An Innovative Model of Distance Learning

The context for the use of ICT for Inclusion

The project involved the development of an innovative model of distance learning, conducted in a virtual environment via an educational platform. The learners work at home, using a personal computer, and teachers work in the distance learning centre, where they can exchange experiences, opinions and observations on the learners. The teacher meets the learner or a group of two or three learner in a virtual environment, using the tools available on the platform for synchronous and asynchronous work.

The project's most innovative aspect is its new way of organising education and support for learners with special educational needs. The distance learning model was created particularly for:

- Pupils who are not able to attend school because of ill health and therefore partake in compulsory schooling through individually conducted teaching, in isolation from their peers. These pupils learn at home, with the teacher coming to their house, and are usually given fewer teaching hours than their peers who attend school.
- Pupils with disabilities, who as a result have limited access to additional activities, as a means of developing their interests or evening out the level of education.
- Pupils with learning difficulties.
- Gifted pupils.

The teaching model's testing stage lasted one year (from February 2013 to January 2014), with 50 pupils from primary schools (classes 4–6) and secondary schools (classes 1–3) as participants. The learners received 3 hours of extra lessons each week, consisting of 2 hours of subjects chosen by the learner and 1 hour with a pedagogue, psychologist or educational therapist (depending on the individual learner's needs). Each of the participating pupils received a laptop with an internet connection, as well as a tablet with a stylus.

The learners work according to individually tailored programmes. The teachers use their own teaching aids or free published materials. Multimedia therapeutic programmes were also developed within the framework of the project.

Prior to the testing stage, the teachers underwent training on using ICT in education.

The Promyk Słońca Foundation is the project leader. The project is conducted in Wrocław in partnership with the Wrocław Commune.

The policy context

The contemporary world is the online world. Digital skills are crucial, as they allow us to gather information and function better in society. ICT offers personalisation for pupils, so that learning becomes attractive and more effective.

Contemporary education should not stand in opposition to the digital world, where the learners function every day. It is these learners – 'digital natives' – from the Digital Age who drive changes in the way we think about school and education, and the institutions responsible for education must react to these changes.

Polish education laws already include regulations on distance teaching methods and techniques. Dissemination of the distance teaching model would greatly enhance the range of forms of education on offer.

The use of ICT

The teaching model using ICT proposed in the project would serve to even out the level of education for learners with special needs, especially for learners with disabilities, mobility problems or those who are chronically ill. Computers serve as an important link to the outside world for such learners. One significant aspect, especially for learners isolated from their peers (learners with disabilities, chronically ill learners, learners who receive individually conducted teaching), is that the solutions proposed by the project enable them to develop social contact, so that these learners are included in their peer group.

Group classes with pedagogues serve as an example. The pupils work according to the project method, developing creativity, co-working abilities and, most of all, enjoying the possibility of getting to know each other.

These classes are open to learners with different levels of social and cognitive functioning (from children with low intellectual levels to gifted pupils; from open, talkative children to those who are reserved and withdrawn). Our attention was drawn by the fact that the mixture of clever discussion with infantile remarks or drawings seems to have no meaning and loses significance. The participants show a lot of empathy and acceptance, as can be observed in our 'online yard' where children stay logged in after the classes and continue talking (as if the laws of the traditional classroom jungle do not exist here). It can be seen that children give themselves the right to be different from their peers and also respect that right for others.

The activities that start via the internet then continue during offline meetings.

Key outcomes and benefits

Some 94% of pupils enjoyed the classes involving distance learning methods and techniques. Some of them improved the marks they got in the subjects chosen within the project's framework (this was the case for 30% of primary school pupils and 38% of secondary school pupils).

The effects of psychological and pedagogical support differ in different groups and are strongly connected to the group's needs.

The learners who received individually conducted teaching reported improved social functioning, greater openness and motivation.

The pupils with learning difficulties observed greater self-confidence, increased self-esteem, better communication skills and improved management of disappointment.

Gifted pupils saw significant improvements in communication, social functioning and knowledge, as well as creativity.

The results of the evaluation show that the pupils noticed that the classes helped them to catch up with their peers, they feel that their knowledge has increased and they are more self-confident. They enjoy online education.

Parents have also positively evaluated the classes. They reported changes in their children's behaviour and better educational results. For them, the most important elements of the project are the opportunities for their child to meet peers and learn how to use modern technology.

According to the teachers, this teaching model is an interesting way of organising the education and therapeutic process. It gives teachers lots of possibilities. They use multimedia educational aids to teach the subjects in an interesting and engaging way.

Thanks to the method, pupils are fully involved, are active, ask questions and search for new solutions using modern ICT.

Teachers have also remarked that the model fits perfectly with the tutoring model, whereby they offer a few possibilities or propose a few different ways, and the pupils make their own choices and achieve more.

Teachers working in the distance learning centre are able to co-operate, create resources, exchange information and experiences and work together on the online educational projects.

- Benefits of the educational model proposed in the project:
  - Personalised education (creating individual environments and learning paths)
  - Individualised education (meeting learners' individual needs and abilities)
  - Education in the learner's current location
  - Possibility of conducting group and individual classes
  - Using technology in education, developing interests and conducting educational therapy
  - High educational standards
  - Attractive classes
  - The educational aids developed can be reused.
- Benefits for learners:
  - By attending extra classes though the platform, learners feel more responsible for their education.
  - Working with technology that forms part of their everyday environment increases their motivation to learn.
  - They can learn at their own pace.
  - They use a wide range of educational aids, monitor their knowledge levels and co-operate with peers.
  - They can use the platform to ask the teachers questions that they would not ask in the classroom.
  - They can receive individual treatment from the teacher.

Once the testing stage is completed and the final version of the project is prepared, the Promyk Słońca Foundation will spearhead activities aimed at disseminating the distance learning model and including it in common practice.

Main challenges and obstacles

The key elements for the success of the project using ICT include:

- Teacher recruitment and training – for the project we searched for passionate teachers, open to innovation, who could serve as leaders and masters for the learners and represent the learning society. These teachers support pupils in developing their ability to learn and continuously offer their expertise in the matter. The teacher training consists of three elements: getting to know the specific work required for learners with special educational needs, practical use of the educational platform and individual training in special platform functions (chosen by

teachers according to the anticipated needs). It is also crucial that teachers can avail of continuous support and not just once-off training.

- Carefully created virtual environment (educational platform) – experts were engaged in the project and the solutions proposed by the experts (interface, tools) were then discussed with the teachers. Teachers were also able to introduce new tools as they got to know the platform better and felt more confident using its functions.
- Continuous IT support in the distance learning centre – frequent minor difficulties with the equipment/internet connection/platform access require a fast response from IT support. In order to avoid a situation where classes are cancelled because of technical issues, teachers and pupils have constant access to IT support.

While leading the project, we encountered conservative attitudes among people in the project environment (psychological-pedagogical clinic representatives, school teachers), who were sceptical towards the distance learning idea. They assumed the model did not enable direct contact between the teacher and the pupil (teachers and pupils being physically in different places during the classes creates a mental barrier, but the pupils do not notice it).

Additional information

Project information page: www.promykslonca.pl

Contact persons:

Anna Grabowska – General Director of Promyk Słońca Foundation, member of the steering group: agrabowska@promykslonca.pl

Małgorzata Gębicka-Zdanewicz – Project leader: mgebicka@promykslonca.pl