



Study of the impact of Comenius school partnerships on participating schools

Institutional changes and
the European dimension

Executive Summary

1 Study context, object and methodology

In the context of the preparation of the new European “Erasmus for all” programme for education and training and the optimisation of the current programme, this study provides an analysis of the impact of **Comenius school partnerships** on participating institutions.

Such partnerships constitute one of the European Commission’s key actions in the field of school education. Comenius bilateral and multilateral school partnerships last for two years and seek to strengthen the European dimension of education by encouraging development of cooperation activities between European schools. These projects provide pupils and teachers from a range of countries with opportunities to work together on one or more subjects of common interest. Comenius *multilateral* school partnerships associate schools from at least three participating countries; themes selected focus on pupils’ areas of interest, on current educational issues in the countries concerned, or on priorities set by the schools themselves. Comenius *bilateral* school partnerships develop language projects comprising two reciprocal exchanges of classes for a minimum period of ten days, each designed for pupils aged twelve and above.

Between 2007 and 2010, the action led to cooperation between almost 26,000 schools and financed over 130,000 pupil and teacher mobilities per year.

Commissioned by the European Commission and coordinated by the Centre International d’études pédagogiques (CIEP), **the study looks at the changes brought about** by Comenius bilateral and multilateral partnerships **at the level of the educational systems and the various stakeholders**, and incorporates a comparative approach to the impact of other programmes, in particular the eTwinning action that has been part of the Comenius sectorial programme since 2007.

The study was carried out between December 2009 and June 2012, and seeks to **identify the effects of Comenius school partnerships on the schools involved and highlight their added value for beneficiaries** (direct and indirect alike). It analyses pupils’, parents’ and other stakeholders’ participation in partnership activities, the support provided by local communities (cooperation with companies, associations and public authorities at local level) and dissemination activities carried out by the schools.

In order to reconstruct the full range of processes and interactions between actors taking part in Comenius school partnership projects, the methodology selected takes a qualitative and participative approach, based on field studies carried out in a total of 50 coordinating schools in 15 countries (Belgium, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Holland, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, Turkey and the United Kingdom), which initiated their partnerships in 2009. The study required statistical processing of data gathered prior to visits through questionnaires and later refined during fieldwork. Over forty indicators were drawn up to express qualitative data in statistical terms, while telephone interviews carried out after the completion of projects enabled analysis of results of sustainability strategies as well as of any problems encountered.

2 Main results of the study

Comenius school partnerships have a highly significant impact on the school community as a whole: in 75% of cases observed, it was perceived as being “quite strong”, “strong” or even “very strong”. It was on pupils themselves that the impact was greatest, followed by teachers and then by the schools and their environment.

Impact on participating pupils

As far as pupils are concerned, the most significant effects were connected to their participation in partnership activities.

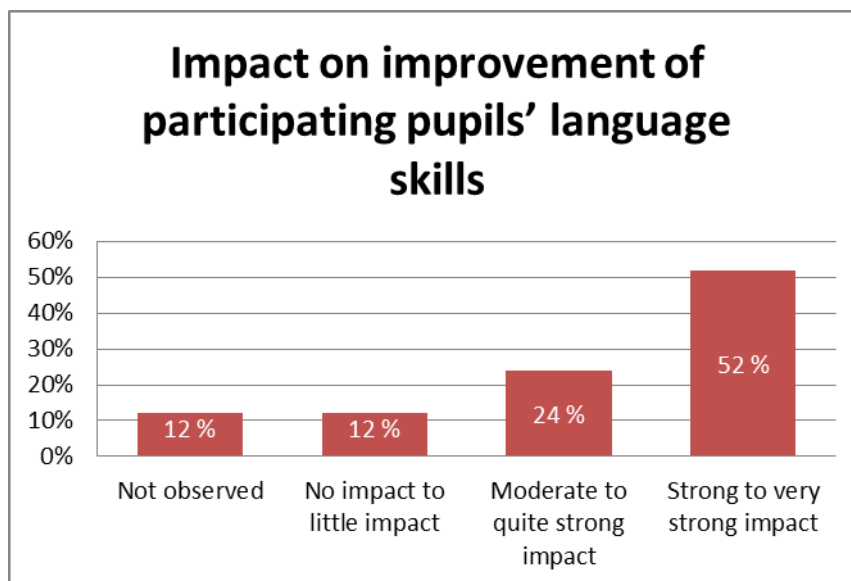
Greater interest in other European countries and their cultures

Comenius school partnerships arouse pupils’ interest in other European countries and their cultures. The exchanges and activities carried out with European partners constitute a laboratory for active European citizenship and set the scene for intercultural dialogue between European pupils. In 82% of schools, pupils’ participation in a Comenius school partnership helped increase their interest in other European countries and their cultures. This data matches the conclusions of an earlier survey carried out in 2007 on behalf of the European Commission.

Improvement of language skills

Bilateral and multilateral school partnerships have a positive influence on the way in which pupils regard foreign languages, and their consequences are felt by all members of the school community, including parents. It is also expressed by an improvement in pupils’ skills, with impact varying depending on educational level, how long they were exposed to the language, and objectives set by the teachers themselves.

Figure 1: Impact on improvement of participating pupils’ language skills



Communicating in a foreign language in a context removed from their everyday experience leads many pupils to overcome previous difficulties and develop greater self-confidence. Although English retains its prominence, many Comenius school partnerships go out of their way to acquaint pupils with Europe’s linguistic diversity.

With regard to younger pupils, it is often a question of raising their awareness of the diversity of languages. Secondary school pupils, on the other hand, tend to see improvement of their language skills as beneficial to their professional futures.

Comenius school partnerships also contribute to another one of the European Union's key objectives ("Education and Training 2020") – proficiency in communicating in the mother tongue. Many project activities are carried out in pupils' own languages, and progress has been observed at all levels.

Significant improvement in cross-cutting key skills

Development of social and civic competences

A decline in feelings of prejudice within schools is frequently remarked by Comenius project participants. Projects change the images that pupils have of partner countries. The two driving forces behind cultural exchanges are the desire to communicate and the sharing of work by pupils of several different nationalities. Comenius partnerships also help to develop pupils' civic competences, by helping them to respect other people's differences, by giving them responsibility, and by enabling them to work – at secondary school level in particular – on the construction of European identity and citizenship alongside other pupils in Europe.

Creative skills encouraged

Comenius projects help return creativity and pupils' artistic expression to their rightful place on the school timetable. They provide opportunities – sometimes never before encountered – for pupils to express themselves through collaboration with pupils of different nationalities and who speak different languages. Development of creative skills combined with other competences encourages a spirit of competition, bringing out the best in those pupils who experience problems in more academic subjects.

Computer skills

Improvement of computer skills is a major objective in most Comenius bilateral and multilateral school partnerships. Use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in interdisciplinary projects enables pupils to activate informally acquired skills. The inclusive aspect of such skills reduces inequalities in schools, motivating all participants as actors within the project and renewing motivation among struggling pupils. Computer skills should be considered as part of "learning to learn" skills in general, as they help make pupils more self-sufficient. Beyond the projects themselves, pupils can feed such skills back into other kinds of learning activities.

Learning to learn

Comenius school partnerships contribute to the development of pupils' "learning to learn" skills. They acquire greater self-confidence and greater capacities for working in groups or on their own. The impact is yet stronger when activities take place outside the school. Participation in group work (abroad or in home schools) helps give pupils a greater sense of responsibility.

Competences to be encouraged

Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship

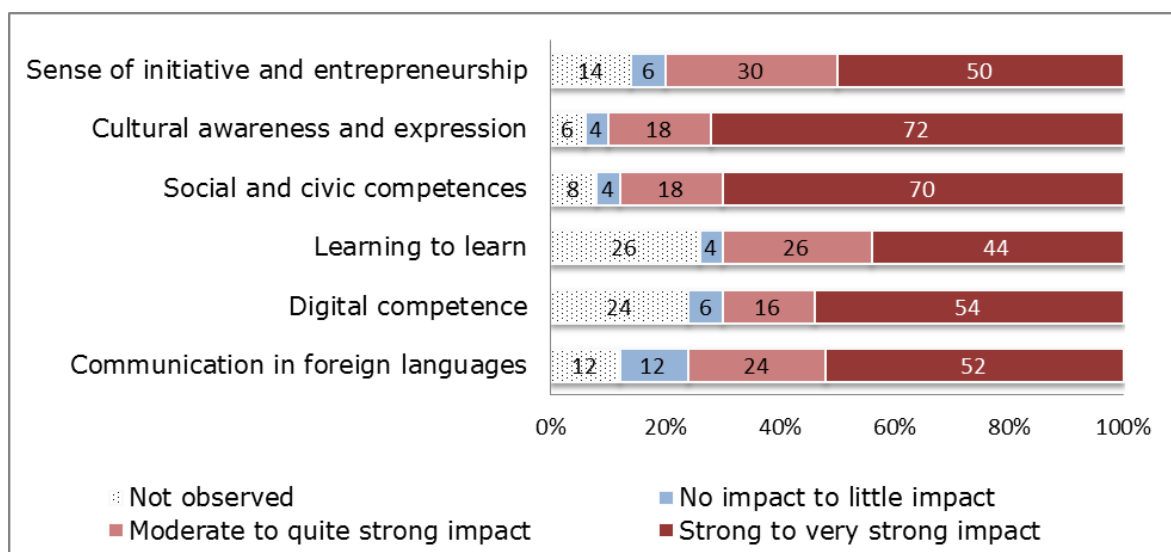
Although the "sense of initiative and entrepreneurship" is not yet a priority competence in Comenius projects, various examples observed bear witness to innovative practices in this area. Activities fostering self-sufficiency – frequently incorporated into Comenius projects – seem especially well suited to development of

this skill. Projects focusing on relations with companies are to be encouraged as they help increase educational systems' awareness of economic realities.

Comenius and the sciences

Improvement in pupils' mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technologies was observed in projects focusing on such skills, which are often incorporated into an interdisciplinary initiative that enables pupils to develop their civic competences and enriches intercultural dialogue with partner schools. The ways in which the sciences are perceived and learned, and pupils' ability to link them to the major issues running through modern society, are transformed by Comenius projects. This new way of working gives pupils a taste for science subjects, and sometimes – particularly among girls – fosters a desire to continue their studies on that path.

Figure 2 Impact on pupils: improvement of key skills



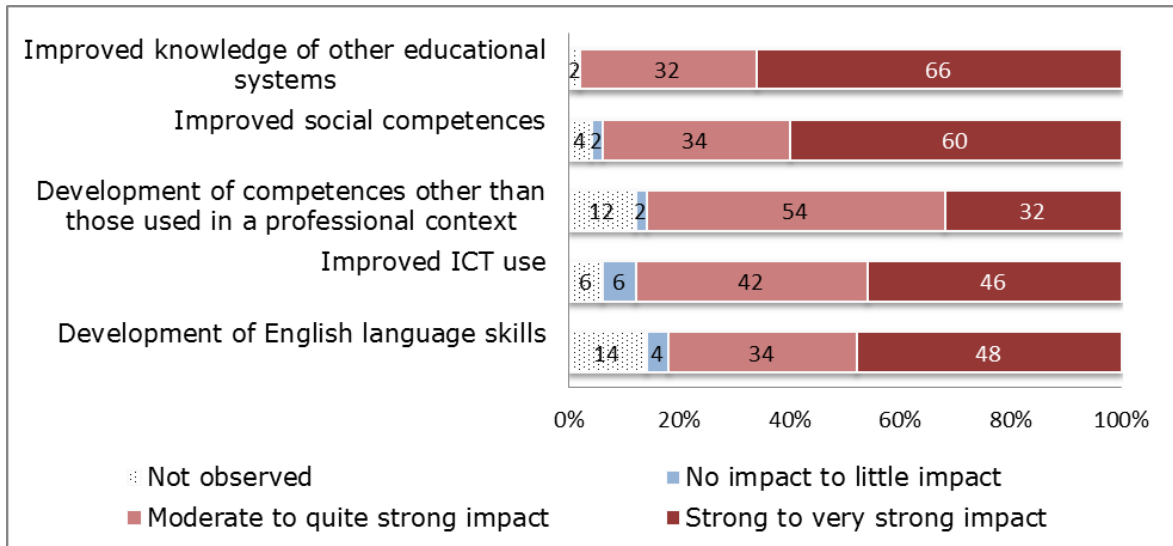
Impact on teachers

With regard to teachers, the most significant impact of Comenius school partnerships is related to the improvement of knowledge of other educational systems and of social competences. The projects also help develop their computer skills and English language skills, along with competences other than those they use as a matter of course in their daily professional lives.

Better knowledge of other educational systems

In two thirds of the schools involved, Comenius school partnerships significantly improved participating teachers' knowledge of other educational systems, particularly as regards competences acquired by pupils at partner schools and various aspects of such systems (curricula, evaluation, etc.), but less usually as regards education policies. Work conditions (salaries, status, working hours, etc.) observed during teacher mobilities also form the subject of much discussion. Analysis of educational systems in neighbouring countries often helps schools to decide upon the topic of their project and also contributes to awareness of a professional culture common to European teachers in general.

Figure 3 Impact on teachers



Improvement of teachers’ social and organisational competences

Comenius school partnerships improve teachers’ ability to work in European and interdisciplinary teams. The impact is stronger in multilateral than in bilateral partnerships and, in the case of the former, varies depending on the number of teachers and partners involved. Teachers appreciate these new styles of collaborative work, which often differ vastly from their usual professional practices. Comenius school partnerships have a proven impact on teachers’ – and, above all, coordinators’ – organisational competences. It is often a question of acquiring new competences that contribute to the highlighting and professional development of the coordinator’s function, and which may be reinvested beyond the project’s contractual duration.

Improvement of language skills, mainly in English

Comenius school partnerships contribute to specialist and non-specialist teachers’ language skills by providing them with an opportunity to converse and work in a foreign language. In over half the schools, partnerships had a major impact on the improvement of participating teachers’ English language skills. Their impact on the development of skills in languages other than English was less marked. Besides the effect this has on teachers’ professional development, the indirect impact it has on their pupils should also be emphasised. By putting teachers in a position where they have to communicate in another language and different cultural context, the projects make them aware of the linguistic and cultural difficulties that some of their pupils have to cope with, and so take better account of them.

Computer skills

Comenius school partnerships enable teachers to develop their ICT proficiency. Such competences are largely developed through self-training or peer training, even if dedicated courses may sometimes be held in-house. Collaborative work methods generate new competences that may readily be invested outside the project itself.

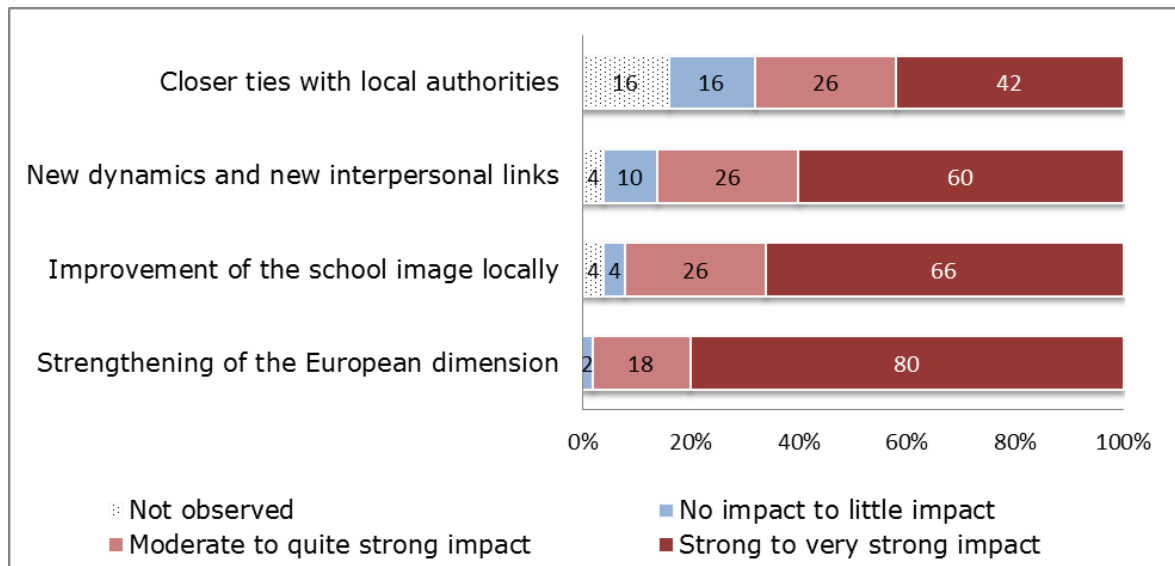
Professional development

Comenius school partnerships help improve teacher-training quality, as they enable the exchange of best practices and stimulate the demand for ongoing training, primarily focused on language skills, as well as on ICT proficiency. The opportunities provided by Comenius training grants ought to be brought to teachers’ attention more effectively, and be more closely interconnected with Comenius school partnerships.

Impact on schools and their environment

Comenius school partnerships make a considerable contribution to strengthening schools’ European dimension, improving their image locally, introducing new dynamics, developing new interpersonal links within them, and fostering closer ties with local authorities.

Figure 4 Impact on schools and their environment



Key factors in increasing impact

The impact that Comenius projects have on partner schools is all the greater when the school head actively supports a project and facilitates its implementation. It increases still further when numerous classes and teachers participate and when the project team implements an in-school communication strategy. Incorporation of activities into the everyday school timetable is also a positive factor. Recognition of tasks accomplished and of competences acquired, along with evaluation of pupils taking part in Comenius projects, are major factors for successful grounding of the project within the school.

Improvement of school image

The unifying aspect to Comenius projects, the greater accountability they require from pupils, and better cohesion within the teaching staff all help improve the atmosphere in schools and create favourable conditions for integration of pupils.

Participation in a Comenius project also helps improve the school’s image locally, testifying to its ability to create ties with partners in Europe, which pupils and parents alike see as a tangible sign of the dynamism and openness of the school, its management and its teaching staff. In the eyes of decision-makers and local authority

representatives, participation in a Comenius project constitutes a major plus for the town or region in which the school is located.

Changes in internal organisation and in the school's educational offer

Comenius school projects set the scene for discussion on new ways of making the best use of school space and time resources. Because they foster interdisciplinarity and an adapted pace of learning, projects require modifications to the timetable, time to be set aside for dialogue between teachers, and suitable adaptation of available school space. Mobilities enable teachers and school heads to compare ways in which school space is organised, encouraging them to give more wide-ranging thought to the interior layout of their schools.

Comenius projects help enrich a school's educational offer, enabling pupils to take part in learning activities that had previously been absent from its programme, and to benefit from newly introduced pedagogical methods. It is the schools' job to incorporate these new learning activities into their curricula – if the educational system provides scope for this – and to perpetuate their use.

Impact on parents and the school environment

Visits carried out confirm that Comenius projects improve the image of participating schools in the eyes of pupils' parents. The impact that projects have on them is closely correlated to the role they are asked to play in the communication strategy and in the activities on offer. The welcome extended to pupils during mobilities is seen by families as a real privilege and an invaluable intercultural experience. Visits to schools showed that school partnership projects also have a positive impact on neighbouring schools and can bring about institutional changes. The impact that projects have on the school environment may be gauged by the degree to which best practices are disseminated and the extension of use of the innovative methods developed.

The school's openness to its environment

By fostering closer ties with local authorities, cultural institutions and companies, Comenius projects also help open up schools to their local communities. They provide opportunities to strengthen ties with local authorities – which are often directly concerned in school management, via reception of foreign partners in particular – and to create synergies between networks. Depending on the themes selected for upcoming projects, schools actively seek out partnerships with associations, specialised institutions and companies.

European openness

Comenius school partnerships have had a major impact on strengthening the European dimension of 80% of schools concerned. In the case of pre-primary and primary schools, school partnerships are one of the only ways of cooperation; in secondary schools, the scheme helps to promote the institutions themselves and is one of the mainsprings of European openness.

Impact perceived after project completion

Interviews carried out several months after completion of projects enabled identification of changes brought about and the ways envisaged to make projects sustainable.

Coordinators confirm the project's impact on pupils, teachers and the school environment, in particular with parents, school partners and the education authorities. They observe that interpersonal ties formed continue after project completion and are maintained by social networking and other communication tools on the Internet.

Dissemination is essentially through project results being made available on a website and their transmission to neighbouring schools.

Analysis of projects carried out by schools after the end of a Comenius school partnership highlights **the depth of schools' interest in this type of cooperation**. In the first few months following the end of the partnerships analysed for this study, 85% of schools had either already submitted new applications or intended to do so within a year. However, funds allocated to the Comenius programme are not yet sufficient to meet the demand from schools in full. Outside Comenius school partnerships, schools do what they can to organise multilateral projects with European counterparts. For many schools, participation in the Comenius sectorial programme provides the only opportunity to travel abroad as part of an exchange project.

Impact differentiated dependent on the type of partnership and the type of school

The specificities of the two types of Comenius school partnerships (bilateral and multilateral) are confirmed after measuring their impact.

With regard to pupils, impact is slightly stronger in the case of Comenius bilateral school partnerships. In bilateral partnerships, communication in a foreign language is the clear front runner due to longer exposure to the language and longer stays, while high pupil participation in projects would appear to be the major contribution of multilateral projects, with regard to the numbers of pupils and the amount of time given over to project activities.

With regard to teachers and the schools themselves, contributions made by Comenius multilateral school partnerships are of greater significance than those made by bilateral partnerships.

Overall, the impact of Comenius school partnerships on participating pupils is strongest at secondary level, although they often concern smaller numbers of pupils. It is clear that pupil mobility, when it is made available, significantly increases project impact.

Comenius school partnerships have greater impact on teachers and on schools and their environments in the case of pre-primary and primary institutions than at secondary level. Here, the impact of Comenius school partnerships is related to the highly mobilising nature of projects implemented in such schools, the incorporation of activities into pupils' curricula, and the key role played by Comenius school partnerships as a means towards European cooperation.

3 Obstacles

The analysis of projects highlighted a certain number of obstacles to implementing Comenius school partnerships.

Organisation

The analysis reveals recurrent weaknesses with regard to dissemination of results, evaluation and self-evaluation strategies, definition of impact indicators, the ability to mobilise the whole educational community and continuance of cooperation.

Administrative weight

The administrative burden, late announcement of results, insufficient mobility, access by and provision of support to first-time applicants and absence of sustainability mechanisms are hindrances to successful implementation in many schools, and lessen the impact of school partnerships.

Compartmentalisation of actions

Analysis of projects reveals a tendency to over-compartmentalise actions and programmes to do with school education within the Comenius sectorial programme (between eTwinning and Comenius school partnerships, for example), between sectorial programmes (for vocational schools, for example) and at the level of "centralised" and "decentralised actions" (Comenius schools being unaware of Comenius multilateral projects).

Lack of competences on the part of project promoters

The competences required for participation in a project are many and specialised, and when the team lacks adequate proficiency in them, the consequences on project implementation as a whole is adverse. Language and computer skills are of particular importance in this respect.

Institutional blocks

Institutional barriers to action also exist, linked to insufficient resources being allocated to mobility, lack of recognition of work accomplished and competences acquired during participation in European projects, in particular with regard to coordinators. Local and national initiatives related to the recognition of quality and dissemination and exploitation remain few and far between, and the lever effect of partnerships on educational systems is limited: schools find it difficult to disseminate the results of projects which they have developed and to influence the development of systems and institutions.

4 Conclusions and recommendations

Effectiveness of the scheme

The results of this study show that Comenius school partnerships make a significant contribution to creating of closer ties between European schools and to improving the quality of education. They do so by fostering exchange of best practices and encounters between various stakeholders on the educational landscape. **The indicators employed throughout this study testify to the effectiveness of short-term mobility programmes** based on project pedagogy and the principle of co-construction of knowledge and identities.

The results of this study are based on data gathered by fieldwork experts and the indicators employed. They confirm, clarify and qualify the conclusions of the 2007 impact study on the same subject, which was based on a survey carried out among beneficiaries.

Significant contribution to schools' openness

Comenius school partnerships make full use of **project pedagogy** – the effectiveness of which in improving the competences of pupils and teachers alike and in fostering intercultural dialogue is widely recognised – **to promote exchanges and schools' openness to the world**. Partnerships also foster distance collaboration between schools, bringing them in line with the eTwinning action, whose closer interconnection with Comenius school partnerships is to be encouraged.

For actors in the field, **school mobility is inextricably linked with Comenius partnerships**. Teachers are clear on the value of mobilities and class exchanges, both with regard to acquisition of new competences and to motivation. For pupils, the

mobility experience has an initiatory aspect to it, constituting the first step on a mobility pathway.

An original initiative, acclaimed by schools

Thanks to mobility and their European dimension Comenius partnerships are **an original initiative with no equivalent in Europe**. For many schools – the most disadvantaged and/or remote in particular – school partnerships financed by EU funds provide the only opportunity for pupil and teacher mobility. 85% of schools covered by this study intended to submit a new application in the year following project completion.

Recommendations

As part of the Lifelong Learning Programme, Comenius school partnerships act as levers of cooperation between European schools. This action, which has been incorporated into the everyday lives of European schools, should be made as widely available as possible. With this in mind, **simplification of procedures** and **relay through pre-existing structured initiatives** with a view to fostering widespread application of the experimental methods and innovations carried out at local level are both well worth giving thought to.

Thought given to creation of an official “European coordinator” status and to its promotion would benefit from being guided by examples identified in this study.

Recognition of mobility by the various educational systems remains an issue, both with regard to competences acquired by teachers and to the incorporation and recognition of mobility in young people’s educational paths, in school and higher education alike.