How to use storytelling in a strategic partnership between higher education and primary schools: writing for inclusion

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Abstract. The European Project "Writing for Inclusion" (WIN) endeavours to raise awareness, to change perceptions and to provide resources on how to implement inclusion through storytelling in the language classroom. This research article sets the principles and tools of the project, while taking into account the creative process of building a story. The Project's ultimate goal is to help build more inclusive education systems that cherish the values of diversity.

Keywords. Storytelling - Strategic partnership - Primary school - In-service teachers - European Union - Inclusive education systems

1. Introduction: Background, main goals and stakeholders

Creating an inclusive community was a primary goal in the process of European integration from its start and this may be the reason why social inclusion has become one of the eleven priorities for Cohesion Policy (2014-2020) within the Europe 2020 Strategy. Indeed, social inclusion has been a long-term key priority for the European Commission in the belief that social cohesion and education played a paramount role to foster social mobility within an equitable society. More recently, the European Commission has launched an initiative called "European Pillar of Social Rights " (2019-2024) which, among other principles, strongly advocated for anchoring a strong social dimension in education in order to attain equity.

In line with these actions, our project "Writing for Inclusion" (WIN) aims to focus not only on rising awareness or changing perceptions to enhance equity but mainly seeks to promote the effective use of digital storytelling as a tool to promote inclusion. In order to mainstream inclusive practices, transnational cooperation among European universities and schools is paramount since it gives the opportunity to act in a problem-related manner that bridges the gap between schools and universities to offer a solution to the existing challenge of setting up a school where all students are treated equally. All in all, this project aims to realize synergies between the different stakeholders involved in the

education of young learners since collaboration may the best way to solve the complex issue of social inclusion in education that Europe is currently facing. Thus, a four-country consortium was created: University of Vic-Central University of Catalonia (Uvic-UCC) from Spain, Università di Firenze from Italy (UNIFI), Eötvös-Loránd University (ELTE) from Hungary, and Poltava V.G. Korolenko National Pedagogikal University (PUET) from Ukraine; and four schools: Les Pinediques, from Spain, Isitituto Compresivo Le Cure from Italy, Erzsébetvárosi Két Tanítási Nyelvű Általános Iskola és Szakgimnázium, from Hungary and Poltava Comprehensive school of I-III degree # 18, from Ukraine.

With regards to the target groups, the project intends to approach in-service teachers, young learners, and more marginally teacher trainees. According to Savic (2009), teachers are "key factors to developing inclusive culture and practices" and their positive beliefs about the benefit of mainstream education are essential to creating inclusive environments. Thus, many international studies (e.g., O'Gorman & Drudy, 2011) confirm that the factors that may favorably impact on teachers' attitudes towards inclusion in the classroom are related to being properly trained and having adequate classroom resources. Pupils are also crucial since when children are exposed to inclusion at an early age, they are more likely to accept disabilities in their environment (Rafferty et al., 2001). Nonetheless, this attitude may wane if not specifically supported by school practices and this is why digital storytelling could be a suitable method to increase the motivation of students towards diversity within their school curriculum. Inclusive schools must respond to the needs of their pupils by ensuring appropriate curricula in the belief that diversity should be valued and not "tolerated" or "accepted". Finally, universities are also relevant stakeholders. According to Crawford and Porter (2004), Higher Education institutions should prepare student teachers for diversity and inclusion in regular classrooms and should also develop ongoing professional development for in-service teachers. Additionally, Slee (2010) has argued that one of the most relevant areas for promoting inclusive practice is pre-service teachers' understanding of its implementation in classroom practice.

2. Methodology: The creative process of building a story

As Ros-Garcia (2013) states, children's books are a transmitter tool that has been used in our cultures for many years, since tales have an educational behavior that influence on people's identity construction. The process of building a story, into children's hands, can be a challenge for primary teachers if they do not have the right tools to do so. There are some narrative structures which are key to constructing stories for children (Canals-Botines, 2020). Those structures may be very useful to create a story that is designed for classroom teaching and can be very helpful to teach relevant topics such as care in education.

When children are involved in the creation of a piece of work, they focus mainly on the steps and on the final objective of the creation. In the Win Project case, the objective is to tell a story dealing with inclusion. Primary teachers take first an online course to learn how to build a story and how to transform their learning into a practical process within their primary classrooms (9- to 10-year-old pupils). They learn how to build stories departing from three different narrative structures and round up their training by choosing one of the structures and building an animated story. These stories will serve

to primary teachers as examples to showcase their pupils and will be samples that may be used to model the children's writing.

The process, in the primary classroom will be led by the teacher and divided into 12 sessions, in which children will be grouped in teams of 4. They will have to learn from the structures and examples in order to decide what narrative structure to take. Next, they will start making their own decisions: what structure to take, and what elements of the story they need. Therefore, the animations will be chosen by the team and a first presentation will be done by a spokesperson to the rest of the class.

Subsequently, they will be following the guidelines given by the teacher in order to build the animated story. To finish, a group member will present it to the rest of the class. Those stories will be shared and presented to the school partners within the framework of the eTwinning platform.

3. Project results

In terms of the project results, WIN will create the following outcomes:

- An open access learning platform. It will gather practices and transfer experiences among the participating universities and schools in the area of Inclusion. This platform will collect information about how diversity in education has been tackled and how digital storytelling may be an instrument to raise children's awareness and to promote integration. The web portal will also be a forum to share knowledge and it will offer resources and strategies for all the project participants. Eventually, it will host the final version of the training package and, upon the project's completion, the platform will continue to run as a source of support for practitioners since it will be open access to the educational community.
- Online modules. Their main goal is to reappraise the teachers' attitude towards diversity and to sensitize them to the teaching styles suitable for spreading our view of Inclusion. At the same time, the learning materials aim to equip teachers with practical suggestions on how to use narrative structures and with online guidance to implement digital storytelling. The modules will provide theoretical knowledge (core reading resources), practical resources (useful websites) and they will explore the creation processes of writing to promote social, cultural and learning diversity.
- Learning-focused animations. They will be a bank of digital resources that children will use to elaborate their stories on inclusion in peer-to-peer scenarios. Animations not only attract and capture attention, but also have a cognitive purpose since they provide more and different information than words. Also, animations connect what children do in the classroom to the rich media world that they live in.
- A school toolkit. It will be developed to aid participants (teachers and students) through all the steps that are to be followed to create a digital story. This online pack will cover the technical processes of how to make the most of the animation toolkit, and it will give recommendations on how to implement the materials in the classroom. This guide will include a sample of a digital animated story for the classroom too.

- A training activity. It will combine e-learning modules (20h) that different partners can choose according to their teaching needs, and face-to-face sessions following a blended methodology. The training activity attempts to act as a stimulus for teachers to acquire knowledge in the field of "Care" and also to familiarize participants with the role of storytelling in integration. The main idea is to encourage the sharing of teaching experiences and eventually create a network of European educators that are interested in gaining deeper understanding and bringing those procedures to their schools.
- A multiplier event. This final event aims to disseminate the project outcomes and reach out to the local community. We foresee around a hundred attendees, namely, families, pre-service teachers, practitioners, primary school administrators, education city counselors, education lecturers and researchers, members of the Catalan, the Spanish Parliament or the European Parliament and members of the Regional/Spanish Government.
- Digital tales. Primary school students will elaborate inclusive stories that will be shared in an eTwinning project among partner schools. Similarly, pre-service teachers will create their own tales after observing and evaluating the project implementation. Those students will be awarded with 6ECTS upon completion of their assignments within the framework of a Literature University Module.

4. Conclusion: The benefits of a European partnership

As for the long-term benefits, the online resources and materials will be used openly by schools, administrators, researchers, teachers and students from participating and non-participating countries. Besides, training in-service teachers though life-learning programs at some of the consortium's universities will also be considered. More specifically participating organizations will benefit by sharing knowledge and best practices to develop and implement innovative approaches for inclusion in education while participating in online virtual exchange activities (eTwinning for schools and the learning platform for universities)

As for participants and target groups, In-service teachers will gain more insight into how inclusive practices can be implemented to mainstream students. Educators will be given the opportunity to share their best practices with other colleagues from partner countries and to cooperate with educators through co-creation of materials and participation in joint workshops. Furthermore, WIN will help practitioners acquire intercultural skills in the area of education and they will have access to increased opportunities for internationalization via online collaboration (eTwinning project). Last but not least, the WIN project may contribute to making the school a place more open to innovation and may empower teachers to become the spearhead of change.

Children are the main target of our consortium and the project itself stresses the importance of creativity and online literacy to encourage more inclusive attitudes towards diversity in mainstream pupils. They will be given the multimedia tools, the narrative structures and the examples to be able to create a short sample of digital storytelling. Their creativity will weave together text, images, music and possibly video that will promote creative e-learning, non-discriminatory attitudes and the development of literacy in both L1 and L2.

Schools will benefit from being part of WIN because they will implement innovative practices to enhance integration, they will include emerging academic skills such as online competence, they will provide professional development for their practitioners and eventually they will raise the school's profile and gain visibility in the local community as a hub for social cohesion practices.

More marginally, teacher trainees will also raise their awareness on inclusion thorough classroom observation and peer reporting. Their placement at school will make them potential users of the project materials in their future classroom. WIN aims to make pre-service teachers aware of the need for inclusive attitudes and practices and also wants to foster the use of technology for academic purposes with young and very young learners.

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