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In Search of Forms of Support for Active Participation in the Community of Learners and Contact Networks. Study Report

The presented article raises issues related to the learning environment based on the engagement and constructive interaction of all its participants, which can also be supported by digital technologies. It draws attention to new opportunities and challenges related to meeting the various needs of young learners. It is also about building a sense of community and support networks, not only with regard to one's professional future, but also to the exchange of knowledge, experience and ideas. The aforementioned issues have been analysed, among others, in connection with selected research results carried out as part of "The Unteachables" Erasmus+ project, which is the result of cooperation between the Faculty of Education, the Faculty of Biology and Environmental Sciences at the Cardinal Stefan Wyszynski University in Warsaw and partners from Denmark – project coordinator, Spain, Iceland, Slovenia and Italy.

Keywords: pedagogy, modern teaching and learning methods, perspective of learners, Erasmus+ project, contact network, community of learners, cooperation

W poszukiwaniu form wsparcia dla aktywnego udziału we wspólnocie uczących się i sieci kontaktów. Komunikat z badań

Prezentowany artykuł porusza kwestie odnoszące się do środowiska uczenia się opartego na zaangażowaniu i konstruktywnym współdziałaniu wszystkich jego uczestników, które może być wspierane także przez technologie cyfrowe. Zwraca uwagę na nowe możliwości i wyzwania związane z realizacją różnych potrzeb młodych osób uczących się. Chodzi też o budowanie poczucia wspólnoty, sieci wsparcia, nie tylko z myślą o przyszłości zawodowej, ale również ze względu na wymianę wiedzy, doświadczenia, pomysłów. Powyższe zagadnienia analizowane są m.in. w powiązaniu z wybranymi wynikami badań prowadzonymi w ramach projektu Erasmus+ „The Unteachables", będącego efektem współpracy Wydziału Nauk Pedagogicz-

nych, Wydziału Biologii i Nauk o Środowisku Uniwersytetu Kardynała Stefana Wyszyńskiego w Warszawie oraz partnerów z Danii – koordynator projektu, Hiszpanii, Islandii, Słowenii i Włoch.

Słowa kluczowe: pedagogika, nowoczesne metody nauczania i uczenia się, perspektywa osób uczących się, projekt Erasmus+, sieć kontaktów, wspólnota uczących się, współpraca

Introduction

Creating educational environments, e.g. reminiscent of real places, abounding with various activities for young people, facilitate non-accidental and reflective participation in the education process. This approach to teaching and learning (more engaging and interactive), as well as to the organisation of a modern, creative school, is presented, among others, in the following reports: *European Commission* (2018). *Study on Supporting School Innovation Across Europe*; *OECD* (2017). *PISA 2015 Results (Volume III): Students' Well-Being*; H. Fullan & M. Langworthy (2014). *A Rich Seam: How New Pedagogies Find Deep Learning.* Among the necessary changes (also analysed in native studies and publications by: Maria Czerepaniak-Walczak, Maria Dudzikowa, Robert Kwaśnica, Zbyszko Melosik, Beata Przyborowska, Bogusław Śliwerski et al.) in the cited reports, particular attention is paid to the learning environment based on: a. the engagement and cooperation of stakeholders, and b. joint creation and introduction of pedagogical innovations[1]. This also includes taking advantage of digital learning tools and sources to create new knowledge and explore new concepts and to communicate and share information outside the classroom/school (collaborating through digital technologies), e.g. information on the quality and results of learning (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019, p. 39). The featured needs related to education should also be associated with dynamic, global changes, including those of a socio-cultural, market and technological nature. Thus, taking into account the above, they should also be associated with the development of key competencies leading to "personal fulfilment, a healthy and sustainable lifestyle, employability, active citizenship and social inclusion" (European Commission, 2019, p. 4). These key competences also include the learning to learn com-

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[1] In the case of "The Unteachables" project implemented by the Faculty of Education (WNP) and Faculty of Biology and Environmental Sciences (WBNS) at the Cardinal Stefan Wyszynski University in Warsaw under the Erasmus+ KA2 Strategic Partnerships, it is also about testing possible, innovative learning strategies in open interaction with groups participating in the project: partner secondary school students, young working teachers and students – future teachers.

petence, involving, for example, an acquaintance with preferred learning strategies, the ability to constructively cooperate and manage social interactions and readiness to search for various learning opportunities (European Commission, 2019, p. 11), e.g. through participating in experiments, project-based learning with digital devices, academic presentations or asking questions to experts via mobile tools. At this point, it is worth adding that the extent to which the needs of learners are met, also in terms of today's relevant competences, impacts their interest in education and the engagement or abandonment of schooling (see, among others, OECD, 2017; The Unteachables Erasmus+ project, 2019). Drafts of interactive teaching and learning methods that have already changed and may further change education are also included in the series of *Innovating Pedagogy* reports (2012–2020). Thus, the learning methods based on the analysed competence of cooperation – also supported by modern technologies – include: action learning (learners work together to find solutions to problems encountered in the real world based on their various experience); place-based learning – students search for learning opportunities with the support of teachers and/or members of a given community, e.g. by participating in social and environmental projects (Ferguson, Coughlan et al., 2019, pp. 27–28, 33–34); networked offline learning – a method that offers the visualisation of learning aspects and its results, supporting local networks and cooperation (artistic, scientific) in small groups at their own pace – i.e. conscious slow learning (Kukulska-Hulme, Beirne et al., 2020, pp. 41-43).

School as an engaging and supportive environment, according to students' feedback

The title of this chapter refers, among others, to a European Commission document which stresses that "schools should be safe, welcoming and caring learning environments, striving for learners' engagement" (European Commission, 2017, p. 17). One valuable aspect is cognitive engagement, e.g. motivation to learn, defining own learning goals, student peer and self-assessment (ability to drive an own learning process). Moreover, the involvement of learners – including their ability to bring ideas and experiences, their confrontation with the interpretation of others (see, among others, Bruner, 2010), expressing their views in discussions and the accompanying sense of responsibility – are important when introducing innovations in both classroom-based teaching methods and organisational practices at school (European Commission, 2018, pp. 39–41, 53–54; Fullan & Langworthy, 2014, pp. 12–13). Promoting interaction with peers and group

activities (artistic, sports, social)[2], also outside the formal learning environment – with the support of school specialists: teachers[3], trainers and vocational guidance consultants – can help reactivate students' interest and engagement in the learning process. According to various European projects[4], the participation of the latter can also be important when working on improving learning (e.g. planning and organisation) and with the social skills developed in and around the school (e.g. launch of peer mentoring, support groups, networks of cooperation among students). Given the above, as well as taking into consideration the topic of the article, it is worth mentioning an interesting project: *The School in the Cloud project* – a series of learning labs "[…] where children can embark on intellectual adventures online" (Organisation website, 2020) with the help of mentors involved in the project[5].

Projects based on community interactions[6] may encourage other educators, future teachers (e.g. students participating in the "The Unteachables" project or commentators on the work of the native project team – their opinions can be found, among others, in the next part of the article) to debate on the perspectives of education. They can stimulate one to do research, design new teaching methods or create innovative, cooperative educational spaces. The cooperation within education systems can take various forms: from creating local contact networks (aimed at sharing good practices and ideas among school employees) to cooperation within regional or national activities[7], including the prevention of leaving school early and its consequences (Europe's online platform for school education, 2020). Unfortunately, the surveyed students[8] (54.8%) – whose statements were

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[2] This is also the goal of the "The Unteachables" international project. Site https://theunteachableserasmus.blogspot.com/.

[3] Teachers' support (quality of relationships between teachers and students) constitutes one of the important conditions which enhance students' well-being at schools, after: OECD (2017). *PISA 2015 Results (Volume III): Students' Well-Being*. Paris: PISA, OECD Publishing, 78, 237, http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264273856-en.

[4] Europe's online platform for school education (3.Support to learners, 3.3.Career guidance and support): Site https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/en/pub/resources/toolkitsforschools/.

[5] More information about the project can be found, for example, at: https://theschoolinthecloud.org/.

[6] Among other important functions of the community – including the community of learners – Professor Agata Cudowska (2018) indicates: meeting the need of belonging and self-fulfilment, as well as integrating and supporting functions.

[7] See, among others, CEDEFOP, Department for Learning and Employability (2017). *Leaving education early: putting vocational education and training in centre stage. Poland.* Site https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/sl/publications-and-resources/country-reports/.

[8] The group of respondents included 172 men and 169 women. Students between 12–16 years of age (this age range is important for "The Unteachables" Erasmus+ project) accounted for a total of 83%.

analysed by the Polish team implementing "The Unteachables" Erasmus + project – were not convinced that the school and teachers noticed their potential (126 people answered "it's hard to say", 61 replied "rather not"). In addition, 32.8% of students did not feel that their work was noticed and appreciated, and 116 respondents, referring to the above issue, answered "it's hard to say". If young people wrote that they felt good at school, it was primarily because of the possibility to meet their classmates. However, to the particular research question (relevant in the context of the issues raised in the text): "how do schools support learners?", the respondents answered as follows:
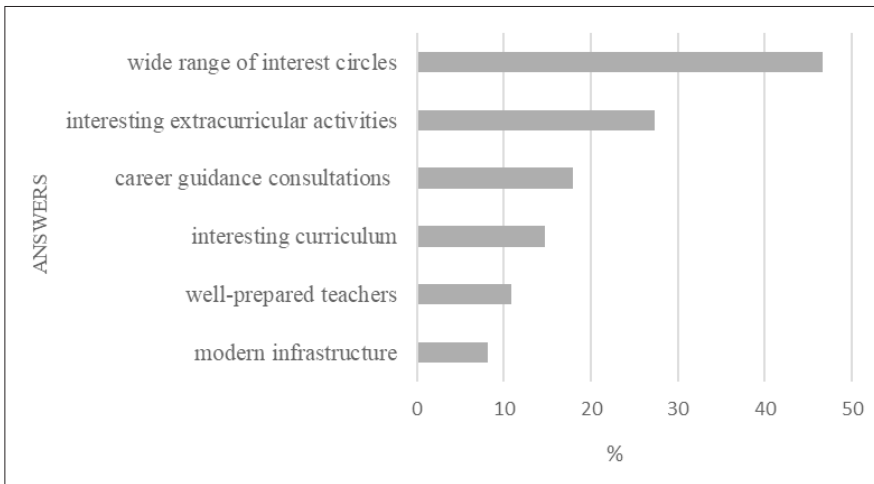

Chart 1. Respondents' answers to the question about school support for learners. Respondents could select more than one answer.

Source: Own study based on the results of research conducted by the Polish team as part of "The Unteachables" Erasmus+ project.

For the sake of completeness, it should be added that most of the surveyed students did not actively participate in school life outside the classroom (e.g. by engaging in the activities of the student council or interest circles). The youth mainly found fulfilment outside the school. Therefore, it can be concluded that the school offer of interest circles, even a very diverse one, is not the most expected means of support for the surveyed learners. It should also be added that 32.8% of the respondents' answers referred to the answer: "the school does not particu-

The results of the domestic study, conducted as part of the described project, have been acquired with the help of the poll method and survey technique (online) – prepared for the sole purpose of the study. The results of preliminary research and their analyses have been presented, among others, on the project website.

larly support learners". So what would increase interest in learning, according to the respondents?
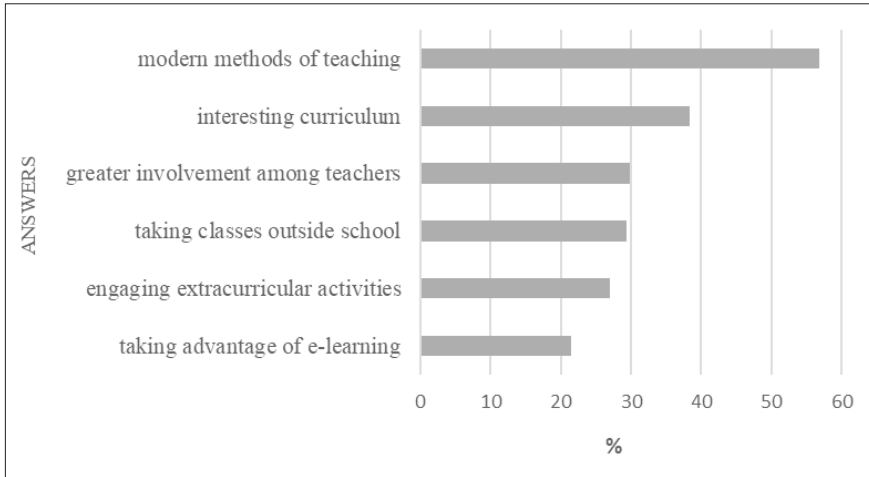

Chart 2. Respondents' answers to the question about significant factors that enhance interest in learning. Respondents could select more than one answer.
Source: Own study based on the results of research conducted by the Polish team as part of "The Unteachables" Erasmus+ project.

To complete the data presented in Chart 2, it is worth adding that students were particularly interested in working in teams conducting interesting projects (35.5% of responses) implemented outside the school (outside the formal learning environment – this information was also found in the analysed reports). In addition to remote learning, they are still interested in talking to other people – not only cooperation within the implemented project, but also meeting successful graduates (14% of responses). Respondents appreciated an interesting offer of school activities and the engagement of their teachers, which, in their opinion, also constitutes an important means of support for learners (Chart 1).

Building up networks of contacts and cooperation – pedagogy students' experience

Deloitte's *First Steps into the Labour Market. International survey of students and graduates* report indicates, among others, that native Millennials have confidence in certain skills, such as learning new things, communication and teamwork, but are sceptical about, for example, their abilities to direct and manage the work of others or their own initiative and entrepreneurship. The lack of con-

fidence in the aforementioned skills (often resulting from the lack of strengthening the distinguished competencies by the school/university – according to the author of the article) can also be associated with the fact that fewer and fewer young people aspire to the role of a leader, also as a significant role in their professional career (Deloitte, 2018, pp. 124–125; ManpowerGroup, 2018, p. 3). It is also worth adding that the presented text focuses mainly on skills relevant to the analysed issue, already stressed in the title of the study, and, unfortunately, on the deficit of these skills, even in the youngest job candidates – according to employers. So while participating in, among others, university research and teaching projects during studies, young adults have the opportunity not only to develop these complex competencies, but they can also establish valuable professional contacts and gain the necessary experience. The contemporary value of soft competencies used in various social situations and relationships with other people (also strengthened during project activities – author's note) is also emphasised by the ManpowerGroup research, including *Skills Revolution 2.0* (2018, p. 10). According to the creators of the cited analyses, employers search for and will above all need people with learnability, those ready to develop the necessary skills and employees with leadership capabilities. What is also important is that Millennials are, among others, interested in strengthening those skills that will ensure the security of their employment (ManpowerGroup, 2016, pp. 8, 11), preferably for a long term. Unfortunately, they are, to a lesser extent, interested in developing the managerial skills sought after in labour markets.

The project activities (e.g. designing and conducting research) – described in this paper and other publications[9] – have always involved the particular efforts of[10]: academic teachers and partner secondary school teachers, secondary school students and students preparing for cooperation, among others, with the surveyed new generation of young students. At this point, it should be emphasised that one of the goals of "The Unteachables" international project is to support young career-developing teachers in acquiring specific knowledge and skills to be able to "negotiate" learning goals with school students of the 21st century. According to the author of this study and a member of the Polish team, the project also draws attention to another important issue, i.e. the need to build a network of contacts and support, not only by the specialists involved in it or organisations

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[9] Among others in the article: A. Kulpa-Puczyńska (2019).

[10] Information about the members of the Polish project team, cooperating general secondary schools, other partners and activities carried out can be found on the project website: https://the-unteachableserasmus.blogspot.com and the web pages of the Faculty of Education and the Faculty of Biology and Environmental Sciences at the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw. Dr Artur Baranowski, an employee of the Faculty of Biology and Environmental Sciences, coordinates the Polish part of the project.

or educational institutions, but also by young learners educated in the academic environment and outside school/university. Project activities have become an inspiration for a broader discussion of the above issue, even during classes held at the Faculty of Education at the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University (in the winter semester 2019/2020) as part of the subject "Selected problems of modern labour pedagogy". Course participants answered the following questions in writing: Which of the activities of future pedagogues are important in terms of building a network of contacts and support? What forms of support do they use to build and develop social capital? The received, thorough responses of 65 people (often with examples and suggestions from respondents) became the basis for further analyses, among others, when working in open dialogues with selected teacher students, followed by a joint debate. It is also worth adding that the considerations of the aforementioned group of students were preceded by presentations: the essence and main goals of the implemented Erasmus+ project and the results of previous studies, mainly surveys[11].

At the outset, it should be emphasised that, despite the fact that students have noticed and stressed in their statements the importance of the issues raised (by providing relevant arguments, incidentally referring to e.g. the roles and tasks of modern teachers and their competencies), there were problems with differentiating specific actions or forms of support corresponding to research problems/ questions (at a very general level – which, according to the author of the text, could have been important when giving answers). When it comes to activities relevant from the point of view of building networks of relations and support, pedagogy students drew attention mostly to: opportunities for being in contact (during and after studies) with teachers and other specialists employed in institutions and organisations supporting pedagogues/teachers. This is enabled by, among others, student internships (contact with the tutor assigned by a given institution is valuable here), scientific conferences and university projects. One of those questioned pointed out to the importance of e.g. workshops and other educational and integrative initiatives prepared and conducted by students in favour of the academic community. Another respondent drew attention to the role of research conducted for the purpose of writing a thesis as an opportunity to establish professional contacts in given institutions, but also with the promoter and participants of the seminar group. However, these were only a few such opinions – written answers. On the other hand, students were eager to indicate issues (related to the analysed problem) which, in their opinion, can be more pronounced

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[11] Detailed data can be found on the project website (Results), in the document: Profiling students. Step 1.

during the classes and which may become the subject of the further university debates accompanying, among others academic seminars. These include:

–   ways of dealing with non-standard, difficult situations (not only didactic, but e.g. when working with students' parents/guardians), including institutional support;
–   care for the psychophysical health of teachers (promotion of a healthy life-style, work-life balance approach, prevention of professional burnout);
–   opportunities to develop students'/pupils' cooperative competencies and motivate them to actively participate e.g. in school life and the local community;
–   innovative teaching and learning methods (the problems also raised in the "The Unteachables" project). According to one of the respondents, "a network of contacts enables multiple access to innovative solutions that can be used at work. [...] it allows one to share knowledge, experience and jointly develop solutions used in school practice."

The presented texts, in the first part of the article, analysing the changes in methods of learning, also point out the value of modern teachers' competencies (described in the context of the project in the article: A. Kulpa-Puczyńska *Features of 'New' Students and The Potential of Future Teachers…*), including the need for continuous improvement and the ability to build professional confidence. How do pedagogy students build or develop their social capital? Social capital is understood as the potential associated with the social relations of the individual, which are a source of information and professional influences, as well as proactive and entrepreneurial behaviour (Cybal-Michalska, 2013; Growiec, 2011; Thornton & Flynn, 2003). Social capital is also related to the ways of using various networks of relations, e.g. a network developed by a university[12]. It should be emphasised that the problem was also discussed in view of the new generation[13] (a generation of complex relations with the Internet and mobile devices) and its

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[12] Research on social capital in Poland, including the social capital at universities, was carried out, among others, by Professor M. Dudzikowa with the team of the Faculty of Educational Studies at the Adam Mickiewicz University. Publications of these researchers include: M. Dudzikowa, S. Jaskulska, R. Wawrzyniak-Beszterda et al. (2012). *Jednostkowe i zbiorowe oblicza kapitału społecznego w uniwersytecie. Studenci o swoim studiowaniu.* [*Individual and collective faces of social capital at the university. Students about their studying*]. Cracow: Oficyna Wydawnicza Impuls; M. Dudzikowa, E. Bochno, M. Marciniak (2013). *Oblicza kapitału społecznego uniwersytetu. Diagnoza – interpretacje – konteksty* [*Faces of social capital at the university. Diagnosis – interpretations – contexts*]. Vol. 4. Cracow: Oficyna Wydawnicza IMPULS.

[13] Described, among others, with the English words: *connect*, *communicate*, *change* and other concepts that expose the social characteristics of young people. After: M. Hardey (2011). Generation C: content, creation, connections and choice, *International Journal of Market Research*, 53, 6, 749–770.

concepts about the future and features, which include a search for new methods and tools for learning and working, as well as readiness to cooperate in various fields, both in the physical and digital world (Hatalska, 2019; Leppert, 2014; Melosik, 2013; Tapscott, 2009; Twenge, 2019).

"Schools and systems that foster highly collaborative practices and purposefully build social capital are places where new pedagogies thrive" (Fullan & Langworthy, 2014, p. 53). What types of support are used by pedagogues, teachers to build, among others, contact and cooperation networks? Obviously, most young people use modern technologies for this purpose – mainly via social media, looking for inspiration on discussion forums, information portals, and secondly, they use it to create or join the activity of interest or support groups (e.g. for early school education teachers) by contacting a particular expert directly (also from abroad) or running a blog. Students also appreciate personal meetings and conversations with their peers (working in a group or learning together) and with experienced professional colleagues (who, according to the respondents, may further become their mentors), e.g. during conferences, specialist courses, postgraduate studies, open lectures, internships, volunteer work or participation in support groups for educators. They also constitute an opportunity to find a job or a cooperation partner. In addition, teachers-mentors not only share their professional contacts, but also help build a professional workshop. This may be complemented by the following statements of the respondents: "each of these individual things plays a great role in improving the ability of future teachers to share knowledge with their students" and "as a teacher, you should try to share your experience, tools and good practices with others, when meeting experts". Unfortunately, only few students make new social contacts – also with a view of their future professional work – participating in the Erasmus+ programme. It is possible that one of the respondents drew attention to a probable reason justifying her resignation from the possibility to study or take part in an internship abroad: "[…] in order to decide to participate in a project like Erasmus, a student must be brave and have high confidence in himself and his skills." Students also strengthen their social capital by working during their studies – "changing jobs or working in different institutions gives the opportunity to build networks and support in different areas." Finally, it is worth quoting one more opinion: "The more contacts we have, the more progress we make, [...] because the people we meet in our lives bring us new experiences." Therefore, we can hope that the surveyed young people will take advantage of the various possibilities of building the social capital described above.

Conclusions

Taking into account the content of the first part of the article, it is also worth paying attention to learning techniques (including those that do not require the use of advanced technologies) and their usefulness in various environments and educational situations. Unfortunately, students often do not have the necessary knowledge regarding effective learning strategies and techniques (see, among others, Black, Allen, 2019; Dunlosky, Rawson et al., 2013). This was also demonstrated by the results of research (its analysis), which was conducted, for example, by the Polish team as part of the "The Unteachables" project. One of its goals (and related problems) is to investigate to what extent the growing percentage of young reluctant learners can be developed into a group of involved students who are ready to co-decide on educational goals and methods.

In addition, the role and tasks of teachers – who should focus, among others, on building and strengthening relationships in education (with learners, their families, other school staff), as well as inspiring and supporting students in implementing the material – have changed; hence the need to recognise specific problems, needs and expectations of all educational partners. This requires appropriate competencies, e.g. communication, expressed, among others, in the ability to define and interpret various situations in education, as well as to "respond" to them. This text is also an attempt to highlight such threads as: 1. greater flexibility of interactive learning methods (e.g. in relation to the place and organisation of learning), flexibility that is expected by young learners; 2. benefits and costs of remote cooperation (as well as remote learning), its forms and conditions. Analysis of the above problems, among others, from the perspective of people involved in the implementation of the "The Unteachables" project, which serves as an example of cooperation between various educational environments.

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