

# The Reality of Comenius Projects in ten Catalan Educational Institutions<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper submits a qualitative study on different aspects of Comenius projects undertaken in ten educational centres in Catalonia during the academic year 07-08. The objectives of this paper are to present these projects within the realities of particular school contexts, to emphasize the strengths and weaknesses of the projects, the difficulties the coordinators have to face as well as analyzing all the issues that should be improved. The data was drawn from 10 interviews (25-45 minutes) conducted with the coordinating teachers for such projects. The study concludes that the Comenius project is a complex project in its development, completely adaptable to the reality of each centre, and very positive at primary, secondary and high school levels. However, it has also brought to light problems in our society and, especially, in Catalan educational institutions, such as a general lack of knowledge of a second language, fear of other cultures, lack of policies to support continuity projects, as well as the workload of teachers.

*Keywords:* Comenius projects, education, methodology, foreign students.

## Resumen

Este artículo presenta un estudio cualitativo sobre diferentes aspectos de los proyectos Comenius emprendidos en diez centros educativos de Cataluña durante el año académico 2007-2008. Los objetivos de este trabajo son presentar estos proyectos dentro de la realidad de contextos escolares particulares, destacar sus fortalezas y debilidades, las dificultades que los coordinadores tienen que afrontar, así como el análisis de todos los asuntos que se deben tener en cuenta para realizar las mejoras. Los datos se obtuvieron de 10 entrevistas, cada una de 25-45 minutos, realizadas a los profesores coordinadores de dichos proyectos. El estudio permitió concluir que el Proyecto Comenius, es un proyecto complejo en su desarrollo, totalmente adaptable a la realidad de cada centro educativo y muy positivo en los niveles de escuela primaria, secundaria y preparatoria. Sin

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embargo, esto también ha sacado a la luz parte de los problemas existentes en nuestra sociedad, especialmente en las instituciones educativas catalanas, como la falta general de conocimiento de un segundo idioma, miedo de otras culturas, la falta de políticas de apoyo para la continuidad de proyectos, así como la carga laboral de los docentes.

*Palabras claves:* Proyecto Comenius, educación, metodología, estudiantes extranjeros.

#### Resumo

Este artigo apresenta um estudo qualitativo sobre diferentes aspectos dos projetos Comenius empreendidos em dez centros educativos de Catalunha durante o ano académico 2007-2008. Os objetivos deste trabalho são apresentar estes projetos dentro da realidade de contextos escolares particulares, destacar suas fortalezas e debilidades, as dificuldades que os coordenadores têm que enfrentar; assim como a análise de todos os assuntos que se deve ter em conta para realizar as melhoras. Os dados foram obtidos de 10 entrevistas, cada uma de 25-45 minutos, realizadas aos professores coordenadores de ditos projetos. O estudo permitiu concluir que o Projeto Comenius, seja um projeto complexo no seu desenvolvimento, totalmente adaptável à realidade de cada centro educativo e muito positivo nos níveis de escola primária, secundária e preparatória. Entretanto, isto também fez visível parte dos problemas existentes na nossa sociedade, especialmente nas instituições educativas catalãs, como a falta geral de conhecimento de um segundo idioma, medo de outras culturas, a falta de políticas de apoio para a continuidade de projetos, assim como a carga de trabalho dos docentes.

*Palavras chaves:* Projeto Comenius, educação, metodologia, estudantes estrangeiros.

This paper submits a qualitative study of five different aspects of Comenius projects undertaken in ten educational centres in Catalonia during the academic year 2007-2008 as part of the research project *Avaluació de l'expressió escrita en llengua anglesa d'alumnes participants en projectes Comenius (2006ARIE10065)*, awarded by the Agència de Gestió d'Ajuts Universitaris i de Recerca of the Generalitat (AGAUR). These five topics directly related to the Comenius projects are: the Comenius coordinators' motivation, the objectives and topics of the school project, the school organization in order to be able to develop the Comenius project, the specific activities

carried out by the school and finally, under the title ‘organisational and cultural aspects’, the problems related to the organisation of the Comenius project at an institutional and school levels as well as everyday problems at a more personal level are presented.

This paper presents the qualitative data gathered from the interviews made to Comenius’ coordinators to evaluate the implementation of these projects. The qualitative data contains the coordinators’ answers to specific questions (see Appendix 1) as well as some unexpected results such as feelings and opinions about the implementation of such projects in each educational centre.

Thus, we would like to put forward a research innovation within the field of European projects. In fact, this is a first study conducted on Comenius Projects applying a qualitative study by gathering data directly from the coordinators of those projects.

### **Theoretical Framework**

According to the study *Impact of the Comenius School Partnership on the participant schools* (2007), the European Parliament created the Socrates project in 1995 (Council Decision No 819/95/EC). In 2000, a second phase was established by the European Commission: Socrates II. This second phase included other sub-projects within the Education and Training Section, specifically the Lifelong Learning Program, in which Comenius was framed. The Comenius actions are part of the EU’s Lifelong Learning Programme. The aim of these actions is for teachers and young students to better understand the European cultures and languages. Some of its aims are to increase the mobility of pupils and teachers across EU; enhance partnerships among European schools, enhance innovative ICT-based contents and better practices.

According to the document “Impact of Comenius School Partnerships on the participant schools”,

The central aims of the Comenius Programme are to expand the knowledge of pupils, prospective and experienced teachers and teacher trainers in terms of their subjects, ways of working and foreign languages and to promote intercultural learning and the European consciousness. (2007: 3)

The Comenius Programme was created out of three individual action programmes: Comenius 1, to provide support to school partnership; Comenius 2, to provide training to school staff; and

Comenius 3, to establish networks between projects. When a school decides to participate in a Comenius 1 project, it must find a partner or a group of schools that are also looking for partners, contact them and sign a partnership contract. According to the information given by the coordinators of the projects, there are two common ways of finding partners. One way is the annual Comenius call, which is an open invitation to all possible members. At this meeting, the centres get in contact with each other and sign their agreement. The other way is making contact by phone or e-mail after finding the school on a specialised website, e-Twinning, created for this purpose.

We visited the website of the Ministry. There, we saw the database created where all data from all European high schools who want to participate could be found; so, we found some partners there. IES Joaquim Bau. (Recording time: 1' 09'')

It seems that it is more difficult to find a partner during these annual meetings because everybody is trying to do the same, and unfortunately, the great majority of centres are already engaged.

The Catalan schools that were interviewed established the following different partnerships: Catalonia, Germany and Turkey; Catalonia, Portugal, Turkey, Malta, Poland and Romania; Catalonia, Italy and France; Catalonia, Poland, Finland, Austria, Germany and Italy; Catalonia, Poland, Holland and Portugal; Catalonia, Poland, France, Luxembourg and Belgium; Catalonia, Portugal, Poland and Slovakia; Catalonia, England and Germany; Catalonia, England, Germany, Slovakia and Slovenia; and finally Catalonia, England and Germany.

In 2007, the activities of Socrates II were integrated into the Lifelong Learning Programme. Comenius is one of the four sub-projects, 1. Comenius (for schools); 2. Erasmus (for higher education); 3. Leonardo da Vinci (for vocational education and training), and 4. Grundtvig (for adult education) (*A single umbrella for education and training projects*).

The Comenius project is aimed at students from pre-school to high schools. The main objective of this project is to develop knowledge of different European cultures, languages and values, and the subjects are not only the students of the school, but also the educational staff (*Comenius: Europe in the Classroom, 2010*)

According to the *Comenius: Europe Lifelong Learning Guide for Applicants (2010)*, the specific objectives of the Comenius projects

are the following: 1. *To develop knowledge and understanding among young people and educational staff of the diversity of European Cultures and Languages and its value.* 2. *To help young people acquire the basic life skills and competences necessary for their personal development, for future employment and for active European citizenship.*

According to the document *Sectorial Projects: Comenius* (2010), in order to carry out these objectives, this project calls for mobility of pupils and staff across Europe, participation in training courses, development and partnerships between schools, multilateral projects to improve the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom, and the development of networks with the aim to promote co-operation in specific thematic areas within European schools.

In its *Annual Report* (2007), the OAPEE states there were 2,035 Comenius agreements signed and 3,238 agreements active during 2007 in Spain. The same document stated that in 2008, there were 1,982 agreements signed and 2,153 active during that year. In Catalonia, during the academic year 2007-2008, there were 110 multilateral projects, involving 62,484 students and 280 teachers<sup>3</sup>.

When comparing the amount of Comenius school projects that Catalonia was granted in 2002-2003 and 2005-2006 to the other regions of Spain (see the document *Informe sobre el estado y situación del sistema educativo -2007-*), we were rated in second place (Andalucia being the first).

The aim of the study published under the report *Impact of Comenius School Partnerships on the participant schools* (2007) is to investigate the impact of Comenius 1 on the improvement of teaching quality on the integration of the European dimension in the work of the participating schools. The study concludes that the Comenius Programme is considered a “*highly relevant instrument that, overall, has a very positive impact on the pupils, teachers and schools involved*” (2007: 75). Nevertheless, the positive impact is limited in time and has no continuation once the students finish school and it is lost as the teachers leave.

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Libotton, Van Braak and Garofalo (2002) submit a pilot project with the purposes of monitoring and evaluating Comenius 3 projects. The results of their project indicate that the coordinators believe these courses are of great importance in developing intercultural awareness

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<sup>3</sup> This information is not published. It has been obtained directly by the author of this article from the Department of Education of the Generalitat de Catalunya (18/03/2010)

as well as fostering collaborative transnational work. These projects also need the “*active and committed support of the institutions involved to become a reality and more so when considering sustainability*” (p.32). Beernaert (2002) reports on the results of the assessment of the Comenius 3 courses that ran between 1996-1999. He describes the positive and negative aspects of the Comenius by both participants and organisers. On the whole, the conclusion is that even though the courses are thought to be very enriching, it is important to bear in mind all the negative aspects that can be improved.

Gordon (2001) suggests that schools provide plenty of answers regarding the evaluation of Socrates programmes in schools, but “*they also express the need for more support in defining what they want to do, less bureaucracy and more assessment of the results and outcomes*” (p. 418).

Diamantopoulou (2006) carried out research to analyse the difficulties and benefits in the implementation of Comenius programmes in Greece. Her conclusions are extremely revealing; she believes that there are many difficulties in the implementation of these programmes due to language problems, lack of technical infrastructure and limited prior experience.

### Methodology

This paper puts forward a qualitative study undertaken in ten public schools in Catalonia during 2007-2008 within the frame of an AGAUR (Agència de Gestió d’Ajuts Universitaris i de Recerca) research grant. The centres selected to the study were EIP Riera de Ribes, IES Torras i Bages, IES Joaquim Bau, CEIP Mare de Deu del Portal, CEIP Montfalgars, IES Vall d’Hebron, Col·legi Camí II, CEIP Pràctiques and CEIP La Roureda. All these schools coordinated a Comenius 1 Programme. The students involved in these programmes belonged to the last two courses of primary school (11-12-year-old children) and the second course of high school (up to 17 years old).

The objective of this paper is to present and describe the Comenius coordinators’ impressions about the implementation of these projects in their schools. According to McNamara, *Interviews are particularly useful for getting the story behind a participant’s experiences. The interviewer can pursue in-depth information around a topic* (1999). For this research, we used a general interview guide approach, with open-ended questions, as the method for carrying out this qualitative research because we required coordinators’ opinions, attitudes, and suggestions about their experience. Likewise, we met the coordinators

of the projects. As it is done with this type of interviews, the open-ended questions were prepared beforehand and served to guide both the interviewer and the interviewee.

Ten interviews were conducted, each lasting 25 to 45 minutes. The interviews were later transcribed for a closer analysis of the data. The content of the transcriptions was analysed and organised in topics. In order to analyse the transcriptions' content, we coded it into different topics. That is, recurring themes and ideas were identified and thus all the information was organised in topics.

### **Findings**

The content of the interviews is very rich and diverse due to the many different topics covered by the interviewees. They showed their interest in letting us know and understand all the characteristics and details of the projects they were carrying out including their coordination, organisation, working methods, positive aspects and problems encountered. We decided to code the data into five meaningful categories according to the information provided by the interviewees: 1) motivation, 2) objectives and topics, 3) school organization, 4) activities 5) organisational and cultural aspects.

### **Motivation**

The first question that the coordinators were asked was why their schools had applied for a Comenius project. Most of them argued pedagogical reasons such as the idea to recreate a natural setting for learning English at school; the promotion of cultural exchanges and a considerable interest in knowing the educational system of other European countries. Before applying for the Comenius Project, many centres already coordinated European exchange projects such as Orator (this is a Programme to enhance innovation projects based to the oral competence. It is granted by the Departament d'Ensenyament of the Catalan Government) and Comenius 1 (this type of project is a collaboration with the universities). The interviewed teachers had also been trying to get in contact at a personal level with other teachers in some European schools in order for their students to communicate in an authentic situation.

All these types of projects provide a great benefit (from the linguistic point of view) for both the students and the teachers (see conclusions), but it also requires a significant amount of work for those teachers who are responsible for the project.

## Objectives and Topics

The Comenius 1 projects start every two years under an established topic. Then, the schools work within specific subtopics that they create. Usually a group of schools from different countries work together under the same subtopic.

It is interesting to see how the topics of the schools which apply for the Comenius projects are different, but their main objectives coincide. The following are the most common aims of the projects: a) to improve students' and teachers' second language (in all the cases studied, it was English); b) to reinforce a European community feeling; c) to share the knowledge of other customs and cultures (for example a teacher commented that some Catalan students were surprised when they saw that the Romanian students addressed the teacher with the use of "usted", which is the polite form of the personal pronoun); d) to enhance the feeling of community among students at the same centre; e) to motivate students in their learning of a foreign language as well as new subjects; f) to know and understand different cultures (as an example, several teachers commented that many parents did not allow their children to travel to other schools because they did not want their children to live with foreign families; g) to get used to living immersed in another culture to learn about tolerance, patience, and culture.

The topics of the projects were completely different from one project to another. These are some of the topics that the schools had chosen to work with: Renewable Energy; the River Llobregat (each school could choose a river in its area), the bands, celebrations, the city of Barcelona (cities varied depending on the country), Citizenship and Democracy, and Traditions. The topic areas were chosen and agreed upon by the coordinators at the annual meeting and, each school found a subtopic within the general one.

These topic areas only had to meet two very important criteria: 1) all schools had to be able to work comfortably on the chosen topic and 2) the topic had to be broad enough for each school to find its own subtopic.

## School Organisation

Before we decided to interview the coordinators of the Comenius Projects, one may believe that these projects had a framework of reference, and teachers only had to follow the guidelines to do the activities. However, after having carried out this research, one can see that each Comenius Project is a reflection of the energy, imagination

and willingness to work by the coordinators and their teams. There is no a general plan for the activities or a specific methodology of work. The organisation of each project is done based on the schools' needs and teachers' participation: different examples of how schools have adapted the project to their necessities are presented in this paper. While there are schools that have involved all their students in the project (from kindergarten to high school levels), in some centres, the activities were carried out only by one whole class. In other schools, the students involved in the project were only volunteers. In this case, the activities took place at the end of the school day (always guided by a teacher). Some centres preferred to choose the participating students, as they felt that the basic criterion to maximize this experience was the level of English, and therefore, just a few students were prepared to participate. Some teachers acknowledged that in the beginning, only some volunteer students were involved in the project, but after experiencing the positive results, the coordinators decided to involve all students. In consequence, they organised a Comenius meeting every week for each different course to include as many students as possible.

One of the characteristics of this type of projects is the exchange of students and teachers between two centres from different countries. A group of teachers is expected to travel abroad and meet their colleagues and set up basic rules for each specific project. If the schools decide that the activity seems interesting enough for their students, they can also plan dates for the students' exchange. At first glance, this aspect does not seem to be complex; nevertheless, it could be one of the most complex ones according to the gathered data in the interviews. In some schools, due to bureaucratic and economic factors, only the teachers could visit other centres; in other schools, both teachers and students could visit their partners. However, only in one of the centres, the whole class could travel abroad to visit their partners. In all cases, the foreign schools visited the Catalan ones.

At the end of the term, the teacher must write a detailed report of the work done by students and teachers. According to this report, all the coordinators stated that the work carried out by students and teachers during the course had been quite hard but also rewarding.

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Generally, the schools involved in these projects upload to their website all information related to the activities and how they are being and have been carried out. One of the teachers interviewed explained that the two English teachers involved in the project were overwhelmed by the amount of work related to the project, and at the beginning of the course they expected others would help them upload some information

to the website. Nonetheless, nobody did it; so, they complained because the time was limited to update the page. In this case, we can see how important teamwork is and how significant the need of having big teams working on the same project is.

### **Activities**

As it has been described above, specific guidelines did not exist about how to conduct the project. From the interviews one can understand the coordinators must find and apply interesting and useful activities for all centres and groups. The coordinators use their experience with other European projects and school experiences to help the progress of their students. Plenty of activities have been designed and carried out by schools within the Comenius projects' framework. According to the interviews, each school designs different types of tasks in compliance with its level of second language. For example, students prepare Christmas cards (the youngest group), newspapers, a book on the theme of the project, blogs, presentations in Power Point, CD ROMs with audio files, activities with e-mails, and posters. A couple of schools once even prepared organic meals and traditional dishes for all the school members.

### **Organisational and Cultural Aspects**

For a better reading and understanding, this data was divided into two sections: 1. "Organisational Aspects" because they deal with problems related to the organisation of the Comenius project at an institutional and school levels. The other section has been called "Cultural Aspects" because they cope with every day problems at a more personal level.

#### **Organisational aspects**

The coordinators emphasised that one of the most problematic aspects that they faced when carrying out the project was the low level of proficiency in English; and most of the students could not accomplish the activities that the teachers had first created. For this reason, teachers often had to carefully adjust the activities that were originally scheduled and agree with the other partner schools. All teachers interviewed agreed that foreign language learning is the major unresolved issue of the education system in our country, and now with this type of projects, the problem is even more evident. For instance, a teacher could explain

that in Finland (as in practically the rest of Europe except Spain), films and television series are broadcast in English:

Teacher 1: This is the problem we have with the foreign languages. Our children will never learn English if we do not broadcast *The Simpson* in its original version as they do in Finland... This is a reality. The pedagogy and methodology that Finnish people apply to the acquisition of English as a foreign language is not half as well designed and organised as ours, but we do not obtain any positive results [...] [in Finland] when you switch on the television, it can be seen in the original version.

Teacher 2: Did you know that in Finland this year it is very popular to study Spanish? This year... last Summer in Finland you could watch *Los Serrano*<sup>4</sup>! In Spanish! This is the right way of learning a language! IES La Roureda (Recording time 30'44")

This teacher's criticism about the lack of original versions on TV in our country went even further. He stated that to learn a foreign language, it is very important that it appears frequently in our lives (as the Finnish government policy makes possible). According to this teacher, all the effort and money spent in our country on the development of new laws and methodologies for schools do not get any positive result if a foreign language is still seen as a strange element in life.

Another common problem is the large amount of extra work faced by teachers involved in a Comenius Project. Because the work that has to be done by the students involves many different types of tasks, teachers have to carefully follow all the students' processes as they complete these assignments. Therefore, it happens that a single teacher has been the supervisor of a whole class of about 30 students who were searching for information in books and on the internet, preparing a Power Point presentation, designing posters, uploading materials to the web, and creating a blog. Perhaps due to the knowledge of this large amount of extra work teachers must do, together with an insufficient English level, in many schools there is only a group of two or three teachers who are in charge of the project. This means a significant extra-workload for the volunteer teachers.

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Another negative aspect that broke out in the interviews was the little amount of investment given to each project. The main coordinators' complaint is that students must often afford their trip and expenses abroad by themselves. Even though, nowadays, they can find

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<sup>4</sup> A very popular Spanish serial

cheaper flights with low-cost airlines, for many families this requires a large financial effort. Schools usually pay for the trip of the visiting teachers, but they tend to stay in their colleagues' homes, saving the school's money. As well, some of the teachers interviewed thought the Comenius projects are being promoted in quantity (that is, the more projects granted the better), leaving the quality in second place.

Economically, Comenius projects do not reach... there's enough money to the teacher (to travel) but not for the children. It is very lucky for us that these cheap airlines exist, because for example I remember that the cost of the trip for the students was 50 euros, return ticket. IES Montfalgars. (Recording time: 8' 32'')

The coordinators of the projects expressed what seems to be a very common problem in many school centres: how some teachers are reluctant to allow their colleagues to leave the school for days to travel abroad. When this happens, the teachers stay in the school and they are in charge of all the tasks that the absent teachers cannot do. They feel that they are responsible for all the tasks, while their colleagues are "on a trip". The interviewees wanted to make clear that those who complain do not belong to the Comenius team, and therefore, they do not know the real tasks that these teachers perform. The root of this problem is the fact that the project does not provide money to pay for a substitute teacher during those periods of time.

As we have stated before, the difficulties, problems and negative aspects of the Comenius projects are not only organisational. If all the difficulties were of this nature, they could most likely be solved with some years of experience. However, we realised that many of the negative aspects expressed by the coordinators belong to a more complex area. We are talking about culture, customs and education.

### **Cultural aspects**

When teachers were asked about what aspect was one of the most difficult of the project, they all agreed that it was the coordination of various institutions from several countries. Obviously, the main reason for this difficulty is the cultural differences and customs of various countries, but in some cases, these differences are big enough that teachers continuously face strains that make their work even harder.

The different European school calendars and schedules are one of the major problems that affect these projects. For instance, it is difficult to organise a videoconference or chat (not to mention the

extracurricular activities) after school because Catalan schools end their schedule much later than other European schools. Organising a year with different deadlines to exchange tasks with other schools is a very difficult job. The beginning and end of the school calendar, not to mention the holidays, are quite different in each country.

These cultural differences are also reflected in the criteria that the coordinators set up to choose the group of students who are going to visit the partner school. It appears that in some countries like Romania, the only criteria are the marks; students with the highest marks are rewarded with the Comenius visit. In general, in our schools, it seems that the criteria are quite different. If not all students can travel, then the coordinators choose those that they believe will make the most of the experience. If teachers are still not sure about who deserves to go, they make a raffle with all those who want to go.

Another difficulty that coordinators sometimes face is the fact that some parents do not allow their children to travel abroad nor stay with unknown families. In such cases, teachers try to convince these parents by offering their positive experiences with the project. Nevertheless, according to the teachers, most of time, it is difficult to accomplish all the tasks.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

All teachers who were interviewed believe that the experience of the Comenius project has been extremely positive. They emphasised the idea that this project not only benefits pupils but teachers as well. According to the coordinators' interviews, language teachers usually try to create class activities that are as close to a natural setting as possible. Within the frame of the Comenius project, the natural setting has been introduced to the classroom because the daily work has been transformed into task work and project work to accomplish specific objectives, in which the main goal is to communicate with a partner school where the L1 is different from ours. These real situations that have been brought to the classroom are also starting to appear in other curriculum areas, thus, the students feel more motivated in subjects like History and Geography. Several different Comenius coordinators concluded that the students who participated in these projects no longer saw foreign languages as a compulsory subject but as a necessity to be able to communicate with their colleagues abroad. With this new view, students considered tasks like organisation, summarisation, and preparation of information to present to their Comenius partners to be necessary steps for setting proper communication.

At a more personal level, we also consider it very important to highlight that some of the Catalan and foreign teachers have become close friends after several years in contact due to the organisation of the project, as the following quotation shows:

With our present Comenius partners it is the second time that we work together and we are practically friends. I have stayed at the coordinator's home and he has stayed in mine. This already implies that we are friends, which means that we can work together in other projects. IES Montfalgars. (Recording time: 15' 35'')

Although this fact should be considered more like an anecdote than a general characteristic, it should be mentioned because the coordinators who mentioned this friendship also emphasised the idea that this could be very positive for their school because both their colleagues as well as their students could feel this close relationship between schools.

Another positive aspect is that because the teachers' and students' exchanges were carried out within the academic calendar, they could all see and learn how the other school was organised and also learn from their daily work. As an example, we can read in the following quotation how a headmaster from a Catalan school explained to us that she was very surprised when she visited Britain and learnt that a teacher could never be a headmaster.

[...] we can see how different schools work and of course, the school management team... what we understand here as the figure of the headmaster ... there [in England] the school's headmaster is the manager and director of the company, so he's the one who makes the decisions. IES Pràctiques. (Recording time: 19'42'')

The other school that we visited... English ... and we found that one of the tasks that the director performed was to evaluate and control ... he visited all classes taking notes on how the different teachers managed their classes. IES Pràctiques. (Recording time: 20'35'')

Most of the coordinators stated that due to the Comenius, the teacher-student relationship had become closer and better. According to their opinions, this was due to the fact that during the project the teacher had to face many new situations and learn from them, making them feel like learners again. Likewise they all had to carry out the same task; teachers agreed that the Comenius project gave prestige to the school. Apparently, there were parents who wanted to know if the school was carrying out a European project when they requested for information on the school before enrolling their children. Furthermore, the parents of

the Comenius students were very proud of the work performed by their children and grateful to the teachers.

The school is very proud of this [Comenius]. During the doors open day parents of future students visit the schools to check if they like it or not... one of the things.... one of the things that make us be more proud of the school is the Comenius project... it gives a great deal of prestige to the school[.]. It gives prestige to the neighbourhood, because other schools do not have these types of projects. IES La Roureda. (Recording time: 14'58")

Finally, the coordinators have also expressed their complaints about some aspects related to the organisation of the Comenius project both at an institutional level and at a school level, and about specific problems that arose in the daily work when implementing the project. We can refer to this project as the document which brought to light problems that many schools have, and which sometimes can be extrapolated to our society. These problems may limit the possibilities of the Comenius programmes both at international and national levels, and include diverse issues such as the learning of a foreign language by students, educators and a quite significant percentage of the population; the significant amount of the coordinators' and school teachers' workload (which prevents them from focusing on projects like this), the little economic support that the Comenius project is given, the need of substitute teachers or extra teachers to help with the Comenius project, differences in schools' calendars, and different criteria for choosing the students that will travel overseas. It is interesting to see that our results (qualitative) coincide with those obtained by the large-scale study carried out by the European Commission. In this report, there is a table in which we are shown the significant difficulties encountered during the Comenius project, and in it, we can see that the first three items in the table (by order of importance) are the following: 1. *Vast amount of administrative burden arising from the Comenius Project (37%)*; 2. *Lack of acceptance of the project by teachers/colleagues not directly involved (19%)*; 3. *Lack of foreign language proficiency of teachers/colleagues (16%)*<sup>5</sup>

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All the material collected has also allowed us to learn a very positive reality about the interviewed schools. We truly believe that the great energy and motivation that Comenius coordinators and language teachers promote in these centres should be emphasised. Sometimes,

<sup>5</sup> Impact of Comenius School Partnership on the participant schools. Final report. [http://ec.europa.eu/education/doc/reports/doc/comeniusreport\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/doc/reports/doc/comeniusreport_en.pdf)

when we think that nowadays schools and colleges have lost their energy and imagination to innovate in the classroom, we discovered with great pleasure that this is not always the case. There are many teachers who develop and implement new exercises, activities and projects to motivate their students. According to the data collected in these interviews, the image that one can get of the Comenius projects are a very positive vehicle to bring new teaching methodologies and activities to the school. Such projects involve observing subjects and concepts from a new point of view, implying a shift of objectives and aims and a translation from the theoretical to the practical.

The problems identified by the coordinators need a thorough analysis for their improvement. They also need to receive more attention from the institutions. We also believe that they are in part due to the youth and short duration of such projects, but we cannot forget that some things have to change in order to be improved. Even with these strains, and after listening attentively to the coordinators' speeches, we can conclude that the positive aspects of the Comenius project definitely tip the scales, not only in favour of the participating students, but also in favour of the teachers involved. Without a doubt, this happens on many levels such as educational, social, cultural and personal.

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*APPENDIX 1: Interviews with teachers*

1. Why have you chosen to participate in a Comenius project? Is it the first time you participate? Are there any other project in the school (exchanges, foreign language projects, e-twinning) that may have influence on the Comenius project?
2. Are you the coordinator country? How many schools participate? Which countries? How do you coordinate the different schools? How many meetings with the foreign schools do you plan to have?
3. How many teachers participate in the project? Do they belong to the same subject or to different subjects?
4. Is the School Board an active member of the Comenius management team? What is the implication of AMPA (parents' association)?
5. How often is the information given to the School Board?
6. How many students participate? Do all the students in the school participate? Only a group? Why?
7. How many hours per week / month are devoted to the project? What tasks are the students required to do? How often?
8. Are there any project coordination meetings among teachers participating in the project? How many hours?
9. How have you planned to work in class? Individually? In groups? Are you planning to do some kind of tutoring or small group work?
10. What kind of feedback do you give?
11. What final tasks do students have to create? What are the objectives of the different tasks?
12. How will you make all the outputs and students' tasks known by the teaching community?
13. Are you going to have a final evaluation of the project in the school? Do you take into account the students' opinions?
14. Are you going to have a final evaluation of the project with the other schools?
15. What do you expect of this Comenius project?
16. Do you think that participation in the Comenius project will be useful for students? What things do you think they learn?
17. What aspects do you think will be the easiest and the most difficult of the project?

APPENDIX 2: Teacher Questionnaire

Please put cross in the answer that you think is the most correct.

(1 = none, 2 = little, 3 = enough, 4 = a lot)

**1. The dissemination of information on the Comenius project.**

Of these objectives, which do you think you are going to achieve with the Comenius project?	1	2	3	4
	Total number of answers			
To foster in students the knowledge and understanding of various European cultures.	0	0	7	7
The learning and understanding of different European languages.	1	4	5	3
Increase the use and understanding of English.	0	0	4	9
Helping young people develop active European citizenship.	0	3	6	5
Helping young people to work together.	0	1	4	9
Promote the innovative use of information technologies and communication.	0	0	6	8
Further improvement of the pedagogical approaches in the classroom.	0	0	8	5
Work some of these themes: arts, environmental education, traditions, struggles against racism, etc..	0	0	7	7

**How is the diffusion of information among the different centres?**

Students of various schools get in touch	1	2	3	4
	Total number of answers			
using e-mail	0	1	6	7
through the Messenger	5	4	2	2
using blogs	9	2	1	0
using power point presentations	1	0	5	7
through the centre website	2	4	2	5
through a common project website	3	2	2	4
via videoconferencing	5	3	2	0
via post	5	3	1	4

**2. Degree of involvement of the groups involved (teachers, students, relatives, managers).**

	1	2	3	4
	Total number of answers			
The school staff supports the project	0	1	6	7
The board of directors knows and supports the project	0	0	2	12
More than one English teacher is involved in the project.	1	2	3	6
English teachers as well as other subject areas' teachers are involved in the project.	0	2	5	7
The project helps teachers to improve professionally.	1	0	7	5
Participating teachers have a special work permit (their teaching hours are reduced) to coordinate and develop the project.	8	3	2	0
The families know and participate in the project.	0	4	6	4
The students' suggestions are taken into account when developing the project.	1	3	7	3
The project appears in the school's web.	0	1	7	6
The teachers and students involved in the project are pleased with the work done together	0	0	2	12
Satisfaction with the activities carried out for the project.	0	0	7	7
Satisfaction with the students learning	0	0	10	4
Satisfaction with the relationship of the schools involved.	0	0	3	11

**3. Coordination and planning of the project**

	1	2	3	4
	Total number of answers			
The coordination among schools is good	0	0	8	6
The preparatory visits are effective	0	0	2	12
The exchange of materials is good.	0	0	6	8
The work's organization is good.	0	0	6	8
The relationship and sharing of information among different centres is smooth	0	1	9	4

**4. The motivation of the groups involved.**

The participation in a Comenius project:	1	2	3	4
	Total number of answers			
Improves students' learning outcomes	0	2	11	0
Improves the classroom dynamics	0	5	7	2
Improves the relationship among students	0	2	10	2
Improves the relationship among the teachers	0	2	11	1
Helps the families know what is done in the English classroom.	0	4	6	3
Motivates teachers in their teaching process.	0	0	9	4
Motivates teachers to work harder	0	0	10	3
It helps teachers work in teams.	0	1	9	3
It helps the students work in teams	0	1	7	5
It fosters teamwork among students and teachers	0	2	7	4
Makes students appreciate their work	0	0	7	6

### 5. Incentives to work in a Comenius project.

The participation in a Comenius project is interesting for teachers because:	1	2	3	4
	Total number of answers			
They travel abroad and meet other educational systems.	0	0	2	12
They motivate students with language tasks similar to those carried out in a natural setting	0	0	8	6
They use more active and innovative methodologies.	0	0	8	6
They use new technologies	0	0	5	9
They continually improve their teaching methodology	0	1	6	7
They feel more valued by the headship	1	2	9	1
They feel more valued by the students	2	2	9	0
They feel more valued by the parents	2	2	10	0

### 6. The socioeconomic level of the school (material and financial resources, access to information technology and communication) and organizational conditions.

	1	2	3	4
	Total number of answers			
The socioeconomic status of students is good	0	4	9	0
The school has many resources	0	3	11	0
When I need I have access to a computer room and there are enough computers for all the students.	0	0	9	5
The internet connection is very good	0	0	8	6
If I need materials or resources the school provides them for me.	1	1	6	6
The school library is good.	0	1	9	4
I work with small groups of students	0	1	8	4
I cannot spend all the time I would like in the project, because I must follow the textbook.	3	3	7	0
There are coordination meetings within the school timetable	4	1	6	3
Students work in pairs / groups outside school hours.	2	8	1	3

**7. Access to ICT by students**

	1	2	3	4
	Total number of answers			
Most students have computer and internet.	0	1	10	3
Most pupils are able to use a word processor.	0	1	6	7
Most students are able to use multimedia presentations.	0	3	7	4
Most pupils are able to seek information on the web.	0	0	8	6
Most students use MSN	2	1	6	4
Most students use blogs.	8	3	1	1

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