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INTERCULTURAL LEARNING IN EDUCATION THROUGH INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES: A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY IN GERMANY AND TURKEY

ÇIĞDEM BOZDAĞ*

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* Mercator-IPC Fellow 2013/2014.
Assistant Professor at Kadir Has University.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Developing a critical cultural awareness becomes one of the key competences in a world of increasing connections between different cultures and different places. Education, as discussed within the framework of approaches to intercultural education, can contribute to the development of such a competence. This study scrutinizes the potentials of information and communication technologies (ICTs) for contributing to intercultural education and focuses particularly on online exchange projects in schools and their contribution to a better intercultural understanding. This report is based on a comparative study that focuses on online exchange projects in Germany and Turkey by analyzing the eTwinning platform for intercultural collaboration between schools in Europe. This exploratory, qualitative study included interviews with teachers, coordinators of the network and students as well as participatory observations in the classroom and beyond. The key findings, which will be further discussed within the report, are summarized briefly below:

PROMISES OF ONLINE INTERCULTURAL EXCHANGE PROJECTS

- The *low budget* of online exchange projects enables a wider range of schools, teachers and students with limited financial resources to participate in intercultural exchange.
- Online projects allow students and teachers *access to other cultures,* which can diminish the fear of meeting a "foreigner" and provide the basis for a deeper intercultural exchange afterwards.
- The online intercultural exchange projects offer *new teaching methods* for students as well as project-centered learning and peer learning.
- During online exchange projects, teachers find the opportunity to *exchange their teaching methods* and improve their intercultural competency skills.
- Teachers and students have the opportunity to *improve their media literacy skills* through these web-based exchange projects.
- The online exchange can be a good tool for the *preparation of physical exchange projects* and also for long-lasting collaboration between the partners.

CHALLENGES FOR INTERCULTURAL LEARNING THROUGH ICTs

- Traditional *teacher-centered* projects may cause teachers to resist adapting student-centered projects, which would allow students to participate directly in online intercultural exchange.
- Some of the teachers and students have *an essentialist perception of culture* in their minds that might lead to emphasizing differences and essentializing cultures in online intercultural exchanges.
- Teachers play a key role in the organization of online intercultural exchange projects; however, there are not enough incentives to encourage or reward their good work.
- Students and teachers might have a diverging view on what the outcomes and benefits of the online intercultural exchanges are.
- The *limited foreign language competence* of teachers and students may limit meaningful intercultural exchange through the internet.
- The *inequalities and deficits in the technical in-*

frastructure in terms of computers, internet connection and other digital devices continue to be a hindrance for online school projects.

- *Lack of media literacy skills* of students and teachers, especially in relation to digital media, is another challenge for online exchange projects in schools.
- *Socio-economic inequalities* generally bring along challenges for creating a suitable environment in which intercultural learning can take place online or offline.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Teachers as well as the students should be *better prepared for online intercultural exchanges* and be informed about the dynamics of intercultural communication.
- *More dual programs that support the combination of online exchange and physical exchange projects* can be fruitful for long-lasting and effective intercultural learning.
- For the better integration of ICTs in school curricula, *new pedagogical methods* should be introduced that emphasize student-centered learning and peer-learning.
- The *technical infrastructures of schools should be improved* in order to provide schools with equal means of participating in online intercultural networks.
- *More support and rewarding mechanisms for teachers* should be introduced in order to increase teachers' motivation for engaging in online intercultural exchange projects.

"I believe that it is not really a question of media (technologies), but of meeting each other. And the stereotypes, they function only as long as one does not know much about a country. It doesn't matter if it is England or Turkey, we all have a picture of other countries and their citizens. And it is suddenly a different story, when you get to know more people and say, ok maybe there is some truth to the stereotype, but it is not all true and this is the exciting part. And because you cannot meet all people in person, eTwinning is a very nice thing" (Interview Jörn,[1] Germany).

1 Names of the interviewees are changed in order to provide them anonymity.

INTRODUCTION

Although we live in a world of increasing "connectivity"[2] between distant places and diverse cultures, our perception of each other is still marked by prejudices, stereotypes and intolerance. Finding an ideal way for peaceful living together with cultural differences is one of the most essential topics that social sciences deal with today. Education can be the key to this matter by developing students' intercultural skills in the broadest sense, by making them familiar with diverse cultures and cultural complexities, and by helping them to understand and accept cultural differences. Intercultural education offers a framework to discuss how education can offer students of diverse backgrounds an equal chance to access quality education and how it can foster mutual understanding between people of different backgrounds and give them access to other cultures.[3] Within this framework, the role of information and communication technologies (ICT) for intercultural learning is gaining relevance due to the increasing importance of digital technologies in our contemporary societies. ICTs can contribute to intercultural education in various ways, and one of these ways is to use these digital communication technologies for online exchange between students and teachers in different places.

Until recently, having access to other cultures and enabling first-hand experiences of intercultural exchange were important topics in intercultural education. Access to cultures and first-hand experience were often gained through student mobility programs. For a long time, these programs were the major form of intercultural exchange in educational contexts. However, these types of physical mobility projects are costly and, therefore, not available in all schools and for all students. Online communication technologies offer a chance to provide a communication space for intercultural encounters not through physical but through a so-called virtual mobility[4]. Through the use of media technologies in schools, teachers and students can participate in intercultural networks and gain valuable intercultural communication experiences. Thus, the integration of media technologies in schools contributes to schools' connectivity on the one hand and to the development of certain soft skills that are necessary in the age of globalization on the other. Skype in the Classroom, Exchange 2.0., Global Teenager Project, Global Nomads and eTwinning are examples of international projects that aim to build intercultural networks between schools in different regions.

This study discusses the potential of digital media technologies to contribute to an online exchange between teachers and students of different cultural backgrounds and the potential of increasing their mutual understanding towards each other by looking at the case of eTwinning in Germany and Turkey. The discussions are based on a qualitative, comparative study, which includes participatory observations, qualitative interviews with teachers, expert interviews with the coordinators and focus-group interviews with the students.

In order to qualify my research, a list of factors that define the quality of intercultural exchange has been identified. These factors, in a sense, analyze the communication space for intercultural interaction and lead to the deconstruction of prejudices and stereotypes. Different factors that play a role in the success of an online exchange are grouped under

2 Tomlinson 2003, 269.

3 Auernheimer 2004, 22; O'Dowd 2003, 120; Stier 2006, 7.

4 See for example Schwartz et al. 2003 ; O'Dowd 2007; Helm et al. 2012.

the categories of school environment, institutional framework, teachers, students, and project design.

The report starts with a brief discussion of the concepts of intercultural education and online exchange. Then, the research design and results of the case study will be presented with a discussion of promises and challenges of online exchange projects in relation to intercultural learning. The paper will be concluded with recommendations for policymakers and organizers of such online exchange programs.

INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION AS A NORMATIVE FRAMEWORK

The role of education for increasing mutual understanding between people of different cultural backgrounds has been discussed widely in education studies, especially within the discussion on approaches to intercultural education.[5] The concept of intercultural education[6] sets a normative framework to discuss the relationship between diversity and education. It goes beyond the discussion of increasing mutual understanding as it argues that the education system must offer equal opportunities to people with diverse cultural backgrounds.

Although various authors and institutions define intercultural education differently, some commonly emphasized aspects can be summarized as follows. First of all, intercultural education should offer students and teachers of diverse cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds equal chance to participate in the education system.[7] Secondly, it should prepare the students for a world in which they will be continuously confronted with cultural differences, develop their respect and knowledge about other cultures, and enhance student's understanding of the dynamics of intercultural interactions.[8] Thirdly, in an intercultural education system, cultural differences should not be seen as a threat to society but rather as a possible enrichment.[9] Fourthly, intercultural education should also draw attention to cultural and historical conflicts that are not very easy to negotiate.[10] Last but not least, intercultural education should provide students and teachers access to other cultures because certain intercultural skills can only be learned through "exposure, first-hand experience and reflection."[11]

Looking at these different aspects of intercultural education, we can conclude that intercultural communication is central to many of these points that support a student's preparation for the globalizing world. Through intercultural communication, teachers and students are being exposed to cultural differences, which is a crucial experience for developing a "critical cultural awareness" about one's own culture and other cultures through self-reflection.[12] This is also a crucial factor in the deconstruction of generalizations about each other and stereotypes.[13] Therefore, intercultural communication networks should be part of an intercultural education that aims to prepare students for a world that is marked by cultural diversity and processes

5 Especially in the USA and Canada, similar discussions about the education's role in culturally diverse society have been carried out in the framework of the approach of multicultural education. In Europe, however, intercultural education is rather more widely used and the term focuses more on cultures' interactions with each other and the complexity of these interactions (Banks 2009, 14).

6 Although the term "intercultural education" is today one of the widely accepted terms for the discussion on cultural differences and the education system, it is also important to be aware of the transcultural aspects of communication that emerge through cultural hybridization processes through migration movements among other factors (Welsch 1999, 3–5; Robins 2006, 20–25; Bozdag and Möller 2015, 2–3). Also, in the case of intercultural networking between schools, transculturality can be an important aspect since there are students and teachers with migration backgrounds from many countries. These can also play a mediating role in processes of intercultural communication through their hybrid cultural orientations. Furthermore, we can speak of various aspects of culture that go beyond the borders of nation states—for example, political movements, popular culture, etc. These make it a necessity in today's world not only to look at intercultural but also transcultural aspects when we are analysing cultures and cultural differences.

7 Auernheimer 2004, 22

8 Stier 2006, 5–7.

9 O'Dowd 2003, 120.

10 Coulby 2006, 250.

11 Stier 2006, 7.

12 Byram 2000, 2.

13 Bennett 1998, 3–5.

of globalization.[14] However, being confronted with people of diverse cultural backgrounds is not enough to deconstruct prejudices and develop mutual understanding between the involved parties.[15] In order to expect such outcomes from intercultural communication, an open attitude towards others is necessary for both parties.[16] This openness towards other cultures is part of the "intercultural competence" of the individuals. According to Michael Byram, intercultural competence is linked to the *attitudes* of people towards other cultures, showing curiosity and readiness to change their perceptions about themselves and others, *knowledge* about other social groups, their beliefs, practices as well as about social interactions, *skills of interpreting and relating* to documents and events from another culture, *skills of discovery and interaction* for acquiring knowledge about culture and cultural practices as well as the ability to use this knowledge in real-time interactions, and last but not least, a critical cultural awareness referring to the ability to evaluate both one's own and another's culture and country critically.[17]

Today, intercultural encounters in schools take place not only through "physical mobility" but also through "virtual mobility" by using digital communication technologies. The intercultural networks that are built by digital media can be seen as "contact zones" in which people of different backgrounds come together.[18] Intercultural networks are defined here in a broad sense, referring to connections between people, institutions or countries that are perceived as parts of different cultures. Through digital communication technologies, intercultural communication between students and teachers in different countries becomes possible even in schools, where resources for physical mobility projects are not available or are limited. Media technologies can play an equalizing role in this sense by giving more disadvantaged schools, teachers and students a chance to be involved in international networks around the globe.

14 Grant and Brueck 2011, 4; Karakasoglu and Bandorski, 2008, 2.

15 Ruffino 2015.

16 O'Dowd 2003, 120.

17 Byram 2000, 2.

18 Pratt 1991, 33.

ICTs TO FOSTER INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCY IN EDUCATION?

Media use in schools was already an important subject for academic research before the emergence of digital media. However, through rapidly developing new media technologies in the last decades, the integration of information and communication technologies into education has moved from the periphery of academic research and education policies to the center.[19] Looking at the literature on schools and digital media, two core issues can be identified. Firstly, there is a large body of research on media literacy, how it can be defined in the age of digital media, and how its education can be integrated in school curriculum.[20] The second issue is the optimization of learning and teaching processes through digital media.[21] This discussion includes the improvement of teaching and learning experiences by the means of ICT and also the inclusion of those who are disadvantaged in terms of access to media. The issue of e-learning or distance learning can also be considered in this second framework.

Despite the increasing interest in the use of media technologies in schools, the issue of the relationship between ICTs, globalization of schools, and intercultural networks remains an understudied issue in the field of communication and media studies. There is some other research that focuses on the role of different digital media for intercultural dialogue more generally—for example, through digital games[22] or through blogs and podcasts.[23] The role of ICTs in intercultural learning is especially discussed in the framework of English or foreign language education.[24] There are several studies in this field on the role of online intercultural exchange between teachers for the improvement of teaching methods,[25] problems faced during online exchange,[26] the development of intercultural communicative competence through the use of ICTs in foreign language education,[27] the importance of task design in these types of intercultural exchanges,[28] and the role of online exchange for increasing the quality of teaching in higher education.[29]

There are also various practical projects that aim to increase intercultural dialogue between students through web technologies such as the Eurokid project,[30] which raised awareness about anti-racism education, or the diverCities project,[31] which was supported by UNESCO to develop a web 2.0 tool to increase intercultural dialogue among diverse cities round the world. Global Nomads, Global Teenager Project and iEarn USA are other examples of projects that aim to foster connected intercultural learning in educational contexts. eTwinning is also a similar network that connects schools in Europe. This program will be discussed in more detail in the next section. Overall, the increasing number of such projects can be seen as a clear sign of increasing interest in the issue.

19 Austin and Hunter 2013, 178

20 See for example Livingstone 2004; Jenkins 2006; Buckingham 2007

21 see for example Abbott et al. 2005; Clark and Mayer 2011; Drummer 2011; Holmes 2013

22 Bansal 2009.

23 Lee 2009, 425.

24 see for an overview O'Dowd 2007.

25 Kamplys et al. 2012.

26 O'Dowd and Ritter 2006.

27 O'Dowd 2008.

28 O'Dowd & Waire 2009.

29 Helm et al. 2012 .

30 see Gaine et al. 2003.

31 Ang and Pothen 2009.

Although all of these different research and practical projects emphasize various aspects of intercultural learning, the role of media communication in these mediated intercultural learning processes is often taken for granted. The issue of access to media technologies and the internet is discussed in several papers, but the discussion often does not go beyond questions of access. However, there are other aspects that are related to media communication and need to be considered in order to understand how media technologies can be used in schools to develop intercultural telecollaborative projects around the world. For example, media literacy is a crucial topic, which is defined as "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create messages across a variety of contexts."[32] With the developments in media technologies, the term has gained a new angle and now includes the "new media skills."[33] These skills are not to be thought of in relation to individuals' competencies, but of course, we also need to consider the unequal power relations and inequalities in the social and cultural contexts in which media literacy is developed.[34] Media literacy of the involved parts influences different mediated communication situations, as in the case of online exchange, but it is an often-neglected aspect in education studies. Therefore, this research aims to adapt an interdisciplinary stance that combines the experience of education studies, especially foreign language education, and experts in communication and media technologies in order to understand how media technologies and media literacy influence online exchanges and online intercultural learning situations.

32 Aufderheide 1993.

33 Jenkins et al. 2006.

34 Livingstone 2004, 8; see also Buckingham 2007, 43.

THE CASE STUDY, RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

This case study aims to understand how web-based school projects contribute to an intercultural understanding among teachers and students by analyzing school projects in Germany and Turkey. These two countries were chosen as comparative cases because of the strong relationship between the two countries through economic ties and decades of Turkish immigrants living in Germany. Despite this strong connection, stereotypes and prejudices have had an impact on both countries' perceptions of each other. The aim of this study was to understand if online exchanges contribute to a better mutual understanding between members of the two countries and to the deconstruction of prejudices. For the purposes of this study, the eTwinning case was chosen as an example of a network that aims to connect schools, teachers and students in different countries through online exchange projects. It is the most used platform for communicative mobility projects in both Germany and Turkey.

The research was designed as a qualitative and exploratory project that aims to understand the perspectives of different actors who are involved in online exchange networks in the field of education. First, an eTwinning project between Germany and Turkey was chosen from amongst the few projects that were listed between Germany and Turkey on the eTwinning website.[35] The chosen project was carried out using videoconferencing between two 7th grader classrooms (13-14 years old), one a secondary state school in a small city in Bavaria and another a secondary state school in a small city in the Marmara region, that were conducting joint English lessons. Project tasks mainly included practices in vocabulary training and speaking. This project was analyzed as an in-depth case study by conducting visits to each of the two schools, participatory observations, qualitative interviews with the coordinating teachers, and focus group interviews with the students.

In addition, the author visited eTwinning meetings in both Turkey and Germany for participatory observation and interviewed 12 teachers in Turkey and 5 teachers in Germany about their engagement in the network and their projects and experience with online exchange. Visual materials and project descriptions about the interviewees' projects were also collected as additional materials. Besides the teachers, local and national coordinators of the eTwinning program were also interviewed as experts (3 in Turkey and 2 in Germany).

Material collection continued from December 2013 until May 2014. The recorded interviews were transcribed, and the collected materials were coded according to the principles of open coding.[36] The developed codes were organized around more general categories that will help to compare and contrast the different cases that will be presented in the next sections.

35 There were several more projects that involved partners from multiple countries including Turkey and Germany. However, these projects were not preferred as the study aimed to focus on the singular relationship between participants from Turkey and Germany.

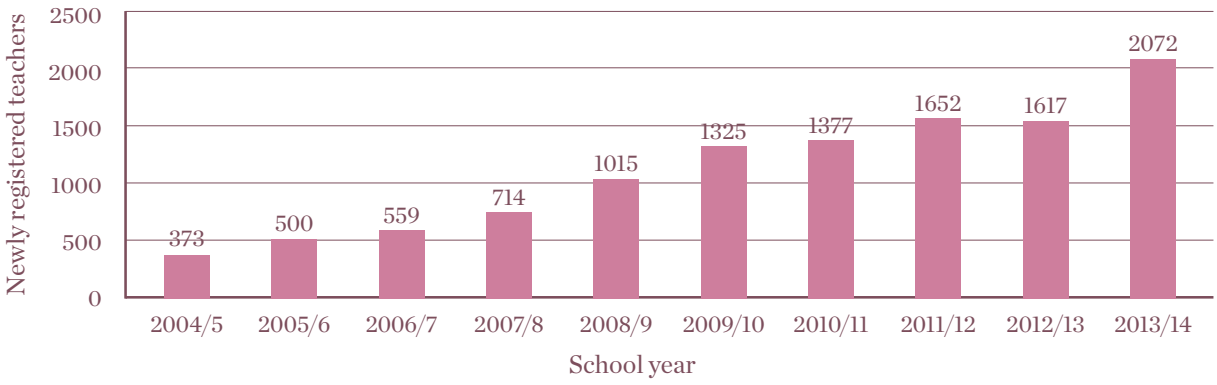
36 Corbin and Strauss 1990, 12.

eTWINNING NETWORK IN GERMANY AND TURKEY

eTwinning defines itself as "the community for schools in Europe, the free and safe platform for teachers to connect, develop collaborative projects and share ideas in Europe.[37]" It was built in 2005 as part of the e-learning program by the EU, and since 2007, it is part of the Lifelong Learning Program. eTwinning network uses the Twinspace platform for communication among teachers and within projects. Twinspace was re-launched twice after its start in order to include Web 2.0 functions and to strengthen the social networking aspects. Within the platform, teachers and students have a separate space for themselves and a shared space for the ongoing projects where the involved schools have access to and can upload the documents, videos, presentations, and blog articles that they prepare within their joint projects. The platform is also supported by various organizational and educational means. There are regular conferences, workshops, and trainings at the regional, national, and European level. Moreover, there are coordinators and support services in each country, again in regional and national levels, and these offer help to teachers who are willing to conduct international projects with other schools.

Germany has been a part of the eTwinning network since 2005. Today, there are over 12,000 registered teachers, over 6,000 registered schools, and over 5,400 ongoing projects between Germany and other eTwinning member countries. The national support service is based in the pedagogical exchange service (PAD, "Pädagogischer Austauschdienst") within the education ministry in Germany. There are around six people who work full time on the organization of teacher training and workshops and the maintenance of the network. Besides the full-time staff, there are regional eTwinning coordinators in each federal state, voluntary ambassadors, and teachers who carry out successful projects and participate in teacher trainings and online discussions to share their experiences. The number of registered eTwinnings teachers from Germany has increased over 500% since 2004/5 (see table 1).

Figure 1: Number of registered eTwinnings teachers in Germany (2004-2014)[38]



37 http://www.etwinning.net/en/pub/index.htm (accessed December 18, 2014).

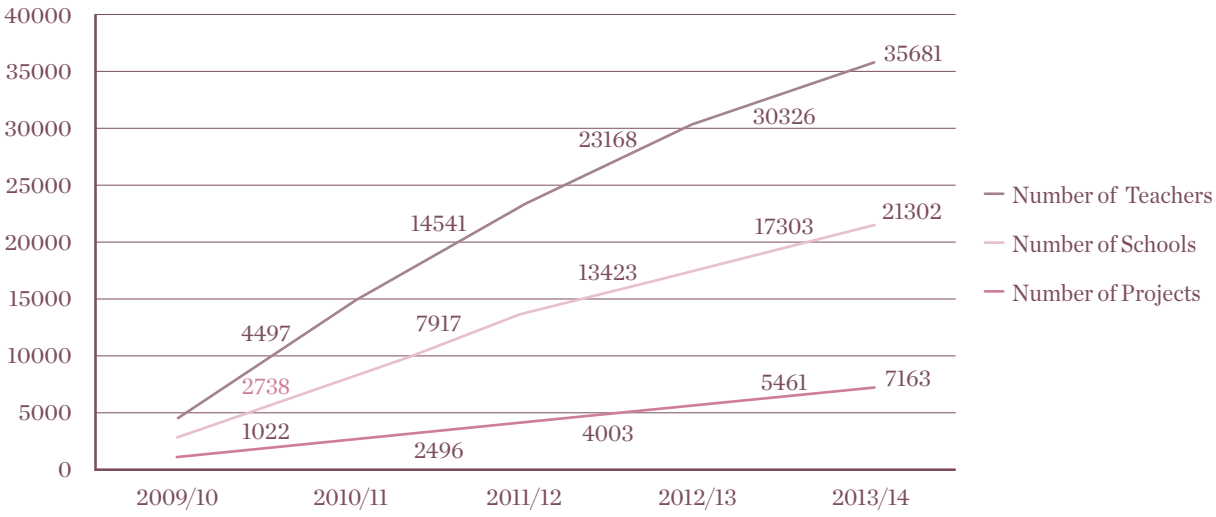
38 The numbers in Table 1 and Table 2 are provided kindly by the national coordinators of the eTwinning program in Germany and Turkey.

Turkey became part of the eTwinning network in 2009. In October 2013, over 25,000 schools, 42,000 teachers, and around 7,900 projects were registered with the network. Turkey is the country with the highest number of registered eTwinning schools in Europe. These high numbers show that there is high interest among Turkish schools in being involved in such projects. Similar to Germany, there is an increasing trend in the number of registered schools, teachers, and projects in the last five years (see table 2).

Although Germany and Turkey each conduct over two thousand eTwinnings projects per year, the number of eTwinnings projects organized exclusively between these two countries is relatively small. Within the eTwinnings platform, there is the possibility of searching for projects by using keywords.

Such a search shows that there are only a few online exchange projects between the two countries. Through an analysis of the following case study, I will uncover some of the reasons for this as I look into both the promises and challenges of online exchange projects.[39]

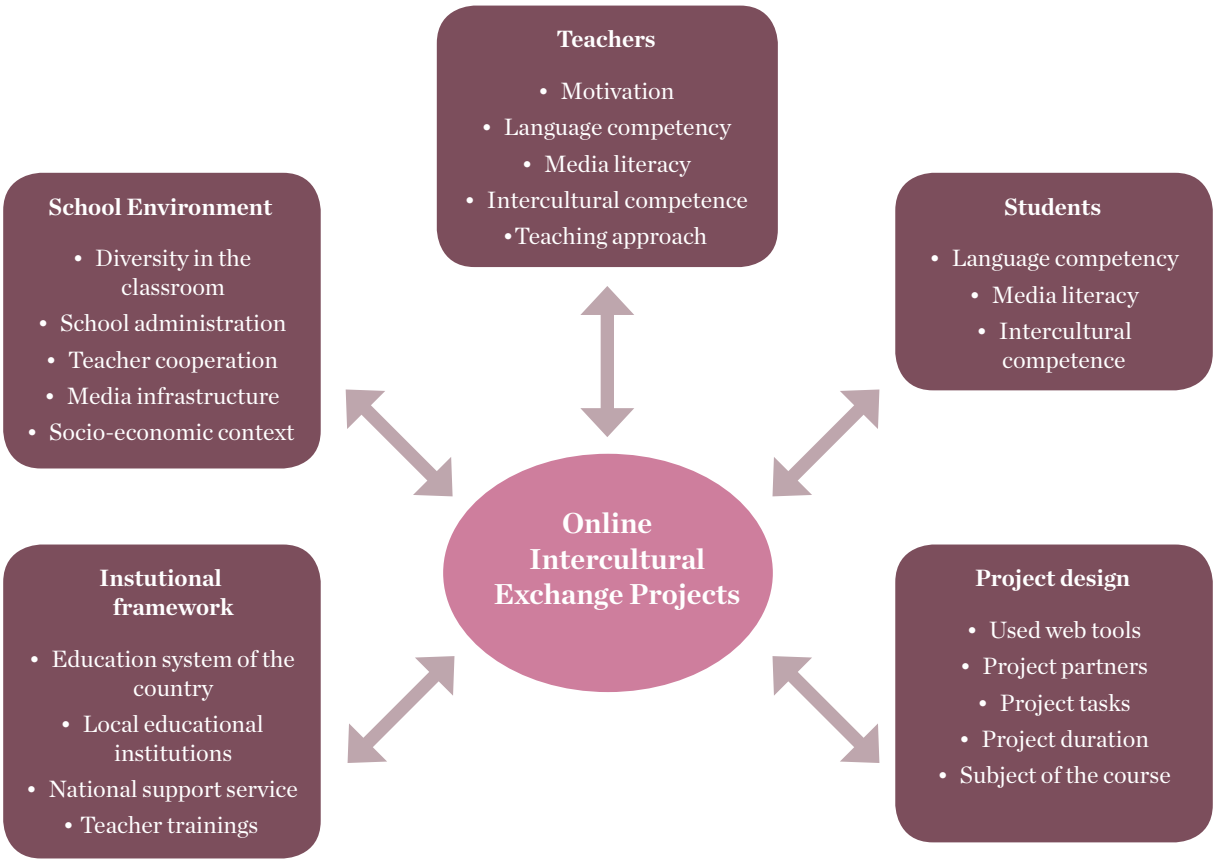
Figure 2: Number of registered teachers, schools, projects in Turkey (2009-2013)



39 The numbers in Table 1 and Table 2 are provided kindly by the national coordinators of the eTwinning program in Germany and Turkey.

For the purpose of this case study, a multi-level analysis of a range of materials collected throughout the study was carried out in order to locate different factors that play a role in the quality of web-based intercultural exchange. These factors can be analyzed under the categories of institutional framework, school environment, teachers, students and project design as can be seen in figure 3. These aspects will be presented in the following sections with examples from the field.

Figure 3: "Quality factors for online exchange projects"



INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

One of the most important factors that has influenced the processes of online exchange is the general institutional framework of the *education system of the country*. This factor defines the school curricula and sets limits within the content of exchange projects. The decision-making mechanisms in the education system as well as the organization of educational actors vary among different countries. For example, in Turkey the system is quite centralized, and in the case of eTwinning, the main organization and decision-making takes place in the educational ministry in Ankara. In comparison to Turkey, Germany has a much more decentralized education system that is regulated through the federal states. Each state has a different educational system into which eTwinning is integrated in different ways.

In each member country eTwinning is coordinated by a *national support service* (NSS) team, which consists of 6 to 10 full-time staff members. The coordinators play an important role in the support and evaluation of ongoing projects, in making the network visible, and also in organizing teacher-training programs. NSS in different countries uses different web tools to communicate with the teachers. For example, the Turkish NSS uses a Facebook group for different topics about eTwinning. Through this group, teachers have a space to post questions and learn from each other: for example, if they have questions about certain functions of Twinspace.

The organization and available financial resources of *local educational institutions* can also have an effect on online exchange projects. Some of the German and Turkish interviewees stated that they were encouraged by staff members of local educational institutions to initiate an eTwinning project in the beginning. Furthermore, the local coordinators of the eTwinning network are also embedded in the local educational institutions. The local coordinators are the administrators who carry out the decisions of the NSS on the local level by having direct contact with the teachers. Indeed, they are very important for making the network visible to teachers and supporting them when they face problems.

Both the NSS and the local educational institutions play an important role in the organization of *teacher training workshops* about eTwinning. The training programs can be national or international. Besides the trainings, there are also contact seminars, which aim to bring teachers from specific countries together in order to initiate new projects. These trainings and contact seminars are very important for any network that aims to foster online exchange in schools. There are also some eTwinning events at the European level. These take place in different countries and are organized in order to provide teacher training in specific subjects and to reward teachers for their success in the classroom. The Turkish NSS coordinator indicated that sending successful teachers to trainings in different countries is a reward in itself for many teachers who cannot afford to go abroad themselves.



SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

Diversity within the school, the relationship between the school administration, teachers, and students, as well as the financial resources and the media infrastructure of the school are also factors that influence the success of the web-based intercultural projects.

Both the schools in Turkey as well as the schools in Germany face challenges due to *cultural diversity in their classrooms*. Turkey is a country that is marked by internal religious, ethnic and cultural differences. This diversity is especially visible in schools in western cities in which the effects of internal migration are widely visible. In Germany, on the other hand, diversity is the product of decades of international migration. However, despite the dynamics of internal or external migration, the cultural diversity in the two countries does not necessarily lead to a better intercultural understanding of the students and teachers within the classroom as it will be discussed in the next sections..

Another important quality factor in the framework of school environment is the character of the relationships between the *school administration* and the teachers who carry out the online exchange project. There were different cases among the interviewees. Whereas in some cases school administration was very supportive and even motivated the teachers to initiate a project, in other cases school administration were actively hindering the teachers from starting a project. The administrative staff in the school can play a key role in transforming online projects into physical exchange projects by organizing financial resources.

Teacher cooperation within the school environment is another factor that can improve online exchange projects. If there is a cooperative and friendly relationship among the school staff, teachers learn about the different possibilities of online exchange from their colleagues or are inspired by each other's projects. There is also an exchange among the teachers about media literacy and technical problems faced during the projects. In some cases, there are joint projects initiated by two or more teachers in the same school. This is especially helpful in developing interdisciplinary projects and also in including teachers with limited foreign language skills into online exchanges.

Media infrastructure of the schools, which refers to diverse technical equipment set up in schools such as computers, screens, projectors, cameras etc., the Internet connection, as well as the available spaces in which to use these different media technologies, is very important for online exchange projects since the communication between exchange partners is mediated through this equipment. Although in both countries different projects have been developed (such as the Fatih project or the Schulen an Netz-Project) in order to improve the media infrastructure of schools, there are still big differences between schools in terms of media infrastructure.[40] Lack of technical equipment or problems with the technical infrastructure can decrease the motivation of the project participants and hinder them from implementing certain project tasks. For example, in the analyzed case study, the participants experienced Internet connection problems, and some days half of the joint class hour was spent on fixing these problems. The interviewed students indicated that at these moments the project started to get boring for them and they lost interest.

The *socioeconomic context of the school,* in relation to the financial resources of the school and the socio-economic background of the local community and the students, is also crucial in terms of available resources for introducing intercultural exchange projects and for organizing physical exchanges. Schools are not only different in terms of media infrastructure but also in relation to other

40 Eurydice 2012, 10.

infrastructure such as laboratories and classrooms. These differences might be striking to the students during an online or physical exchange when they see that the other students are being educated in a much more developed environment. Such a reaction was explained by one of the teachers from Diyarbakır on the basis of her project experience with a French school. Furthermore, exchanges might also reveal larger socio-economic differences between the students themselves within different countries. When these differences are too big, the exchange might be even demotivate the disadvantaged students to participate in intercultural learning.

TEACHERS

Online exchange projects are still not integrated into school curricula in most countries; they are mainly initiated by the teachers on a voluntary basis. Therefore, the *motivation of the teachers* is probably the most important factor for the design, content and sustainability of the projects. Most of the interviewees indicated that they started eTwinning projects as they were searching for new teaching methods and ways to integrate new media technologies into the classroom. The experienced teachers stated in their interviews that their motivation increased as they had more experience with eTwinning projects. Only in some cases the teachers indicated that their motivation to initiate new projects decreased throughout time. This might partially be due to negative experiences during the previous projects and also due to problems faced because of differences in work and school culture.

Further, it is not only about the motivation of the teachers but also about the competencies that teachers need to possess in order to conduct online exchange projects. *Language competency* is one of these as communication plays an essential role within the projects. Most of the eTwinning projects are conducted in English, which is not the native language of many European teachers who are carrying out international projects. On the one hand, this makes a certain level of proficiency in foreign languages a prerequisite for initiating projects. Especially in Turkey, teachers, beyond those specifically teaching English language courses, are not often fluent in a second language. Because of this, eTwinning projects are mainly carried out by foreign-language teachers. On the other hand, despite the level of English, some teachers see exchange projects as a chance to build on their own language competencies. For example, a science teacher from Turkey who was interviewed during the project stated that she could improve her English competency during the online exchange by practicing it through different means. This learning opportunity can provide further motivation for teachers to continue their exchange.

Since online exchange requires basic online skills to communicate with the project partners, *media literacy skills* also play a role in eTwinning projects. These include skills to "access, analyze, evaluate, create and participate with messages in a variety of forms."[41] In order to design projects that foster an exchange between students who are in distant places, the teachers should be able to employ different digital tools. This is also important for communication between the teachers themselves. In return, online exchange projects can also be a motivating factor for improving media literacy skills. Some of the interviewed teachers indicated that they became aware of many digital learning tools that they can use in their classrooms because of the eTwinning projects.

Besides language competencies and digital skills, teachers should also bring a certain level of *intercultural competency* to the projects in order to design and conduct projects that can help to provide students with a meaningful intercultural

41 Aufderheide 1993, 6.

experience during the project. These skills can also be improved throughout the project, however, the teachers should be aware of the dynamic nature and complexity of the concept of culture, be open towards cultural differences, and be prepared to question his or her assumptions and prejudices about other cultures. In practice, however, many teachers have quite an essentialist idea of culture in their minds; they view culture as something bounded and based on homogeneous, shared values and practices. In such a case, they tend to motivate students to compare cultures and focus on differences, ignoring aspects that might be shared transculturally. But there are also other examples in which teachers articulate a more cosmopolitan orientation:

> *"I think that everybody should become aware of what we call world citizenship. What we do is actually about how to become a world citizen. Everybody is same at the end, German or French, we are not very different. If we say, then we are all human beings, we have similar needs. In order to deconstruct prejudices and live in a more peaceful World, we are doing such a Project so that the students see that the other side is not very different than us." (Interview Osman, Turkey)*

The teachers' standpoint and attitude towards other cultures have an enormous influence on the projects. However, even in cases in which the teachers already have an open attitude towards cultural differences, they need to be trained about how to practice intercultural education as well as about methods on how to prepare students for an intercultural exchange. Although there are numerous training programs offered by the national coordinating teams of the eTwinning program, the topic of intercultural educations seems to be only a small part of these trainings.

STUDENTS

Although teachers are often the initiators of online exchange projects, *the motivation of the students* is also very important for the success of the projects in terms of having an enriching intercultural exchange. Students' motivation depends on various factors such as their socio-economic background, the parents' education level, their interest in intercultural networks and foreign language learning, and the design of the project and the possibilities of participation. Students expect to be able to be an active part of the projects and communicate with the project partners directly. Therefore, teacher-centered projects fail to engage the students in online exchanges. Technical problems faced during the project can also be demotivating for the participating students.

The online exchange through eTwinning is often carried out in foreign language courses. Although the students are learning foreign languages, a certain level of *foreign language competence* is necessary for a meaningful intercultural exchange so that they can understand the other part and express themselves in return. In cases where the students have more advanced language skills, the exchange between the students can go deeper and include, for example, discussions about favorite books, music, or hobbies and also continue after the projects through different online social networks. Even in the case of limited foreign language competence, some of the students may look for other ways to express themselves such as by asking family members for help or using online translation tools. Some of the teachers indicated that students' motivation to improve their foreign language skills increased after being involved in eTwinning projects.

Media literacy skills are also important for the students to be able to carry out project tasks that include media communication (filming and editing

videos, creating online content, searching information etc.). Online exchange offers them a chance to use media technologies and develop these skills during the project. Especially in urban schools, students often are equipped with a good level of digital skills; in some cases, they even assist their teachers with certain tasks. However, as other research shows, digital media skills should not be taken for granted in the case of young people,[42] and they are important factors to consider for the success of online exchange projects.

Besides language and media literacy skills, the *intercultural competency* of the students is a factor that plays a significant role in the project. Students' attitudes toward other cultures and their openness for intercultural learning during the project are important aspects for a successful project, but the projects should also aim to change their attitudes towards other cultures, increase their knowledge about them, and improve their intercultural competency.

PROJECT DESIGN

Online exchange can be conducted in various ways. In eTwinning, the exchange is project-based. The involved teachers design the projects and decide what the content of the project will be, what the project tasks are, which web tools will be used, and how the students will be involved during the project. The *subject of the course* is here a determining factor since there is a certain curriculum in each country that has to be followed during the course, and the project design has to have a common ground in order to serve the requirements of each country's education system. As already mentioned, most of the eTwinning projects are carried out in foreign language courses, and they are often planned for the purpose of language practice.

The duration of the project is also important for its effectiveness. Whereas certain projects are designed for shorter durations, especially beginners' projects or projects with too many partners, there are also others that continue for a whole year or even longer. Longer projects enable the students and teachers to get to know their partners better and get a deeper insight about the other culture. Some teachers or schools continue to work together for years. After closing one project, they start another and continue their collaboration.

Finding the right *project partners* (in terms of harmony of the teachers, shared aims, age of the students, etc.) and having a suitable group size for the project purpose are other elements that influence the success of online exchange projects. The eTwinning platform allows projects with two or more project partners, and the size of the project group is very important in terms of defining the nature of the project. Sometimes it is difficult to carry out certain tasks with two large groups, and you need more groups to realize other tasks. Furthermore, the harmony between the partners and work organization is also important. Some project partners who have worked well together carry out new projects and continue their collaboration for years or develop exchange projects to meet each other.

Project tasks that should be carried out by the students are also important for intercultural learning. The degree of students' participation in the online exchange is very important. The interviewed students indicated that they expect to communicate with the other students in the project themselves through social network sites. Such a direct interaction can also lead to a long-term interaction between the students even after the project is over. Furthermore, in some projects, the students build international teams including students from different countries. In such a case, the students follow a common aim and communicate through

42 See the EU Kids Online Study, accessed December 11, 2014: http://www.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/EUKidsOnline/Home.aspx.

different means. This creates an intense interaction among them.

The project tasks are also closely linked to the *web tools* used during the projects. Twinspace, which is the communication space of the eTwinning network, contains different tools such as discussion forums, online blogs, and profile pages. However, some of the interviewed teachers and students did not find the platform very effective and user-friendly. The platform has already been re-launched three times since the beginning, and it will be re-launched again soon in order to have a more user-friendly design and include functions such as video conferencing. The teachers and students also use tools outside of Twinspace such as social network sites and videoconferencing tools, blogs, or video websites.

PROMISES OF ONLINE EXCHANGE PROJECTS

Based on our analysis of different aspects of online exchange projects, we can point out the potential of these projects for contributing to intercultural education, which can be realized only when the factors above are considered.

First of all, the low budget of the online exchange enables teachers and schools in poorer and rather disadvantaged districts to carry out exchange projects. In the eTwinning network, there were teachers who were working in small towns or in schools where most of the students came from a lower socio-economic background and/or the school has limited financial resources. The following quote offers a great example about how online exchange projects can be an alternative to physical exchange projects in such cases:

> *"To me eTwinning makes more sense than Commenius. Because, I should say that I am in a small village and I don't even have a building to host those people when I do Comenius. I don't have a süper market, not even that, those small markets. I thought this has more advantages for me and for the children because we are doing Project-based teaching and they can be more involved through doing projects at the moment." (Interview Seda, Turkey)*

One of the most important functions of online exchange projects is that they provide the students *an access to other cultures*, which is an essential element of intercultural education. These encounters with other cultures can help the students to overcome their fear of "foreigners" and engage in other forms of intercultural interaction more easily in the future. However, we should also indicate that not all projects go beyond this aspect of offering access to intercultural exchange and succeed in providing the students with an advanced understanding of intercultural relations. This is partially due to the lack of necessary language or media literacy competences, the design of the projects (as discussed in the previous section), or the cultural positions of the involved parts.

Most of the teachers stated that they found out about eTwinning as they were searching for new and innovative methods for teaching. Online exchange projects offer such possibilities for *new teaching methods* by enabling different ways of international collaboration as well as (intercultural) forms of peer-learning by the use of different web 2.0 tools. Through these projects, the students have the opportunity to work in intercultural teams and exchange ideas with students and teachers from a different cultural background. With a good project design, the students can have the chance to learn about the subject of the course on the one hand and increase their intercultural competency on the other.

Furthermore, the teachers themselves find the opportunity to *exchange their teaching methods* with their project partners in different countries. Many teachers indicated that this was an enriching experience for them and they learned about different school and learning cultures. They also learn from each other in terms of ICT use, which contributes to their *media literacy skills* in different ways.

Most of the teachers, who are doing an online exchange still think that physical exchange projects and personal encounters are more powerful tools for enhancing intercultural skills. For this reason, many teachers also organized physical exchange projects after an eTwinning project if they were happy with the collaborative work with their partners. Participating in an online exchange before a physical exchange project can be a good *preparation for the physical exchange* and also help the project partners to continue their collaboration afterwards.

CHALLENGES FOR INTERCULTURAL LEARNING THROUGH ICTs

Online exchange projects in schools are still quite new, and there are still a lot of challenges faced during the projects. This section provides an analysis of different problems that were mentioned in the interviews and observed by the researcher.

One of the challenges for designing participatory and student-oriented projects is the *teaching habits of the teachers*. As the saying goes, old habits die hard, and some of the teachers had difficulties giving up their role at the center of the course and letting the students participate in the project and communicate with the counterparts directly. The teacher training programs as well as the guidelines provided on the eTwinning webpage emphasize the importance of the participation of the students and the value of peer learning as more effective methods for intercultural learning. This emphasis goes hand in hand with the general transformations of approaches to teaching and learning towards a more student-oriented understanding.

Another barrier for raising critical intercultural awareness of students can be the perception of culture itself. Some of the teachers still have an *essentialist perception of culture* in their minds as a bounded entity with shared, homogeneous characteristics. This leads them to design projects that encourage students to make essentialist assumptions about cultures and emphasize the differences rather than the similarities. Others preserve an ethnocentric perspective and look at the information they gather through the project from their own cultural perspective. In such cases, the eTwinning projects can even have the reverse effect and reconstruct prejudices and stereotypes instead of deconstructing them. There were some teachers who stated that they celebrate the international cultural differences in their international project team; however, ironically, they still identified cultural diversity within their own classroom as a problem. As already mentioned, a certain level of intercultural competence is a prerequisite for intercultural learning in terms of being open to other cultures (including local cultures) and open to a change of one's own perspectives through the intercultural experiences and the development of these competences. This should be an essential aim of teacher education and trainings offered within the framework of networks such as eTwinning.

As teachers play the most important role in designing and carrying out online exchange projects, one of the most important incentives for increasing the amount of such projects and improving their quality in terms of intercultural learning effects would be to offer more support to teachers. There are only *limited rewarding mechanisms* such as national and European quality labels for good projects in the case of eTwinning. However, both in Turkey and in Germany these rewards do not have a concrete influence on the teachers' careers. Furthermore, due to the limited budget of the eTwinning network, the trainings are only available to a certain number of teachers yearly.

Another problem we face throughout the online exchange projects is a problem that is as old as the history of formal schooling: *the discrepancy between the views of the students and the views of the teachers*. Some of the teachers carrying out an online exchange are convinced that their projects are fun for the students per se because they use computers and the Internet. Indeed, students find computers interesting since they provide a novelty in the everyday of the school life; however, this is not enough to make the projects interesting. After the first class hour, students expect something interesting in the content of the project; otherwise, they disengage from the classroom and are not

interested in the intercultural exchange. Being part of the communication themselves—for example, chatting with the other students or playing with them—can be elements that motivate the students to be more engaged in these online exchange projects.

Most of the projects are carried out not in the native language of the students but in foreign languages, mostly in English. Therefore, both the teachers and the students should have a certain level of *foreign language competency* in order to enter a meaningful intercultural dialogue. However, this is not always the case, and the lack of foreign language competences prevents some of the projects from going deeper in their thematic field. Furthermore, the lack of language competences also prevents many teachers from developing eTwinning projects.

The *technical infrastructure* is also crucial for the quality of the eTwinning projects so that different digital tools can be used for the intercultural exchange and the communication evolves smoothly without any technical problems. However, many schools both in Turkey and in Germany are not equipped with the necessary technical infrastructure and there are inequalities between the different schools in both cases. Even the most important requirement, a stable internet connection, is not maintained in some schools. For example, this was a problem in the analyzed in-depth case study, and the students mentioned that they were irritated by this problem since most of the joint class hour was spent for re-establishing the discontinuous Internet connection.

As discussed in the previous sections a certain level of *media literacy* is also another prerequisite of successful online exchange. This was less of a problem both for the teachers and the students in comparison to the lack of language skills. However, most of the teachers who are doing an eTwinning project are below a certain age. It might be interesting to analyze if there is a connection between age, media literacy skills and the engagement in eTwinning projects. Furthermore, especially in rural areas, there are still children who do not have access to computers and Internet outside of the school. For these students, online exchange can play an important role in improving their media literacy skills. One of the interviewed teachers indicated that for most of her students the eTwinning project provided students with their first access to computers and internet. She observed that some of them did not even know how to use a mouse before the project (Interview Seda, Turkey). This lack of media literacy is a problem for the particular project on the one hand; on the other hand, as the interviewed teacher also indicated, it can be a good opportunity for both students and teachers to learn these skills.

Last but not least, the *socio-economic differences and inequalities* probably present the most important challenge for the online intercultural exchange projects. The differences in the socio-economic backgrounds of the students and the school environment can hinder them from focusing on the cultural aspects during the interaction. In cases where there is a big difference between the project partners, the outcomes of the projects can even be demotivating as one of the interviewed teachers from a school in the Eastern part of Turkey indicated as below:

> *"As I could observe, the thing that attracted the attention of our students the most was their laboratory. "My teacher, their laboratories are so different, why don't we have something like that. We mostly have a regular classroom, which is imitated to be a laboratory with some materials and cabinets." (Interview Zehra, Turkey)*

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROGRAM COORDINATORS AND POLICY-MAKERS

The potentials of online exchanges for intercultural learning can be better realized with the support of different school institutions and through incentives introduced by politicians. The recommendations based on the above-presented research results are summarized in this last section of the report.

One of the most important factors that can improve the effects of intercultural learning through online exchange is *better preparation of teachers for these exchanges*, who can in return better prepare the students for the promises and challenges of intercultural exchange. In this preparation process, the teachers should be encouraged to question their own cultural positions, assumptions, and prejudices about other cultures, learn about the complexities of intercultural interaction, and open up towards other cultures in terms of accepting cultural differences. If teachers have a positive attitude towards project partners coming from a different cultural background, the students will develop a positive attitude toward their exchange partners and also more comfortably interact with the other group. It should be clear to all involved partners, teachers, and schools that merely bringing together people of different cultural backgrounds is not enough for intercultural learning; a better preparation process before the exchange and a better reflection process after the exchange are the keys to improving the intercultural competencies of the involved teachers and the students.

More programs to support the combination of online exchange with physical exchange projects should be introduced. The online exchange can provide a basis for first encounters and relationship building between project partners prior to a physical exchange. Furthermore, the possibilities of an online exchange can be used to continue the relationship between the partner schools who were once involved in a physical exchange project.

In order to better integrate information and communication technologies (ICTs) into school curricula, *new pedagogical methods* should be developed that emphasize peer learning and student-centered projects. As the research results show, using computers is not enough to make learning processes more entertaining.

Improving the technological infrastructure of the schools is very important for the general betterment of integration of ICTs in school curricula, specifically for the success of the online intercultural projects. Although in both analyzed countries big projects such as the "Schulen an Netz" project or the "Fatih Project" are introduced, there are still big differences in terms of schools' resources and ICT infrastructure.

Since the teachers are the driving force behind the online intercultural projects and their motivation is key for the success of the project in terms of intercultural learning, *more support and reward mechanisms* should be offered in order to encourage involvement in these projects. Although there are some mechanisms to reward successful projects, these rewards do not have a significant or formal effect on the careers of the teachers.

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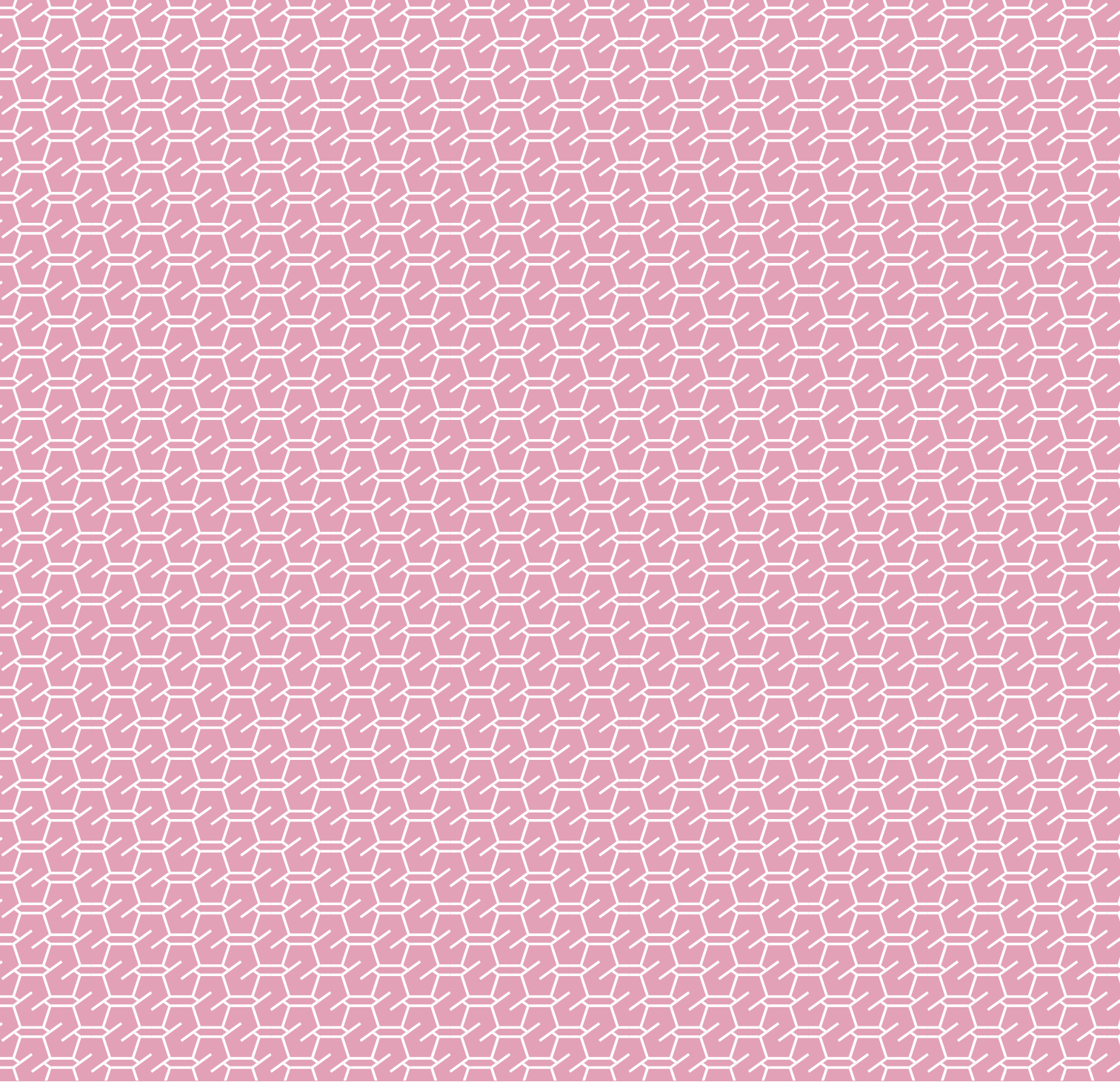
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Istanbul Policy Center
Bankalar Caddesi No: 2 Minerva Han
34420 Karaköy, İstanbul TURKEY
+90 212 292 49 39
+90 212 292 49 57
@ ipc@sabanciuniv.edu
w ipc.sabanciuniv.edu