

INTERPARENTS

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PARENTAL VIEW ON COMPUTER-ENHANCED TEACHING AND LEARNING AT THE EUROPEAN SCHOOLS

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In recent years, computer-enhanced teaching and learning techniques found their entry and wider application in various national systems of primary and secondary education. Due to its unique organisational structure, pedagogical programme and mission, the European School system offers a particular receptivity with regard to these innovative teaching and learning techniques. It is a conclusive consequence that the European School system now sets off to fathom out the advantages endowed with this new technology and to investigate how the European School system could make best use of it.

PILOT PROJECTS

In the course of the past school year, a number of pilot projects have been carried out at several European schools. These pilot projects encompass various aspects of computer-enhanced education, such as

- a) the **development of software** providing assistance, either in class with the teacher or by distance learning at home, to those pupils who encounter difficulties in learning;
- b) the **introduction of a learning platform** that, on the one hand, offers learning resources that can either be attached to ordinary lesson plans used in class room teaching or be accessed remotely e.g. from home, and, on the other hand, has incorporated communication features that can be used to increase attention attributed to each individual pupil;
- c) the **implementation of distance courses** offering joint education to geographically distributed pupils;

hereby focussing on some essential facets of European School education, i.e. supplementing curricula with border-crossing learning experiences; assuring teaching of mother tongues; subject options that otherwise could not be offered.

SCOPE OF APPLICATION AND PERSPECTIVE

Even though the present pilot projects primarily deal with main issues of the educational programme as it is currently offered by the European School system, their scope can and should be put into perspective:

One of the most prominent features of the European School's educational programme is **mother tongue tuition**. The European School's linguistic sections accommodate children speaking in their mother tongues that are the national languages of the European Union member states. However, practical reasons impose restrictions. As a result linguistic sections in the European schools are necessarily limited for justifiable pedagogical and economical motives. Wherever

children's proper linguistic sections are not available, they are affiliated to an appropriate existing section and taught their mother tongue, e.g. by distance, either linked to another European School or to a national institution. With the imminent enlargement, this situation is likely to become more acute due to the fact that not all new languages will immediately have their own section. Consequently there is good reason to anticipate a need to offer further distance learning courses to ensure mother tongue education in a variety of languages. In this context, it is important to note that mother tongue tuition has not only a bearing on the acquisition of a pupil's native language. Mother tongue teachers convey culture and tradition of their country of origin, its identity and special characteristics; they help pupils to understand and value their own roots in a European School environment that fosters and promotes the development of respect and understanding for the **cultural diversity** of Europe. Therefore, education via distance learning courses should also comprise the necessary personal contact and "real life" interaction with the mother tongue teacher.

The minimum number of pupils necessary to open an optional course restricts the European School's scheme for free **option choice**. The initiation of option courses via distance education may overcome this limitation and increase the flexibility of the scheme. Here too, it is conceivable to either link different European schools or to connect the European schools with system external establishments. Is it, in this context, too futuristic to imagine the incorporation of other subjects in the timetable and thus the creation of an alternative educational programme in parallel to the present one?

It is a promising approach to use software applications, either in class or by distance, to provide personalised **learning support** to pupils who have to catch up on specific subjects. Furthermore, the special assistance that is given to pupils who experience learning difficulties and have **special education needs** could benefit from appropriately designed software applications. And, of course, it is also imaginable that by these means suitable measures may be provided to contribute to the advancement of **particularly gifted pupils** by offering them more challenging assignments and thus broader opportunities to develop the full potential of their talents.

A thoughtful integration of distance teaching units in the traditional lesson plans may constitute an **enrichment of classroom teaching** and could increase pupils' motivation by making the learning process livelier. Examples are, inter alia, the constitution of working groups in project work, an exchange with other classes abroad, the uptake of special knowledge via connections to experts, organisations or institutions. An **enhanced collaboration and communication** between teachers, pupils and parents may result from a networked learning platform with remote access that may serve as a pool of teaching material, a forum for group work, an information board, an exchange medium and more. It seems that possibilities are enormous – what will set the limits?

RESOURCES AND REQUIREMENTS

It goes without saying that the allocation of resources, be it for the procurement of appropriate technical equipment and teaching material or for the deployment of qualified teaching staff, is a prerequisite.

All necessary materials, i.e. both **technical equipment and learning materials**, should be in place and operational before a course starts. Appropriate equipment should be at hand for all students and they should be familiar with its operation. Sufficient and competent **technical support** has to be foreseen in order to ensure that possible technical problems may be solved immediately.

Pedagogical support through **qualified teachers** should be offered to children at all time. In addition to their pedagogical qualification and language skills, teachers nowadays, have sufficient computer literacy so that training in basic computer skills is no longer required. However, teachers involved in computer-enhanced teaching and learning should receive appropriate further training focusing on both the technical aspects and the implications for pedagogical content and didactics. A teacher's involvement in computer-enhanced teaching and learning projects should never adversely affect his or her teaching assignment. A reduction of teaching hours due to a teacher's training or involvement in organisational matters is not acceptable.

The introduction of computer-enhanced teaching and learning techniques demands an investment. Awareness that cost effectiveness in the short term might be questioned makes it imperative to apply **economic principles** when considering a scale-up of the present activities and an expansion to cover the whole of the system so as to allow all European schools to keep pace with the new development.

NEXT STEPS

Assessing the achievements made so far, identifying benefits or possible sources for improvement and defining further needs of the European School system is an indispensable requirement for further progress in this field.

At this stage, it is vital to pursue a **systematic evaluation of pilot projects** taking into account the observations of teachers, pupils, parents and technical staff members involved. A comparative study based on the outcome of this evaluation and on experience that has been gathered in national education systems could be a promising exercise to benefit from existing knowledge and experience gathered already elsewhere. Inspectors originating from members states that are leading in this field could play a key role in the transfer of experience, knowledge and best practice.

Networking lies within the nature of computer-enhanced teaching and learning, "island solutions" at the level of individual European schools would be a paradox. Consequently, future efforts will probably include a European **school system wide expansion** of this new educational technique. A matter of priority will then be to fully inform management and teaching staff of all schools about the possibilities offered and limitations imposed by the new technology such that all European schools acquire the necessary competences for developing meaningful new projects that suit the needs of the whole European School system. It goes without saying that at this level **overall coordination** is mandatory to ensure harmonised procedures and compliance with predetermined **guidelines**.

Furthermore, given the potential risk of being carried away by the enthusiasm of taking on the formidable challenges ahead, one should not overlook that our children's education is and continues to be the core issue here. Those with a pedagogical role both have the responsibility and the competences to provide information to pupils and their parents in a way and format that it can be understood by them. The onus is also on them to ensure a smooth integration of computer-enhanced teaching and learning entities into the traditional lesson plans. Clear **rules and regulations** are necessary in order to avoid any misunderstanding and conflicts that otherwise may arise.

CONCLUSION

INTERPARENTS is in great favour of any idea with the potential to enrich our children's education. The initiative to examine the potential of computer-enhanced teaching and learning as a new future-oriented avenue in European School education has been positively received.

INTERPARENTS, however, wishes to stress that the new computer-enhanced techniques should be solely employed as an additional tool; it should not be used to replace class-room teaching and therefore be restricted to those situations where it clearly adds value to children's education. It is an absolute must that appropriate equipment and qualified staff are available and that pedagogical methods and didactic approaches are appropriately adapted to the new teaching medium. The financial impact should be assessed on the basis of economic principles and aimed at a sound balance between costs and benefits. The topics of future projects should be purposefully chosen. Every project should be carefully planned and professionally managed to ensure best performance and to avoid any adverse effects on ongoing schooling.

INTERPARENTS is now awaiting the outcome of the evaluation of the pilot projects and will follow with great interest all further development and progress made in this field.