THE COMENIUS 1 SCHOOL PROJECT: REFLECTIONS ON ITS GOALS, ACTIVITIES AND PRODUCTS

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This paper presents the results of a recently completed research on the effectiveness of Comenius 1 school projects based on a comprehensive analysis of their educational and social dimensions. The research methodology integrates the advantages of the Logical Framework Approach (LFA) applied to 58 successfully completed Comenius projects, with the case-study method, focusing on two selected projects with similar priorities and contrasting efficiency. Data analysis shows that poorly designed and structured school projects with unbalanced logical framework bear a greater risk of disrupting coherence between their educational and socio-cultural aims and effects. According to the case-study data, the educational aspects and effects of the school project are the first to suffer in case of inaccurate or poor project analysis, planning and implementation. With regard to the specifics of the Comenius projects, the results of this research give some good reasons to revisit and rethink the Program's priorities, evaluation criteria and procedures.

Keywords: school project, educational effectiveness, social effectiveness, project method, project-based approach, project-based teaching & learning

The specific provocation for the research presented in this paper is the introduction of Comenius 1 school projects into the Bulgarian comprehensive school system some 10 years ago. These were expected to be an important part of the European strategic program for sustainable and common policies in this area, which is a sufficient reason for this topic to be assessed on a regular basis. Historically this is not the first attempt to reach socio-economical and political goals by introducing project-based solutions. In the beginning of the 20th century in the new established Soviet Union (1918-30) the Central Committee of the Communist Party issued an extraordinary decree on the compulsory inclusion of the project method in Soviet schools by declaring the so called "metod proektov" to be the one and only truly "Marxist" and "democratic" method of teaching (Holmes, 1991:123). "The changed curricula had just been passed when the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union intervened. In a resolution dated September 5, 1931, the highest decision-making body in the country condemned the 'ill-considered craze for the project method'" (Anweiler, 1978:431), declaring that the project was not suited for teaching the knowledge and skills necessary to increase industrial production and strengthen communist consciousness. This governmental resolution brought the discussion of the project method to an abrupt halt. Like progressive education as a whole, the project method was no longer on the agenda of the

educational theory debate, either in the Soviet Union or in the countries that were to come under Soviet domination in Eastern Europe after World War II" (Knoll, 1997). The Comenius 1 school projects also play an additional role by integrating with local realities and educational traditions in a unique way.

The specific Bulgarian educational environment 10 years ago did not fit well with the concepts and practices of project-based education. The traditional educational model in our country was based on teaching–learning interactions in a standard classroom space and through mainly frontal whole-class teaching and cognitive learning techniques and methods. Until recently, the school/learning projects were mainly limited to the area of vocational education and hardly any such project has been applied in areas like science education, civic education or even arts and sport. Perhaps the first attempts in this direction entered the Bulgarian school practice through the introduction of foreign language courses, based on programs and textbooks from the respective countries of origin. In order to keep with the original methodology of such study programmes, Bulgarian language teachers had to include project-based strategies and techniques in their everyday teaching and classroom management thus becoming familiar with project-related principles and specifics.

Comenius 1 school projects introduced in my country over the past decade integrate by definition project-based teaching/learning with project-based educational & school management. This was why Bulgarian schools and educators had to cope with both challenges at the same time. How far have they have advanced in dealing with school projects' development and management? How supportive, indeed, is the EU Comenius program to local school communities and needs? What should it be rethought or modified during the next long-term program period after 2013? These are some of the practical questions which drew my attention and motivated my interest to Comenius 1 school project effectiveness in Bulgarian context.

The present paper *aims* to summarize the main pros and cons which Bulgarian comprehensive schools, teachers and students have experienced by participating in Comenius 1 school projects. It presents the results of a recently completed research on these projects' effectiveness based on a comprehensive analysis of their educational and social aspects.

The social efficiency of the school projects is identified through the different types of social developments and changes on both personal and group /community level. It is considered to be stronger, if the project actively deals with the levels of social competence and integration.

The educational efficiency is evaluated mainly via two types of manifestations: (1) the quality of project-based learning and (2) the teaching excellence. This dual approach is based on the understanding of educational sustainability as a functional interaction between students' development and achievements and teachers' professional improvement.

The research methodology integrates the advantages of the theoretical analysis with the Logical Framework Approach (LFA) and the case-study method. Basic data sources are gathered from the official documentation of the projects (project proposals and final reports, evaluation and valorisation sheets, project products etc.) and from the feedback and reflections of the participants (Focus group discussions and surveys with Comenius experts, students and teachers).

Theoretical reflections

In its current use the term "project" can denominate a great variety of human activities. Usage of the term has expanded from traditional architectural or engineering designs, through routine "home projects", to art manifestations - new songs, art installations or performances and, finally, ending with such a powerful concept as the management of global social projects. Within this rich diversity, the ideas relating project and education have emerged quite early in history. Despite the traditional myth that the project method was for the first time developed in the USA (Kilpatrick, 1918) associated mainly with the area of vocational education, recent studies (Knoll, 1997) relate its first manifestations with the practice of the so called *architectural competitions or*ganized by the oldest European architectural academies in Rome (1697) and Paris (1765). These initially annual events were aimed to provoke student-architects to demonstrate their professional abilities and artistic talents by fulfilling real architectural tasks, such as designing important public buildings, spaces and heritage sites. Since those times *authenticity* of project-based education (teaching & learning) serves as one of its strongest characteristics turning it into an ever-lasting paradigm in education. The historical reconstruction reveals that the concept of teaching through projects reached the United States in 1865 where it served as an instructional method in manual training, agricultural education, and general science (Knoll, 2011). Further on, in the 20-ies of the XX century, the project method was actively conceptualized and disseminated by its "*classical outsider*" William H. Kilpatrick (Knoll, 2011).

Perhaps the most significant practical impact of such a re-conceptualization is the active spread of school/learning projects in all areas and levels of educational systems and institutions. Only understanding project-based education as a sustainably developing complex of relatively independent manifestations can represent in a realistic way its rich educative and developmental potential that contribute to both global and local educational goals and means since centuries. In fact the rich "history" and wide "geography" of the project-based learning's applications confirm the universal nature of this concept and its capacity to be implemented successfully in different local (incl. socio-political) contexts: Italy and France (16-17th century), USA (19th century), Russia (end of 19th - beginning of 20th century), Australia, Canada (second half of 20th century), EU countries (21st century) etc. Not accidentally, authors have dwelled on projects' multi-dimensional functionality even more than a century ago (Branom, 1919:4).

This circumstance invites a further search for a more precise definition of some of the most popular and frequent uses and meanings of the term "project", particularly in the area of education. According to Jane Henry (1994:13), a variety of terms have been in use for referring to different types of project-based learning. This author mentions especially *project exercise* (mini-projects), *project component/s* (one or more projects that form part of a larger course); *project courses* (i.e. courses including substantial project element); the *project-based courses* (all the assessment in the course is based upon a series of mini-projects); *project credits* (courses consisting entirely of one big project similar to thesis or dissertation); *project approach* (project work as one among many types of methods or forms); *project method/orientation* ("refers to situations where institutions teach entirely or largely through projects, offering students a discovery or problem-based approach to learning" (Henry, 1994:13). Most popular among the latter are the project method and the project approach concepts which integrate several

of the existing other types of project-based learning (exercises, components, courses or credits).

The variety of project-based education practices also explains the existence of numerous and diverse learning projects. W. Kilpatrick (1925) designed four types of projects for his method: construction (such as writing a play), enjoyment (such as experiencing a concert), problem (for instance, discussing a complex social problem like poverty), and specific learning (learning of skills such as swimming). Nowadays, there are much more detailed classifications of projects in education.

Notwithstanding the now existent rich variety of project typologies and constructs in the area of education, a certain "mix" of term usages and concepts is still observed. This motivated me to search for their systematization, while using as basic criteria the different existing concepts, constructs and contexts of project-based planning and acting in education.

The project *concepts* spread from teaching/learning as a project, to social and/or organizational development as projects, up to education itself as a complex project (integrating the rest of the concepts). These concepts are in use thanks to the implementation of several project *constructs* – project method, approaches or models. The role of specific filters between theoretical concepts and applied constructs play the corresponding educational *contexts* – learning projects, socio-educational projects, experimental (pilot) projects for new educational models.

The Comenius 1 programme covers mostly the first three sub-areas of educational projects, but not so much the area of designing new complex educational practices and models. As part of the current Lifelong Learning (LLL) Programme of the European Commission, the Programme was introduced with the launch of a set of transnational priorities aimed at enhancing the quality and reinforcing the European dimension of school education, in particular by encouraging transnational cooperation between schools and by contributing to improved professional development of staff directly involved in the school education sector, along with promoting language learning and intercultural awareness. The Comenius program has been launched for first time in 2001 as part of the Socrates Program (2001-2006) prolonged in 2007 as part of the LLL program (2007-2013). The Comenius action plan focuses on the first phase of education (covering nursery, primary and secondary schooling including technical and vocational education). It extends to all in these education community teachers, education staff and pupils whilst endeavouring to also involve organisations outside school such as parents associations, NGOs, local authorities, the business sector and the social partners. The programme is currently focusing in particular on:

- Motivation for learning and learning-to-learn skills.
- Key competences: improving language learning; greater literacy; making science more attractive; supporting entrepreneurship; and reinforcing creativity and innovation.
- Digital educational content and services.
- School management.
- Addressing socio-economic disadvantages and reducing early school leaving.
- Participation in sports.
- Teaching diverse groups of pupils.
- Early and pre-primary learning.

Comenius activities as a whole cover three areas of action, namely school partnerships (Comenius 1), training of teachers and other school education

staff (Comenius 2) and development of networks (Comenius 3). *Comenius 1 program* embraces three types of partnership projects – school projects, language projects and school development projects. Each one of them is administrated according to specific priorities, procedures and evaluation criteria (see for details the web site of the program: http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-programme/doc84_en.htm). At the same time the programme makes possible to implement at least three different types of project manifestations in school education: project method, project-based approach and development/management model.

Teachers participating in the Comenius 1 programme need to have at least two types of special skills and competences – (1) for school project's development and management, and (2) for designing project curriculum and project-based teaching and learning. This is why the project effectiveness is evaluated simultaneously on the basis of two-fold criteria – one part reflecting the quality of project management and another part - reflecting the quality of project-based education. According to the Programme, the initial evaluation, as well as the current monitoring of projects, is conceptualized through the so called *Logical frame* (LogFrame) analysis which focuses mainly on analysis of the logical interconnections between project goals /expectations, activities and outcomes/products. This fact also explains why the current research methodology adequately reflects the Programme's characteristics and procedures by including the LogFrame analysis as one of the research instruments.

Research methods

The first necessary explanation referring to the methodology of the research is that the presented data and analysis are part of a long-standing work on the topic starting with my earliest theoretical research in 1998. Since then, I have elaborated on several specific usages of the term "project" in the area of education – project-based learning and teaching, educational project management, projects on educational approaches and models, evaluation of Comenius 1 school projects etc. For the specific research purposes I have used different data collection and analysis methods and tools (see table1).

Table 1. *Data collection and analysis methods*

Surveys (2004 - 2010)	Incl. 312 Comenius students and 84 teachers
Experimental teacher training "Implementations of learning projects in school civic education" (2005 - 2007)	6 groups with about 90 teachers Follow up training programmes for in-service teachers.
Documental (logframe & content) **analysis** (2006-10)	applied on 58 successfully completed Comenius 1 projects (selected among 250)
Case studies (2010)	comparing 2 selected projects with similar logical frameworks and contrasting efficiency
Focus groups (2010)	2 mixed students/teachers focus groups

Owing to this long-term research period, a big amount of empirical data and data interpretations have been accumulated, which were published at the time in several Bulgarian and international editions. This paper summarises the data and conclusions based on two of the used data collection methods and tools – the documental (LogFrame) analysis and the case-studies - both finalized in 2010.

For the *LogFrame analysis* the short version of the technique has been used. Its main components are the project goals/expectations, the project activities and the project outcomes/products. The final selection of the analysed 52 (from 250 reviewed) projects was based on the thoroughness of the application forms. *Social effectiveness* of school projects is identified by the manifestations of social competence and integration on both personal and group level. *Educational effectiveness* is evaluated mainly on the basis of two types of manifestations: (1) quality of project-based learning and (2) teaching excellence. Five main steps form this analysis procedure:

(1) Content analysis of project application form information (following the structure of the document and forming basic meaning groups in each area and establishing the boundaries of each analytical level);
(2) Comparative logical analysis of the different meaning groups on each analytical level
(3) Describing typical good and bed logical structures used by project planning
(4) Quantitative and qualitative analysis of project monitoring data (external evaluation procedure)
(5) Comparative analysis between the project logical structures on planning phase and the project realization and outcomes on monitoring phase.

Thanks to these procedures it became possible to answer some of the most significant questions for this research like:

- What are the most challenging steps in project development?
- How can project development quality and complexity affect project implementation and outcomes?
- How do the Programme strategy, priorities and evaluation criteria affect the Comenius 1 school projects' effectiveness?

The *case studies* then followed the documental analysis. The strongest provocation for their execution was to find out how sustainable was the interconnection between project planning and project implementation in a specific case context. For this purpose two projects with similar logical frameworks and contrasting effectiveness based on the results of the documental analysis were selected. In this paper the two projects are presented as the "Story telling project" and the "School life project".

Results

Documental LogFrame-based analysis

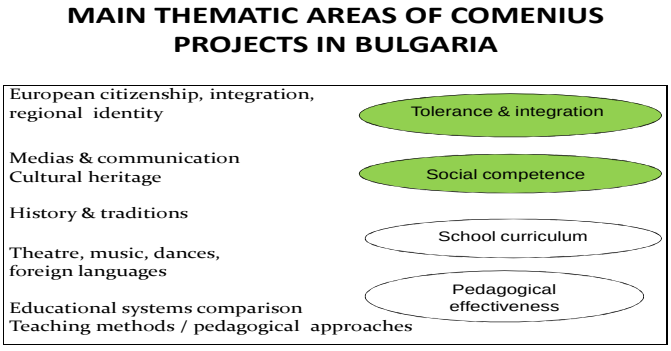
The documental analysis led to detecting a spread of opinions among several structural groups (units) with regard to the three main targets of the analysis - expected effects, activities and outcomes of project implementation.
Four levels or clusters of *expected effects* from the implementation of school projects were distinguished. The highest frequency of opinions covered two groups of expected effects – those on teachers and their work, and on school culture development. Second level effects included expectations toward students learning, development and key competences, while third level effects referred to the specific area of intercultural attitudes and relations and the students' language culture and experience. The lowest level of expectations referred to students' behaviour and communication as well as ICT use in education (see table 2).

Table 2. *Criteria, units and frequencies of the content analysis: expected effects*

Criteria	***Units***	***Frequencies***	
Expected effects	• Effects on teacher and his work • Effects on school culture development	47 45	34.2%
	• Effects on students' learning and development • Effects on students' key competences and	39 37	28.3%
	• Effects on intercultural attitudes and relations • Effects on students' language culture and practice	32 28	22.3%
	• Effects on students' behaviour and communication • Effects on ICT implementation and usages in education	23 18	15.2%

These data correspond directly with the results from the content analysis of the Comenius project thematic areas and priorities (see figure 1) where again four basic items were identified namely (1) pedagogical effectiveness, (2) school curriculum, (3) social competence and (4) tolerance and integration (see figure 1).

Figure 1



According to collected data, Comenius projects in Bulgaria target a balanced socio-educational effectiveness (see figures 2 & 3). Typical areas of the educational effectiveness include students' (29%) and teachers' (36%) learning, work and development. Specific priority expectations are related to foreseen effects on the language (21%) and ICT (14%) education. The social effectiveness dimension of project implementation covers four basic elements – school culture and climate (33%), key competences and free time activities (27%), intercultural attitudes and integration (23%) and communication and development (17%).

Figure 2

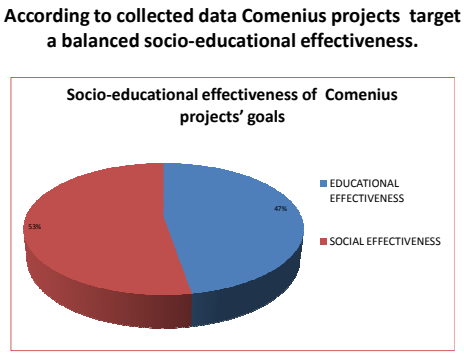
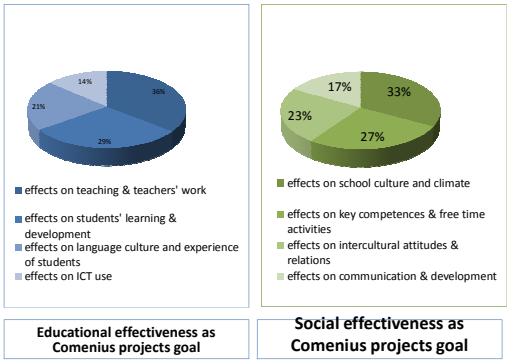


Figure 3



The researched Comenius 1 *project activities* can be divided in three content groups. The first group (48% of all registered activities) includes three sub-groups – research activities, arts activities and teaching-learning activities. All of them are strongly related to teaching and learning activities. The second content group (34%) integrates again three types of activities – promotion, project management and advertisement which correlate mostly with aspects of project management and implementation. The least represented project activities (18%) are those associated with civic education and participation, school development, communication and mobility. All the project activities in this group correlate significantly in their contents and meaning with the goal of social effectiveness. (see table 3).

Table 3. *Criteria, units and frequencies of the content analysis: project activities*

Criteria	***Units/Activities***	***Frequencies***	
Project activities	• Research activities • Art activities • Teaching-learning activities	49 47 42	48%
	• Project management • Advertisement • Working on project products	34 14 51	34%
	• Civic education and participation • School development • Communication and mobility	13 10 30	18%

According to the Logframe methodology the *project outcomes and products* represent the third main element of projects' logical frame. On the basis of the data from the project documentation and the feedback from the project monitoring the most objective information about project effectiveness can be based on the facts about created/developed project products. They show that about 62% of the project products were developed involving non-traditional devices or carriers and only about 38% were made in a traditional paper form. The main Comenius 1 school project products divide into three basic types – artistic and creativity products (42,6%), school activities and initiatives (36,7%) and products supporting teachers' work (21,7%). The project management products cover two main categories – products from the management - plans, reports, calendars, scenarios etc. (35,2%) and advertisement products (64,8%) (see table 4).

Table 4. *Criteria, units and frequencies of the content analysis: project products*

Criteria	***Units***	***Frequencies***		
Products by type of carriers	• Electronic devises and carriers • Informative and thematic products on paper carrier	71 43	62,3% 37,8%	100%
Products by type of main activities	• Artistic and creativity products • School activities and initiatives • Products supporting teachers work	58 50 28	42,6% 36,7% 21,7%	100%
Products by type of management activities	• Advertisement materials • Products from the project management	46 25	64,8% 35,2%	

Comparative case study

After performing the documental analysis with a view to define the main trends in Comenius 1 projects' goals, activities and products, the next major research task was to find out if and how their features correlate with the effectiveness of specific projects. For this purpose two projects with similar profiles but contrasting effectiveness (according to external evaluations and monitoring data) were selected. The expectation was that by comparing them on the basis of their detailed LogFrame analysis some concrete conclusions about the significance on the significance of effective project development leading to successful project implementation could be drawn.

At first glance the two projects were quite similar. They were presented by similar educational institutions – both by public comprehensive coeducational schools, located in cities with average population of 65-85,000 habitants. Their 3-years Comenius 1 projects started in 2005 as part of the school partnership sub-programme. The projects involved 6 partners including between 10-15 teachers. The students were between 8 and 15 years old and almost the half of them were girls. Both projects had similar aims including developmental, pedagogical and socio-cultural goals. They also intended to cover identical thematic areas, as well as European priorities.

However, a few but significant differences did exist between these projects such as the institutional role of the Bulgarian schools involved, the LogFrame sustainability and the envisaged system of monitoring (external) evaluation. According to the available data on the Bulgarian input to *The Story telling project*, is was indeed very significant, but the status of the institution was one of a project partner. At the same time the Bulgarian school in *The School life project* played the role of project coordinator which

meant than the initial project ideas and implementation design were most likely elaborated by the Bulgarian team. The data from the monitoring after the first and the second year of the two projects shows serious differences in their external evaluation. While *The story telling project* was highly valued, *The school life project* was assessed below average. Subsequently the LogFrame analysis of both projects showed again sharp differences between them projects. *The Story telling project* was characterized by high sustainability of its logical structure, while *The School life project* suffered from serious disbalances between goals, activities and outcomes/products (see table 5).

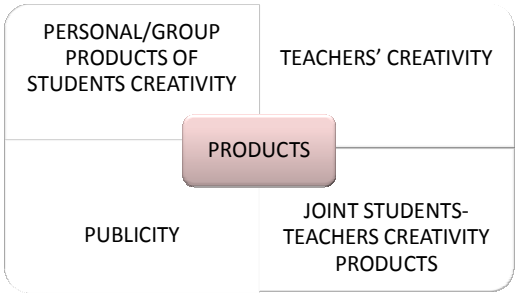
Table 5 *Areas of similarities and differences between the 2 compared Comenius projects*

	Areas	***Details***
Similarities	Type of institution and location	Public comprehensive coeducational schools in cities with population of 65 – 85 000 habitants
	Comenius programme	Comenius 1 school partnerships
	Project period	2005 – 2008
	Partners	5 partners from EU countries
	Participants	11 – 15 teachers (incl. 9-10 women) Boys to girls: about 50/50 Age 8 to 15
	Project goals	developmental, pedagogical, and socio-cultural
	Thematic areas covered	Pedagogical methods and approaches Cultural heritage and history Arts and literature Communication with other communities
	European priorities covered	Challenges in educational systems Intercultural dialogue and education Language education and diversity New ICTs in education
Differences	Institutional role in the project	Story telling project – partner institution School life project - coordinator
	LogFrame sustainability	Story telling project – highly sustainable School life project - highly unsustainable
	Monitoring evaluation	Story telling project – highly above the average School life project – below the average

In the case of *The Story telling project* the following specifics showed up:

- There is a strong interconnection between project goals, thematic areas and reflected European priorities.
- Every project stage (phase) has been fulfilled in accordance to the initial expectation and intentions.
- The project products reflect the contribution of all the participants – students, teachers and partner communities (see figure 4).
- Monitoring evaluations are based on authentic facts and products.

Figure 4



In the case of *The school life project* the following specifics have been identified:

- The whole logical structure of the project is disbalanced on all levels of the project cycle – from planning, through implementation, to producing final results. This has affected negatively the project effectiveness and especially its educational aspect in both areas - of quality of instruction and teaching excellence.
- There is a notable discrepancy at project development level between project goals, thematic areas and European priorities associated with the project implementation.
- The interrelation between the project goals, activities and products is also unbalanced.
- Two types of *broken balance effects* have been identified. The first one is consequence from spreading the project planning over subject areas which can not correspond effectively to the project thematic areas. The second manifestation of the broken balance effect reflects the conflict between the initial project goals and the final project products (see figure 5 and 6).

Figure 5

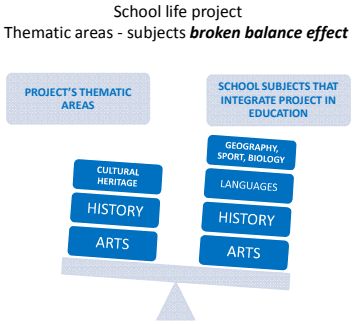
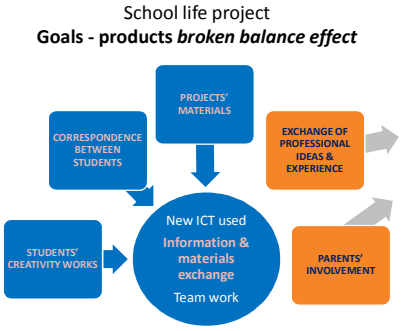
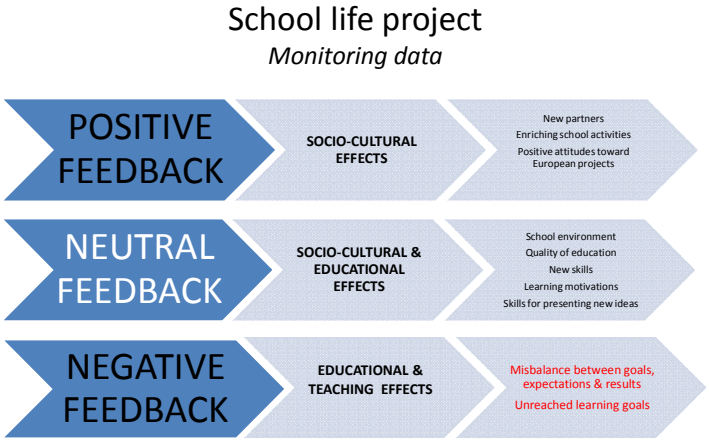


Figure 6



The *educational aspects and effects* of the school project are the first to be affected in case of inaccurate or poor project analysis, planning and implementation (see figure 7).

Figure 7



Discussion

The collected research data provides a basis for a more profound reflection on practice and effectiveness of Comenius 1 school projects in Bulgaria. It helps to identify their typical features and manifestations which seem to form a *specific profile* of the Bulgarian school project performed under EU educational programs.

According to its content characteristics the typical Comenius 1 project with Bulgarian participation is mainly focused on *three thematic areas*: (1) tolerance and integration (2) educational curriculum and (3) educational effectiveness (teaching excellence). Languages education, ICT trainings and skills, intercultural dialogue, history and cultural heritage, art and literature, social competence, school culture and climate, new learning and teaching methods are among the most often covered subjects and topics.

These three main thematic areas correspond largely and steadily with the *two main groups of project goals*, namely (1) socio-cultural and (2) educational. According to the research data exactly the socio-cultural goals are considered as the lead incentive and significance of the internationally developed and managed school projects. This fact explains why both teachers and students understand their involvement with the Comenius projects mainly as a way to develop their social competences and awareness, and to enlarge the scope of their social communication, rather than use it as an effective tool for higher academic goals and achievements. The latter observation should be considered as a logical result of the common will and readiness for intercultural cooperation and European integration in brand new areas of life, work and learning.

Another significant feature of the Bulgarian experience with Comenius 1 projects is *the co-partnership*. Usually the Bulgarian institutions participate as co-partners and only few of them play the role of project coordinator. There is no strong connection between institutional status in the project and project effectiveness. Therefore, it is obvious, that Bulgarian schools still feel uncertain to take responsibility for the whole project management. They are much more active, creative and successful at the level of implementation, than at the level of development and management.

Whatever the role or the contribution of the school, there is always a *strong interconnection between the effective planning of a project and its effective implementation*. When the balance between the different necessary stages is broken (due to errors or miscalculations) this always affects the final outcome. Well-planned and implemented Comenius projects do have a positive impact on life, study and work of all participants. The so called effects of ”broken balance” usually reflect difficulties experienced by schools when coping with real-life problems and goals while trying to respond to the European and national priorities of the Programme. This makes international school projects much more management- and result-oriented than needs- and process-oriented.

Another very important aspect of International school project is that even when it is not very effectively planned and implemented the *participants still retain a positive attitude and disposition its performance usage and potential*.

The comparison between the results from the documental LogFrame analysis and the comparative case study shows that good project planning and implementation is a strong prerequisite for project effectiveness. At the same time the Logframe analysis mirrors the project effectiveness mostly with regard to the characteristics of the project management and its results,

but not so much as to measuring the quality of education which would need other kind of tools for evaluation and implementation.

Conclusion

The collected and analysed research data give us ample grounds to conclude that the implementation of the Comenius 1 Programme in Bulgaria creates both large possibilities for successful future development, as well as great challenges for finding the best working balance between different contexts and priorities – national and international. The current focus of the Programme on project management and evaluation (results- and management-oriented), as well as on the social dimensions of expected effects and outcomes still impedes schools and participants from getting the desired educational effects. The relatively short and fragmentary period of the projects does not support a deep and sustainable change of educational realities.

These conclusions give grounds to recommend the reorientation of the Comenius 1 Programme policy for the next programming period after 2013, from its present focus on project-based school activities and outcomes to project-based educational models which share a common philosophical and theoretical basis, but differ in their specific implementation in accordance with authentic conditions of national and international environment. Another possible change which can work productively for the future of the Programme are the changes in the evaluation criteria and procedures. Instead of putting the emphasis on effectiveness of project management and products, the Programme should impact more successfully on the quality of educational models and processes. Log Frame approach still will be a useful tool for operational evaluation, but definitely not enough productive from a strategic long-term perspective.

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