the strengths of individuals in the consortium.

Therefore a new application was needed which considered the feedback from the previous applications and demonstrated the nature and impact of a multilateral project particularly in relation to the aims of the European Commission:

- to improve the initial or in-service training of staff in school education;
- to improve the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom;
- developing, promoting and disseminating educational best practices, including new teaching methods or materials;
- developing or exchanging experience on systems of providing information or guidance particularly adapted to the learners, teachers and other staff concerned by the Comenius programme;

(EACEA 2011: 20-21)

Approval for the Project

In February 2011 the final application for EDGE was made, the points that needed addressing were formalised and in July 2011 the project was granted approval. The process was competitive, with 202 projects being submitted at that time. Thirty-three were approved, two of which were from Flanders, and one of these was the EDGE project. The budget for the project was € 287.302, with partner countries comprising: Belgium, Austria, Czech Republic, Germany, Estonia, Spain, Hungary, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Turkey and the United Kingdom. The institutions involved in the project included, amongst others; schools, universities and children’s homes. Because one of the outcomes for a Comenius lifelong learning programme is related to staff mobility and partnerships, the project has enabled staff to work in a range of institutions in order to meet, review current work and discuss next steps. Additionally the project focused on young people in school, their experience of education in relation to gender and the testing of materials that have been created by the group. This fulfils Comenius aims in relation to “improving pedagogical approaches”, “better teaching techniques and practices” and “enhancing the quality and European dimension of teacher training” (EACEA 2011).

The key outcomes for the project were agreed as follows:

- a study text about gender education (including a comparative analysis of the different countries position in relation to education and gender);
- a European resources database;
- development and implementation of four core modules (including development and testing of didactical material within a secondary education setting);
- development of a web based curriculum;
- a website;
- a virtual learning environment.

Structure of the Project

The project outputs were structured in work packages (WP) to include: WP 1: The Steering Group, including work around quality, parity evaluation and dissemination. The key tasks of the group were the general structure, timetabling and management of the project.

WP 2: Gender education in Europe, comprising three elements a) the study text; b) an empirical analysis from the participating countries' perspectives in relation to differences in gender, educational attainment, motivation and gender homogeneity; c) the development of a "European resources database" about gender education.

WP 3: The development of the modules – Gender and Identity; Gender and Sexuality; Gender and Interculturality; and Gender and Lifestyle, including the development of the best practice activities for testing in school.

WP 4: European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) and an accompanying manual. The ECTS credit information provides guidance around learning outcomes, modes of delivery, prerequisites, recommended and required reading and planned learning and teaching methods. The manual was created to provide guidance for students wishing to gain accreditation from undertaking any course content coming out of the project. The information includes a web-based curriculum, a course brochure and a web version of the course brochure.

WP 5: Implementation and Testing including working together to explore national accreditation guidelines in relation to teacher training programmes and country specific implementation guidelines.

WP 6: Internal and external evaluation and a quality assurance plan to ensure all materials were suitable and appropriate for the given audience; to internally evaluate the effectiveness of the materials in schools and within individual institutions. In addition, the external evaluation of the project as whole was evaluated in order to report on its quality and demonstrate its impact.

WP 7: E-Learning, including the development of the website and the virtual learning environment.

WP 8: Dissemination and validation of the materials, for example using the materials in lectures and seminars, testing materials in secondary schools, informing the national agency of the materials produced, providing university libraries with the study texts.

Testing the Materials

The materials were tested at a secondary school in Flanders on 8th and 10th October 2013. Participants were aged 13-14 and both boys and girls participated in the activities. Best practice activities were developed for each module area (identity, sexuality, interculturality and lifestyle). Each best practice activity was delivered to four groups: boys only; girls only; majority boys; and boys and girls. Groups were randomly distributed and the characteristics of the students were the same in all groups. The taught sessions were observed and field notes collected and analysed by teachers or members of the EDGE group. Here follows two examples of findings from the test phase.

Gender and Identity: Communication

The lesson was designed to generate discussion around notions of communication, topics discussed and preferred methods. There was class discussion to identify the different means and topics of communication, used generally by people and then of those used mainly by young people, followed by small group discussion of the gender differences and similarities. The lesson was concluded with the young people sharing and summarising their findings in a whole class context.

Role of the teacher: Teacher facilitates the discussion, but does not offer reasons for answers, nor does the teacher try to help young people explain their answers in the class discussion.

Role of the observer: Note different ways the mixed gender group interact with one another and the way the single gender group interact with one another. Make a note of the way the answers may be similar or different when groups are mixed/single sex. In addition are there differences in the means

and topics identified when the groups are mixed or single gender? Compare the final outcomes and conclusions.

Results and experiences during the test phase: In total this class was taught four times: once to a group of boys, once to a group of girls and twice to a mixed gender group. A lot of attention was given to teach the class four times in exactly the same way and with exactly the same questions, remarks and with identical enthusiasm and energy. The differences were significant. Most feedback came from the „mixed groups” and here the observer experienced the greatest enthusiasm. Boys played a greater global leadership role than girls, which is corroborated by research in the UK which states that there are differences between boys and girls in their confidence to use certain communication skills, with boys tending to feel more confident overall than girls (Clark 2011). Boys are more likely than girls to say that they feel confident speaking in front of classmates, explaining their points of view and asking when they do not understand anything. The responses during the brainstorming phase in the mixed groups were most original and special. The pupils were thinking of original ways of communication that were not mentioned in the homogeneous groups. The group discussions were also more effective here. It was noted, however, that some girls in the small groups had little opportunity to participate. Reporting the results of the small groups back to the classroom was again very mixed. The toughest group was the girls: they hardly said a word, were not enthusiastic and there was hardly any atmosphere at all. Participation was minimal, and it seemed like they were not interested. The small group discussions were difficult and quiet. The „wildest” group was the group of boys. They were also the only group to challenge the teacher. Participation was clear, albeit in a noisy way. Here the teacher had to exercise behaviour management and discipline a few times. The small group discussions were also often off task. Yet this lesson was far more pleasant for the teacher than the silent girls’ group. For the observer and the teacher, teaching this class, was a very enriching experience.

Teacher: We had no idea how such a lesson could take place so differently and how different the atmosphere could turn out to be. Our preference was obviously with the mixed groups.

Gender and Sexuality: Physical changes during puberty: The lesson was designed to engage pupils in discussion and education about the onset of puberty and how it is different for boys and girls.

Role of the teacher: To explore what pupils already know about the topic of reproduction, as an introduction to the topic of puberty. Much input will be required from the students in order to involve them more in the topic of the lesson.

Role of the observer: Ensure that the lesson material is linked to puberty.

Experiences and results during the test phase: The lesson was taught four times. All students were divided into a group of boys, a group of girls and two mixed groups. The teacher was expected to give the lesson each time in exactly the same way, to try to emphasize the same things, to have an eye for the same detail and to respond in the same way. The differences were remarkable.

First, the boy’s group, the most active and, at least on first sight, the most interested of the four groups, even though at times it was a little “ridiculous”. The boys were quite noisy and exuberant, but also worked together nicely. They talked freely about their bodies and were “honest” about their experiences with the opposite sex. At one time they went off track. They began to ask questions about more girl-related topics, such as periods. It appeared that boys found it harder to wait their turn. They “threw” answers more readily into the group. Humour was never far away! The second group was mixed. This group required more effort on the part of the teacher. It was very difficult to get the students to talk. Where in the previous lesson the boys would give spontaneous answers, the teacher now had to appoint respondents. The girls seemed very shy. It also occurred to the teacher that the chattiest pupils during regular classes were now very quiet. The girls’ group; according to the teacher were “a great challenge”, with almost no interaction. Beforehand, the teacher had thought it would be easy to talk to girls about feelings, love and the human body but nothing was less true. It did not

matter which example was given, the girls continued to stare at the teacher and were withdrawn. According to Clark (2011) research demonstrates that boys are more likely than girls to say that they are confident talking with teachers and other adults. The last group was mixed again. Reported as the easiest group to work with and according to the teacher was mostly like any regular class. The pupils worked quietly, regularly gave answers and seemed to have more respect for each other's answers. There was much positive interaction.

Teacher: In retrospect it appeared that talking about „puberty”, the phase of life in which the students find themselves, is no mean feat. Although the biggest surprise was that the girls' group had the most problems with it.

It was clear from the best practice test phase that there was much to learn about the ways in which boys and girls engage with their learning in single sex and mixed sex groups, how they have differing levels of confidence and the ways in which they interact with one another. The findings were fascinating and demonstrated that as educators, it is important to recognise that boys and girls sometimes require the opportunity to work separately in classroom contexts depending on the subject or theme.

Challenges experienced during the project

As the project comes to its conclusion it has been useful to take the opportunity to reflect on some of the challenges and benefits of undertaking research and partnership-working of this nature. As with all research there were challenges presented. Some of these are outlined here, the first example being the content of the questionnaires.

One of the UK schools completing the questionnaires, asked for the questions relating to “sex” to be removed before they were distributed to students. This was done but meant that some of the results were skewed in relation to this section of the research. A second UK school was invited to participate and there were no problems here with the questionnaires, all sections were completed, but there were no teacher questionnaires completed in the given timeframe, from either of the participating UK schools.

Permission to carry out the research was difficult in some of the countries participating in the project. In Hungary it was necessary to gain permission from parents before pupils could complete the questionnaires and in some countries it was difficult to get permission from the schools. This meant that the time frame was challenged and added additional pressure to this element of the project.

The editing of the book chapters presented difficulties due to the complexity of the different languages. Editors often felt compromised when sections and statements had to be amended, particularly when the sense of a discussion was lost in the translation from one language to another. Editors had to make ethical decisions relating to the ways the work was altered, whilst still maintaining the integrity and sense of the chapter, sometimes it was possible to do this in conjunction with the original author, but at other times these decisions were made unaided.

Translations of all the chapters were expensive and time consuming especially as the study text was published in Dutch, English, German and Turkish. However this was a great benefit to the project, as it meant that the output of the texts had a much wider reaching audience.

Time was a challenge. For some members of the group, time was allocated in their annual workload and therefore the project was part of their day-to-day working practice. Some members of the project group had fewer work commitments than others and some members of the group were completing all the work for the project alongside their fulltime work. Consequently there were sometimes delays in work being completed and deadlines were not always met as promptly as would have been hoped.

Finally, E-communication, this presented few problems for some members of the group, but for others the e-communication was a challenge. The virtual learning environment (VLE) had been created to

enable all members to communicate with each other, upload materials and review documentation. By communicating via the VLE all members of the project would be included in the emails and therefore everyone would be able to see what communication was taking place. Some members of the group, particularly the project organiser, used the VLE at all times; others did not use it at any point in the three years of the project. This was possibly due to a range of reasons including technical problems, lack of confidence using the VLE interface and loss of password and login details.

Benefits of collaborating in a project such as EDGE

Just as there are challenges, there are many benefits and without a doubt the benefits outweigh the challenges. The impact that a Comenius project has from a personal and professional perspective is astonishing. The opportunity for personal development, growth of subject knowledge and the empowerment that travel brings, are defining features of a project of this nature. Meeting in different countries, visiting a range of educational contexts and working alongside academics and educationalists from a range of educational settings has developed a greater sense of interculturality amongst the EDGE group. Several institutions have exchanged bi-lateral agreements for staff and student mobilities and there is an increasing sense of collegiality between the partners.

There has been wider impact in relation to colleagues in the individual institutions, sharing resources, inputting into module content and exploring theoretical concepts with students studying gender in Higher Education. At the University of Derby the project has become an integral part of a thematic strand of internationalisation and gender, and students are given practical materials to evaluate and test out in school. Study texts and materials are additionally shared with students completing dissertations at the end of their undergraduate degree, where there is a focus on gender and the European dimension.

For the secondary schools involved in the project there has been learning from a range of perspectives. Young people completing questionnaires have become more aware of the gender debate, the young people testing the materials have experienced learning from a different perspective and this in turn has had an effect on the ways in which lessons are structured, organised and taught. Additionally there were young people in the UK who were involved in creating videos for comparison with the “test” school on the same topics of communication and emotional wellbeing and this has had a positive effect on those young people in terms of confidence, skills of self-management and public speaking.

To summarise

Working collaboratively has been challenging, the group have devoted a great deal of time to the outputs, it has not always been plain sailing ... but it has been an enriching, empowering and experiential endeavour. We have learned a significant amount about young people, education and gender and have become more effective educators and more collegiate partners as a result of working together on the EDGE project.

References

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