



# Cross-cultural collaboration

It is well known that health problems are both local and global, as the world is becoming increasingly interconnected. Therefore, integrating the international dimension in the schoolwork addressing health issues holds an important place in the Shape Up methodological framework.

Research has shown that cross-cultural collaboration enhances pupils' motivation and commitment to learn and participate in the project's actions<sup>13</sup>. Furthermore, it contributes to the development of the sense of the other: a sense for cultural, socio-historical, political, geographical differences and similarities concerning health, care for the other and the variety of possible strategies to address health-related problems.

In cross-cultural collaboration, children and young people are encouraged to think both locally and globally. They get to know about the ideas and opinions of their peers in the other European cities concerning health and wellbeing, eating traditions, opportunities for physical activity and body movement. The mutual feedback and reactions shared among peers bring in new perspectives in pupils' thinking and reflection about their own culture and the values, attitudes and lifestyles they normally take for granted. This is additionally inspiring for getting new action ideas and suggestions for health-promoting changes in their own lives and environments.

The research and evaluation findings linked to another project, which was focused on the issue of alcohol consumption and health, but which used a similar educational approach including cross-cultural collaboration<sup>14</sup>, showed that both teachers' and pupils' experience with international collaboration was quite positive, despite a number of barriers that required participants to be creative to overcome them. Below are some quotations highlighting their perspectives.

The teachers emphasised the importance of cross-cultural teamwork for the development of the pupils' global awareness, respect for differences, social care and responsibility. This excerpt from an interview with one of the teachers illustrates this point:

"I think pupils learn that we are all alike and, at the same time, we have different life experiences because we come from different countries and different conditions. It is good for pupils to realise this on a more global level, the global sameness, if you like."

<sup>13</sup> SIMOVSKA and JENSEN, 2003; SIMOVSKA, 2005.

<sup>14</sup> SIMOVSKA and JENSEN, 2003.

The teachers in the Young Minds project also pointed out a number of difficulties including, for example, lack of time, lack of coordination between the classes, age differences between the pupils, language barriers, etc. However, the quotation below shows that the teachers in this project considered the barriers as challenges rather than insurmountable obstacles:

"I cannot see difficulties, only challenges. Pupils took it as a challenge and they were very much involved. They saw that it was not that difficult to write e-mails in English, for example; they slowly improved and could see that it was easier than they first thought. It was just slower at the beginning and, when they improved, they did not even have to use a dictionary, they could do without."

The accounts from the pupils in the same research showed that, for them, it was important and interesting to learn about the traditions, conditions and lifestyles in other cultures and countries:

"I think I learned a lot about other cultural habits related to drinking. You get to know about habits in other countries and not only in your own. That was interesting for me."

"Their cultures are different. We have different customs related to drinking, different habits, and we think differently about alcohol. It was interesting to hear about this and compare it to our culture."

In order to use the benefits of cross-cultural collaboration, Shape Up suggests that European cooperation represents an integral part of the project planning, implementation and evaluation. Children and young people should be involved in the planning of the joint projects and exchange of ideas on food, eating and body movement with their peers in the other European cities. The Shape Up portal provides excellent opportunities for this collaboration.

At the school as well as school-community level, the project activities should allow for complementarity and mutuality among the pupils. Children and young people from the different schools and cities involved in Shape Up should use one another in different stages of the project.

**(S+)I** In the **Selection and Investigation** phase, pupils from different cities can share and exchange their ideas about the aspects of the issue of food and body movement with which they would like to work in more depth. They can mutually inspire each other and create a bank of ideas and topics that would be interesting to address as part of Shape Up. All these ideas could be published on the public pages of the Internet portal and serve as an inspiration to draw upon throughout the project.

Further, pupils can explore diverse aspects of food and body movement in a variety of cultures and contexts; investigate mobility conditions and possibilities in the different cities; look into the eating patterns and physical activity habits of their peers in different countries; compare differences and similarities; identify the unique characteristics of each class/school/city; as well as explore what they have in common.

**V** In the **Vision** phase, pupils in the different European cities involved in Shape Up can create joint visions, using their creative energy and imagination to envisage solutions to health problems relating to an unbalanced diet and lack of physical activity. Some examples could include: the school canteen of our dreams; the healthiest menu, which is also FUN and TASTY; a school on the move, a non-sedentary school; an active and healthy city; the ideal school of the future; the city as a playground; transport of the future, etc.

**A+C** In the **Action and Change** phase, pupils can share their ideas about possible changes at a school or local level. Furthermore, they can provide each other with feedback and suggestions about how to take action and bring about change; the key people in the local community who can make changes happen; the best strategies to approach them; how to ensure support from the adults in the community, etc. They can even plan and take joint actions to influence European policies concerning food, diet, physical activity and young people's health and wellbeing.

**(E)** In the **Evaluation or Reflection** phase, pupils can share and celebrate successes with their peers internationally, and they can learn from each other's barriers and obstacles. They can discuss with the pupils from the other Shape Up schools and cities, for example, what barriers they came up against; how they overcame the obstacles; who supported them; what could have been done better; advice for the future; similar health-promotion processes, etc., all of which is a valuable experience that is conducive to the development of action competence.

The Shape Up Internet portal, particularly the Virtual Classroom section, plays a crucial role in integrating the European cooperation in the project work. This section of the portal should be used to create an effective cross-cultural learning environment, whereby pupils publish web contents jointly, exchange ideas and opinions, share information and document actions and changes initiated as part of their Shape Up work.

## Tips and advice

### Working with cross-cultural collaboration

Various strategies could be developed to ensure effective web-based communication between pupils. Below are a few ideas that can be used as points of departure:

- Involve European cooperation in the project planning from the very beginning.
- Mind-map with the pupils, and engage them in selecting specific topics and ways in which they would like to collaborate with their peers from the other Shape Up schools and cities.
- Team up with schools from the other Shape Up cities to work jointly on some aspects of the Shape Up work.
- Establish joint cross-cultural pupil teams to work as web-editors. This team, supported by teachers and the Shape Up facilitators, could be responsible for coordinating the presentation of the contents of the virtual classroom section in the Shape Up portal.
- Appoint teams of pupils of different ages to facilitate the portal-based discussion forum among the pupils.
- Plan together (teachers, Shape Up facilitators and pupils from the partner schools) a specific timetable for the project collaboration which takes into account time differences between countries, as well as school schedules and holidays.
- Discuss Internet ethics with pupils and make sure that they know the safety rules for using the Internet.
- Help pupils to present their ideas, visions, actions, etc. on the website in multiple ways: drawings, photos, mind maps, videos, etc., in addition to text.