

Exploring student teachers' experiences of engaging in Hands of the World, a contextualised global intercultural eTwinning project

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Abstract

This paper considers the impact of student teachers' participation and engagement in the award-winning eTwinning international Hands of the World (HOTW) project which connects over 2000 students and their teachers in 50 schools across the world. Students participated in a wide range of educational collaborative experiences, before and during the first COVID-19 lockdown of 2020, to develop their knowledge and understanding of intercultural education. Student teachers live and work in an interconnected and intercultural world and having a knowledge of how to embed diversity, inclusion and cultural awareness into their practice is important to ensure that their pupils develop a positive intercultural mindset. An explanatory design analysed students' end of year reflections on participating in the project, which were publicly available on the project's Padlet™ page. Data were analysed thematically focusing on participation (types, levels and enablers) and benefits (pedagogy and personal). The findings revealed a continuum of engagement with some students taking part at a lower level, where they would observe and question, whilst others had a higher level of engagement taking part in the activities and/or applying the project to practice. Our analysis enabled us to identify that although there were various barriers to participation, the design of the project enabled students to engage at various levels with a higher level of engagement evidenced during the COVID-19 lockdown when the barrier of time constraints had been removed. It was clear that all students had derived benefit from their participation in the project, however, those who engaged at a higher level, particularly during the COVID-19 lockdown, had a richer experience. Students working at the highest level; those who participated in an activity with another school for example, benefitted from receiving support and guidance from experienced teachers in the project. Those at the second highest level of engagement were able to benefit from engaging in activities at home independently or with family members and were able to experience intercultural learning through the lens of the teacher and/or pupil. Personal and professional gains of taking part in this contextualised project were enhanced confidence, increased competence and the development of new knowledge and understanding of intercultural pedagogy. Our findings suggest that effective intercultural learning in teacher education requires a range of intercultural opportunities that can be accessed at a variety of levels and at different times throughout the year to provide a rich learning experience.

Keywords: intercultural pedagogy, diversity, global citizenship, inclusion, teacher education