Sonja Kovačević, PhD, Full Professor
University of Split
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
sonja@ffst.hr
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6563-1231

Sara Pivac, M.A. in Pedagogy
"Izvor" Kindergarten, Solin
spivac@ffst.hr
https://orcid.org/0009-0004-4953-2339

Sandra Jovišić, M.Ed. in Early Childhood Education
"Cvit Mediterana" Kindergarten, Split
sandra.jovisic@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0002-1457-296

COMMUNICATION, COLLABORATION, AND NETWORKING THROUGH THE ESEP

Abstract: *The European School Education Platform (ESEP) serves as a hub for interaction, collaboration, and networking among educational professionals, aiming to increase the quality of education across Europe. A study conducted in Croatia involved a sample of 174 participants. An online structured questionnaire was designed for the research. The primary objective was to examine the knowledge, experiences, and attitudes of educational professionals in preschools, primary, and secondary schools in Croatia regarding the ESEP and eTwinning projects. Data analysis revealed that over half of the respondents were familiar with the ESEP, whereas a significant majority demonstrated substantial knowledge of eTwinning projects, regardless of the type of educational institution in which they worked. Findings related to the evaluation scale of eTwinners' experiences indicate considerable variability in their experiences. Globalization trends and the demands of modern life present numerous challenges for educational professionals, necessitating their commitment to lifelong learning, with a particular focus on enhancing communication and digital skills.*

Keywords*: eTwinning, communication, preschools, schools*

INTRODUCTION

Given the globalization trends accompanying the evolution of modern society, education must align with the realities of digital transformation. It is imperative to develop resources accessible to all educational professionals, enabling them to strengthen their digital skills and competencies while keeping pace with emerging educational trends. In the context of contemporary society, characterized by processes of European integration, dynamic development, and the growing significance of digital media, online content, including various educational platforms, has become an essential tool for connecting educators across different cultures and institutions. Accordingly, this study focuses on communication, collaboration, and networking through the European School Education Platform (ESEP). The motivation for exploring this area lies in the scarcity of studies and research in Croatia addressing collaborative online networks that connect educational professionals across Europe. The first part of the paper provides a brief overview of scientific insights related to communication, collaboration, and networking, with an emphasis on the ESEP and its eTwinning projects. This is followed by a presentation and analysis of the results obtained from a study investigating the knowledge and experiences of educational professionals concerning the ESEP and eTwinning projects, including their attitudes toward communication, collaboration, and networking. The scientific contribution of this paper is significant, as no similar research has been conducted in Croatia, even though Croatian educational professionals are active members of the eTwinning community and recipients of numerous quality labels for their participation in eTwinning projects. This topic is approached with the hope that, in addition to its research value, this paper will provide practical benefits for educational professionals in preschools, primary, and secondary schools.

COMMUNICATION, NETWORKING, AND INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION

Communication is a process in which shared content is created between a source and a recipient through the exchange of various symbols (Antolović & Sviličić, 2020). The precondition for initiating communication is the need for it, meaning there must be a purpose in the form of a message to be conveyed (Jurković, 2012). Successful communication is characterized by the highest possible alignment of meaning between the sent and received messages (Rouse & Rouse, 2005). Jurković (2012) identifies four primary types of communication: oral, written, contact (nonverbal), and e-communication. Electronic communication, or e-communication, represents a modern form of interaction that increasingly replaces traditional communication, leveraging information and communication technology through electronic means. Every organization,

including those in the educational sector, functions as a communication network where information is exchanged to achieve specific outcomes (Jurković, 2012). The accessibility and convenience of e-communication make it indispensable in modern society, playing a critical role in international collaboration by enabling faster and more efficient interactions among individuals and organizations. Interpersonal communication on an intercultural level poses a significant challenge for individuals, offering a competitive advantage in their professional field (Antolović & Sviličić, 2020). Intercultural awareness is a cognitive component of intercultural communication competence, encompassing the ability to recognize similarities and differences between cultures (Gulbay, 2022). Effective intercultural communication requires specific knowledge and skills, including sensitivity to and understanding of contexts distinct from one's own (Rouse & Rouse, 2005).

The importance of interaction, collaboration, and cooperation in educational practice is consistently emphasized. Quality collaboration among all participants in the educational process is essential for fostering a healthy environment in which children can develop (Srok & Skočić Mihić, 2012). While parents and educators play distinct yet complementary roles in the educational process (Ličanin, 2023), the harmonious integration of family and institutional education results from strong collaborative relationships (Strelec, 2023). The path to improved educational practices is shaped by individuals' readiness for lifelong learning. Greene (1996, as cited in Buljubašić-Kuzmanović, 2009) highlights cooperative learning, teamwork, and collaboration as essential activities for success in the 21st century. Accordingly, new strategies are needed to promote quality in educational processes. Indicators of quality related to interpersonal relationships are often linked to cooperative learning, which fosters affirmation, communication, and collaboration (Buljubašić-Kuzmanović, 2009). Educators should embrace new technologies and opportunities for networking to support lifelong learning and continuously enhance their practices (Zorić-Beslema, 2013). The processes of globalization and European integration present significant challenges to education systems at all levels (Gehrmann, 2008). Addressing these challenges necessitates coordination and the establishment of reform strategies for national systems, which, in turn, requires international collaboration (Gehrmann, 2008). Achieving shared educational goals based on principles of competitiveness, tolerance, inclusivity, and democracy fosters coordination (Puljiz & Živčić, 2009, as cited in Baketa, 2012). These goals, set by the EU Council, aim to achieve prosperity and progress through lifelong learning, relying on knowledge sharing among member states (Baketa, 2012).

Networking plays a vital role in education by providing a framework for the professional development of educators and integrating the fragmented field of lifelong learning. Networks can be seen as organizational solutions to address the diversity and complexity of educational needs (Bienzle et al., 2007, as cited

in Cachia & Punie, 2012). Professional development refers to activities that enable educators to enhance their work in educational institutions (Little, 1987, as cited in Kostas & Ioannidou, 2023). Networks serve as essential channels for communication and collaboration, facilitating the exchange of knowledge and best practices (Leproni, 2023). Education in postmodern societies is characterized by flexibility, democratic principles, and the inclusion of individuals and diverse social groups in the educational process (Kostas & Ioannidou, 2023). Networks developed by future educators can provide support, mentoring, and access to scientifically validated practices and resources (Carroll & Resta, 2010, as cited in Cachia & Punie, 2012). Educators should ensure learning experiences that emphasize innovation and creativity, values increasingly highlighted in modern societies (Cachia et al., 2010; Johnson et al., 2011, as cited in Cachia & Punie, 2012).

Although substantial research addresses the future of learning and educators' roles, little attention is given to their collaboration through networking (Cachia & Punie, 2012). Cachia and Punie (2012) note that educators view information and communication networks positively to improve the quality of their work and express a strong desire for greater collaboration with peers, especially across cultures and nations. The concept of learning communities among educators or students emphasizes fostering a sense of belonging and establishing shared goals (Leproni, 2023). Networks are characterized by inclusion, integration, and interaction, aiming to create environments that embrace diversity and promote meaningful participation (Leproni, 2023). Through collaborative projects, educators can encourage local communities to address global challenges (Leproni, 2023). Such networks cultivate a sense of responsibility for sustainable development and a shared future.

THE EUROPEAN SCHOOL EDUCATION PLATFORM

The European School Education Platform (ESEP) was launched in 2022 as a free, multilingual platform that connects and supports education professionals across all levels of education, from early childhood education and care to primary, secondary, and initial vocational education and training. The platform unifies previous platforms such as eTwinning, School Education Gateway, and Teacher Academy into a single entity. Funded by the European Union's Erasmus+ Programme for education and training and supported by partner organizations, ESEP is an initiative of the European Commission. The platform offers a wide range of resources, including reports on recent research, examples of good practices, educational materials developed through European projects, and a variety of tools for schools, as well as a self-assessment instrument. Another key feature of the platform is its free online courses, seminars, and teaching materials available via the EU Academy for professional development.

ESEP is available in 30 languages, including Croatian (ESEP, 2024). As Howell (2010, cited in Acar & Peker, 2021) states, such online learning communities provide valuable opportunities for the professional development of education staff. Acar and Peker (2021) suggest that using a platform positively influences educators' perceptions of pedagogy, technology, professional development, innovative practices, and lifelong learning.

eTWINNING

eTwinning embodies a methodology, pedagogical approach, a community of practitioners, and a platform that enables innovation, communication, and collaboration (ESEP, 2022, as cited in Horvat, 2022, p. 124). Zhu et al. (2013, as cited in Giannis, 2022) view eTwinning as a tool for advancing innovative teaching methods through the development of educational, social, and technological competencies, which place the transformation of education at the global level at its core. Networks such as eTwinning undoubtedly contribute to accelerating educational changes and spreading pedagogical innovations at a systemic level (Kostas & Ioannidou, 2023). The goal of eTwinning is to strengthen international collaboration and professional development among educators registered on the platform. The eTwinning community is funded by national support services – the Agency for Mobility and EU Programmes (AMPEU) from Erasmus+ funds, based on a grant agreement from the European Executive Agency for Education and Culture (ESEP, 2024). AMPEU plays a key role in disseminating information, organizing conferences, competitions, training workshops, and supporting educators at all levels of involvement (Pietrzak, 2009). eTwinning, which started as a local initiative, now represents a community of 1,053,000 educators from 233,000 educational institutions across over 40 countries (ESEP, 2024). Leproni (2023) refers to it as the largest European community of practitioners. The primary aim of this community is to foster interaction and collaboration between children and educators through participation in joint virtual projects via a secure digital platform.

Through communication, collaboration, and joint project work, registered members of the eTwinning community exchange knowledge, ideas, and experiences, enriching their work with children. Furthermore, educators gain insights into how education functions in other countries, becoming familiar with curricula, values, and principles applied in their work with children (Horvat, 2022). Crisan (2013) states that the ultimate goal is to improve the quality of education in Europe through collaboration and the exchange of ideas, while Dominguez-Miguela (2007, as cited in Huertas-Abril & Palacios-Hidalgo, 2023) identifies six key objectives of eTwinning: networking European schools, encouraging educators and children to participate in projects, fostering the European dimension in education, raising awareness of multilingualism

and multiculturalism in European society, enhancing intercultural dialogue and understanding, and supporting the professional and digital skills development of educators.

Recently, the concept of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) has appeared in the literature. Rubin (2017, as cited in Huertas-Abril & Palacios-Hidalgo, 2023) defines this concept as an innovative educational approach that uses modern technology to mediate intercultural interactions and collaborative learning between children and educators from different countries, promoting global understanding. eTwinning can be considered one of the prominent COIL initiatives (Huertas-Abril & Palacios-Hidalgo, 2023). Vuorikari (2010, as cited in Cachia & Punie, 2012) describes eTwinners as innovators, individuals capable and willing to engage in international collaboration via Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The desire to meet personal needs within the educational process often sparks the need for collaboration with others (Başari & Ada, 2023).

The digitalization of all aspects of life and the rise of the internet have significantly impacted educators' work. Educators in Europe believe that the use of ICT tools has positively affected their work, with 85% of respondents indicating that they use various ICT models in their teaching practices (Cachia, Ferrari, Ala-Mutka & Punie, 2010, as cited in Cachia & Punie, 2012). Regarding skills, the respondents report that digital competence is one of the main competencies they have developed through eTwinning participation. Following closely behind is cultural competence, which has been enhanced by using online tools that allow users to virtually meet and design collaborative projects via the platform. The further development of interpersonal skills, such as communication, collaboration, and time management, is another positive outcome of eTwinning participation. When the collaboration is international, the development of foreign language communication skills is also noteworthy (Cachia & Punie, 2012). Cachia and Punie (2012) observe that a smaller number of respondents also report improved management skills, such as leadership, initiative-taking, support provision, and team coordination. Given all these benefits, educators who are also eTwinners express a desire to expand the eTwinning network and increase its user base. Despite the significant growth in the number of users in recent years, the number remains symbolic compared with the overall population of educators in Europe. Schön (1983, as cited in Leproni, 2023, p. 125) introduces the concept of the "reflective practitioner" in the educational context, emphasizing the need for professionals to reflect on their actions as they occur. By participating in ongoing reflection, educators have the opportunity to adjust their practices in real time, resulting in continuous progress and improvement of pedagogical outcomes (Leproni, 2023). eTwinning projects provide educators with opportunities to implement this practice.

eTWINNING PROJECTS

By participating in eTwinning projects, educational professionals engage in situational and informal learning, acquiring new skills and competencies within the context of their daily work (Nucci, Tosi & Pettenati Carocci, 2021). Zandravelli (2017; cited in Kostas & Ioannidou, 2023), following the research results, concludes that educators strengthen their existing formal education through this informal learning, adopting collaborative and self-regulated learning methods within a community context. Additionally, they capitalize on what they have learned in their daily work with children, thus continuing their professional development and self-education, leading to greater job satisfaction (Kostas & Ioannidou, 2023).

A precondition for ensuring a high-quality learning environment for children and the development of their potential is the continuous enhancement of the knowledge, skills, and competencies of educators (Horvat, 2022). The National Curriculum for Early Childhood and Preschool Education (2015: 29) states that "the readiness of educators and other professionals in preschools to embrace new forms of professional learning involves an ongoing process of research and collaborative learning among all professionals in the institution". Professional development for educators includes the continuous development of all competencies and readiness for lifelong learning (Slunjski et al., 2006; cited in Horvat, 2022). The challenges of modern times demand the development of a diverse range of competencies. For educators, these include: developing new, modern strategies for planning educational processes, improving digital skills and using information technology, communicating in foreign languages, fostering intercultural understanding, and cultivating initiative and entrepreneurship through the ability to plan and manage projects (Horvat, 2022).

The 2019 eTwinning report reveals a connection between participation in eTwinning projects and the development of educators' skills and professional practices (Horvat, 2022). A survey of 10,000 eTwinners revealed development in areas such as project-based learning, improving the technological knowledge essential for educational work, collaboration with other educational professionals, and the ability to select optimal teaching strategies (Horvat, 2022). Crisan (2013) reports findings indicating that eTwinning facilitates the transfer of knowledge from other educational systems (87%), strengthens the sense of belonging to the professional community (85%), supports educators in taking on more significant roles in working with students (72%), and links the formal curriculum with engaging and motivating educational activities (85%). Regarding continuous professional development, as many as 90% of respondents indicated that collaborative educational projects were the most significant factor, and 89% mentioned close collaboration with educators

from other countries for cultural exchange and language skills improvement. Furthermore, 81% of the respondents reported improved relationships with other educators within their institution and across institutions, as well as the implementation of collaborative activities or experience exchanges after participating in eTwinning. Another benefit of participating in eTwinning projects is the opportunity for educators to critically reflect on their pedagogical practices and consider the implicit pedagogy concerning children. These moments arise because they have connected with other practitioners from different parts of Europe, thus encountering various approaches to education and raising awareness of cultural differences and similarities (Horvat, 2022).

It is noteworthy that collaboration within this professional development network is characterized by greater synergy and cooperation than collaboration that occurs within individual institutions (Bettini, 2021). Bettini (2021) observes that this difference stems from a greater readiness to provide mutual support, as relationships within the eTwinning community tend to be more symmetrical than those within institutions. Additionally, respondents noted that better collaboration resulted from the quality of interpersonal relationships formed among eTwinners and the mutual recognition of each other's competencies (Bettini, 2021). This is further confirmed by Hargreaves (1998; cited in Bettini, 2021), who suggests that the emotional dimension of relationships among colleagues can be crucial in the process of co-constructing and enhancing their professional identity. International projects within eTwinning increase the number of interactions and establish communication among partners, which influences the development of intercultural perspectives (İzgi Onbaşili, 2022). Collaborative tasks in projects foster not only professional skills but also teamwork, considering various perspectives and suggestions from international partners (Tonner-Saunders & Shimi, 2021; cited in İzgi Onbaşili, 2022).

Outstanding projects may receive the eTwinning European Award and become part of the project gallery. The European Quality Label (EQL) is an internationally recognized distinction for work on an eTwinning project, acknowledging the fulfillment of specific quality criteria (Giannis, 2022). It is awarded to educational professionals for their project work and reflects emerging trends in assessing the quality of educational processes (Young, 2012; Papadimitriou & Niari, 2017; cited in Giannis, 2022). Interestingly, Croatia has the highest number of EQLs awarded among 44 countries (140 EQLs per million people), followed by Turkey with 70, and North Macedonia with 58 (Giannis, 2022). The versatility, flexibility, interculturality, multilingualism, skill development, innovation, professional development, collaboration, broadening horizons, and networking of educational professionals at the European level underscore the importance of eTwinning in the education of generations of educators and children alike (İzgi Onbaşili, 2022).

AIMS OF THE STUDY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aim of this research is to determine whether educators in preschool institutions, primary and secondary schools in Croatia know about the ESEP and eTwinning projects. Furthermore, the study aims to explore the experiences of eTwinners and how they assess communication, collaboration, and networking with other educational professionals across Europe. Additionally, the study seeks to examine educators' attitudes toward communication, collaboration, and networking.

Based on the research aim, the following research questions were formulated: Do educators in Croatia possess knowledge of the ESEP? If so, how did they acquire this knowledge, and are they using it in communication, collaboration, and networking with other educational professionals in Europe? Do educators in Croatia know about eTwinning projects, and if so, how did they acquire this knowledge? What are the experiences of eTwinners related to creating and participating in eTwinning projects? What are educators' attitudes toward communication, collaboration, and networking with other educational professionals?

METHODOLOGY

The empirical research was conducted on a sample of 174 participants, including 168 women (96.6%) and 6 men (3.4%). Regarding their workplace, 104 (59.8%) educational professionals were from preschools, 39 (22.4%) from primary schools, and 31 (17.8%) from secondary schools. A total of 93 (53.4%) participants held a higher education degree, while 81 (46.6%) had a higher vocational education degree. The age of the participants and their years of work experience in educational institutions are presented in Tables 1 and 2 below.

Table 1.

Age of Participants

Age group	f	%
> 25 years	7	4,0
26 – 35 years	31	17,8
36 – 45 years	66	37,9
46 – 55 years	50	28,7
< 55 years	20	11,5
Total	174	100,0

Table 2.

Years of Work Experience in Educational Institutions

Years of Experience in Educational Institutions	f	%
0 – 5 years	17	9.8
6 – 10 years	40	23.0
11 – 15 years	23	13.2
16 – 20 years	39	22.4
21 – 25 years	22	12.6
26 – 30 years	16	9.2
31 – 35 years	11	6.3
More than 35 years	6	3.4
Total	174	100.0

The research was conducted in May 2024 on a sample of early childhood educators, primary and secondary school teachers in Croatia via an online survey method. The collected data were analyzed via descriptive statistical procedures (percentages, frequencies, means, and standard deviations). For the purposes of this research, a questionnaire was developed. The instrument consisted of general demographic questions (gender, age, level of education, years of work experience in educational institutions, type of educational institution), as well as questions related to knowledge of the ESEP and eTwinning projects. A Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 was used to assess experiences related to eTwinning projects and opinions about communication, collaboration, and networking among educational professionals. The scale values were as follows: 1 – "Strongly disagree"; 2 – "Disagree"; 3 – "Neither agree nor disagree"; 4 – "Agree"; 5 – "Strongly agree".

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first section of the questionnaire examined the knowledge of educational staff regarding ESEP. Based on this, the following questions were posed: Have they heard of the ESEP? If yes, how did they come across information about the platform? Are they familiar with the platform and its features, and do they utilize the communication, collaboration, and networking opportunities it offers?

The results indicated that 60.3% (f=105) of the respondents were aware of the ESEP, while 39.7% (f=69) had never heard of it. These results are not surprising considering that the ESEP has only been in existence since 2022, highlighting the need for additional informational outreach to educational professionals through various channels. Table 3 presents a comparison of the results based on the type of educational institution where the respondents work.

Table 3.

Awareness of the ESEP

Educational Institution	Heard of the ESEP	Never Heard of the ESEP	Total
Preschool	56.1% (f=59)	65.2% (f=45)	59.8% (f=104)
Primary School	24.8% (f=26)	18.8% (f=13)	22.4% (f=39)
Secondary School	19% (f=20)	15.9% (f=11)	17.8% (f=31)
Total	60.3% (f=105)	39.7% (f=69)	100% (f=174)

Information about the ESEP was most frequently obtained by respondents from colleagues (19%) and within their institution (17.2%). A smaller portion learned about it during professional conferences (6.3%), on websites (12.6%), and through social media (4.6%). A group of 20.1% of respondents indicated that they were familiar with the platform and its capabilities. However, the majority, 48.3%, stated that they were not familiar with the platform and its features, while 31.6% were somewhat familiar. Table 4 presents a comparison of the results based on the type of educational institution.

Table 4.

Knowledge of the ESEP

Educational Institution	Fully Familiar with ESEP and Its Features	Not Familiar with ESEP and Its Features	Somewhat Familiar with ESEP and Its Features	Total
Preschool	51.4% (f=18)	65.5% (f=55)	56.4% (f=31)	59.8% (f=104)
Primary School	28.5% (f=10)	27.8% (f=15)	25.5% (f=14)	22.4% (f=39)
Secondary School	20% (f=7)	20.2% (f=14)	18.2% (f=10)	17.8% (f=31)
Total	20.1% (f=35)	48.3% (f=84)	31.6% (f=55)	100% (f=174)

Only 3.4% of the respondents indicated that they regularly use the communication, collaboration, and networking features of the ESEP, while 8.6% use them occasionally, and 9.8% rarely use them. The majority of the respondents (78.2%) stated that they do not use these features. A comparison of the results revealed that respondents from primary and secondary schools more frequently utilize the communication, collaboration, and networking features of the ESEP than those from preschools do. This suggests that employees in

preschools lag behind those in primary and secondary schools. The modern era enables collaboration and networking with colleagues anytime and anywhere (Cachia & Punie, 2012), but it seems that educational professionals still lack sufficient knowledge about networks that facilitate the exchange of knowledge and best practices (Leproni, 2023). Given that the ESEP serves as a meeting point for educational professionals at all levels of education, is available in Croatia, and is free of charge (ESEP, 2024), the lack of awareness is surprising. This emphasizes the need for further efforts to inform educational professionals in Croatia.

The second section of the questionnaire focused on the knowledge of educational staff regarding eTwinning projects. Based on this, the following questions were posed: Have they heard of eTwinning projects? If yes, how did they come across information about eTwinning projects, and do they know what an eTwinning project entails?

The results showed that 94.3% of the respondents had heard of eTwinning projects, while 5.7% had never heard of them. This result is expected given that eTwinning was established in 2005. Table 5 presents a comparison of the results based on the type of educational institution.

Table 5.

Awareness of eTwinning Projects

Educational Institution	Heard of eTwinning Projects	Never Heard of eTwinning Projects	Total
Preschool	59.1% (f=97)	70% (f=7)	59.8% (f=104)
Primary School	23.8% (f=39)	0	22.4% (f=39)
Secondary School	17.1% (f=28)	30% (f=3)	17.8% (f=31)
Total	94.6% (f=164)	5.7% (f=10)	100% (f=174)

Information about eTwinning projects was most frequently obtained from colleagues (35.1%) and within their institution (31.6%). A smaller portion learned about it during professional conferences (11.5%), on websites (8.6%), and through social media (4.6%). A smaller group, 17.2%, was unaware of what an eTwinning project entails. Approximately equal proportions of respondents (42.5%) were either fully familiar with what an eTwinning project involves or only somewhat familiar (40.2%). It was found that respondents generally possess a high level of knowledge regarding eTwinning projects, with information about their content and structure acquired mainly from colleagues and within their institutions. There were no significant differences based on the type of educational institution. eTwinning is a platform that contributes to the learning of both educational professionals and children through the use of

technology (Özen & Çiray Özkara, 2023), intending to promote international collaboration and professional development (ESEP, 2024). It is encouraging to note that Croatian educational staff possess a high level of knowledge about eTwinning, described as the largest European community of practitioners by Leproni (2023).

The third section of the questionnaire explored eTwinners' experiences in participating in eTwinning projects. The following questions were posed: Have they participated in or initiated any eTwinning projects? Have they received a quality label for an eTwinning project, and does the institution they work in hold the eTwinning School label? Additionally, respondents who had participated in eTwinning projects were asked to rate 19 statements about their involvement via a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5.

The results revealed that 20.1% of the respondents had participated in an eTwinning project, while 45.4% had never participated despite being part of the eTwinning community. A smaller percentage, 5.7%, identified themselves as the initiators of at least one eTwinning project. The remaining 59.2% had never initiated their own project. A total of 10.3% of eTwinners had received a quality label for a project they participated in, while 54% had never received such a label. Comparing the results according to the type of educational institution, it can be concluded that recipients of the quality label for eTwinning projects were the least frequent among respondents from preschools. Moreover, 21.8% of the respondents indicated that their institution holds the eTwinning School label, while 43.1% do not work in an institution with this designation. Given the results, it can be concluded that respondents from preschool educational institutions lag behind those from primary and secondary schools in terms of eTwinning project experience.

Ranking the results according to levels of agreement, it was clear that respondents most strongly agreed with the statement that networking has far more advantages than disadvantages. Furthermore, there was also strong agreement with the statement that eTwinning promotes an idealized image of educational professionals as skilled project workers. The respondents showed more disagreement regarding the difficulty of finding a partner for eTwinning collaboration, suggesting that they had contrasting experiences. Moreover, there was greater agreement with the statement that educational professionals are willing to learn, which makes collaboration easier.

Table 6.

Experiences of eTwinners

Statements	N	Min.	Max.	M	SD
Networking offers far more advantages than disadvantages.	75	1.00	5.00	3.75	1.25
Communication among partners was of high quality.	77	1.00	5.00	3.70	1.17
It is easy to collaborate with educational professionals because they are willing to learn.	75	1.00	5.00	3.65	1.12
Communication with partners during the project positively influenced the development of my communication skills.	78	1.00	5.00	3.64	1.16
International networking will be essential for future educational professionals.	76	1.00	5.00	3.63	1.23
Participation in an eTwinning project positively influenced my relationships with other educational professionals.	76	1.00	5.00	3.48	1.37
Collaboration during the eTwinning project was good.	75	1.00	5.00	3.44	1.28
eTwinning promotes an idealized image of the educational professional by equating a good teacher/educator with a good project worker who is always ready and willing to join or start a project.	76	1.00	5.00	3.43	1.08
Networking through the eTwinning project gave me new ideas and enriched my work with children.	75	1.00	5.00	3.41	1.42
Participation in an eTwinning project enhanced the development of my foreign language (English) communication skills.	75	1.00	5.00	3.38	1.32
Participation in an eTwinning project is part of my continuous professional development.	76	1.00	5.00	3.38	1.40
eTwinning promotes continuous and unattainable development through projects, making the teacher/educator into a project.	76	1.00	5.00	3.30	1.23
While working on the eTwinning project, I networked with colleagues from different countries.	74	1.00	5.00	3.29	1.35

Table 6. *(continued)*

Statements	N	Min.	Max.	M	SD
Communicating with partners gave me an understanding of educational systems in different European countries.	75	1.00	5.00	3.29	1.32
Digital competence is one of the main competencies I improved by participating in eTwinning.	75	1.00	5.00	3.25	1.36
It is easier to network on the platform than in my own environment.	76	1.00	5.00	3.21	1.20
It was difficult to find partners for collaboration in the eTwinning project.	75	1.00	5.00	2.68	1.10
Collaboration was hindered by the fact that we work in different educational systems.	74	1.00	5.00	2.40	1.12
Collaboration was hindered by cultural differences.	74	1.00	5.00	2.32	1.18
Valid N	72				

A comparison of responses from participants working in various educational institutions revealed that participants from preschools were less involved in and did not initiate eTwinning projects as frequently as those from primary and secondary schools were. This difference is also evident in the rates of receiving the eTwinning quality label for projects and the eTwinning school label held by their institutions. Based on the evaluation scale related to eTwinner experience, it can be concluded that participants' experiences vary significantly. Notably, the highest agreement was recorded with the statement that networking offers far more advantages than disadvantages. Additionally, there was strong agreement with the statement that eTwinning promotes an idealized image of the educational professional, equating a good teacher/educator with a skilled project worker. This may indicate an understanding among educational professionals that their role goes beyond teaching alone but also includes collaborative, project-based work. Furthermore, this observation could reflect the notion, as argued by critics, that we live in a "project society", where our work processes, including educational ones, are shaped through projects (Jensen et al., 2016; as cited in Lewis & Decuypere, 2023, p. 24). In the fourth part of the questionnaire, the general attitudes toward communication, collaboration, and networking were examined. Analysis of the results from the evaluation scale on communication, collaboration, and networking indicated the highest agreement with the statement that effective communication is

essential for successful collaboration. The high level of agreement with the importance of feedback in communication and the necessity of developing communication skills in educational practice is not surprising. The lowest agreement was observed with the statement regarding isolation within one's institution, although the high standard deviation suggests that participants held contrasting views on this matter. There was also low agreement with statements regarding exclusive collaboration through platforms, challenges in using digital tools and communicating in foreign languages, as well as the demands of intercultural communication. Interestingly, no participant expressed complete disagreement with the statements about cooperative learning and teamwork being prerequisites for success in the 21st century, as well as the acceptance of new technologies and connectivity opportunities. Additionally, no participant disagreed with the assertion that, in contemporary society, communication in foreign languages is essential, nor with the notion that the quality of educational practice is determined by a commitment to lifelong learning. The absence of complete disagreement with these statements indicates a broad acceptance of these views, which aligns with the profile of the sample of respondents.

Table 7.

Attitudes toward Communication, Collaboration, and Networking

Statements	N	Min.	Max.	M	SD
Effective communication is essential for collaboration.	174	3.00	5.00	4.86	0.40
There is no effective communication without feedback.	174	3.00	5.00	4.77	0.50
Educational professionals must possess developed communication skills.	174	1.00	5.00	4.73	0.61
Effective collaboration among all stakeholders in the educational process is essential for a healthy environment in which children can develop.	174	1.00	5.00	4.71	0.64
The path to higher-quality educational practice is determined by an individual's readiness for lifelong learning.	174	2.00	5.00	4.48	0.74
For successful communication, it is crucial to understand and be sensitive to contexts that differ from one's own.	174	1.00	5.00	4.48	0.70
Cooperative learning, teamwork, and collaboration will be essential in future professions and preconditions for success in the 21st century.	174	2.00	5.00	4.47	0.71

Table 7. *(continued)*

Statements	N	Min.	Max.	M	SD
Educational professionals should be stakeholders in positive social changes by embracing new technologies and opportunities for connection.	174	2.00	5.00	4.45	0.74
In contemporary society, it is essential to be able to communicate in foreign languages.	174	2.00	5.00	4.42	0.71
Networking benefits both educational professionals and children.	174	1.00	5.00	4.29	0.84
Networking plays an important role in education by providing a framework for professional development.	174	1.00	5.00	4.17	0.86
Networks are organizational solutions for the diversity and complexity of educational needs.	174	1.00	5.00	3.94	0.91
The most demanding and difficult form of interpersonal communication is intercultural communication.	174	1.00	5.00	3.87	0.94
Collaboration through the platform is challenging because it involves using digital tools and communication in a foreign language.	174	1.00	5.00	3.86	1.05
It is difficult to exclusively collaborate via the platform.	174	1.00	5.00	3.69	1.02
I often feel isolated in my institution.	174	1.00	5.00	2.53	1.27
Valid N	174				

The attitudes of educational professionals toward communication, collaboration, and networking with other educational professionals are generally consistent, as indicated by the arithmetic means and the relatively low standard deviations for the given statements. Minor deviations were observed only concerning collaboration exclusively via the platform and challenges related to the use of digital tools and communication in a foreign language. These results are unsurprising and align with the statement by Carroll and Rest (2010; as cited in Cachia & Punie, 2012) that educational professionals are "caught with one foot in the future and another one in past". The most significant divergence among respondents occurred regarding the statement that they feel isolated in their institution, which contradicts findings from research by Gatta, Pereira Cunha, and Costa (2009; as cited in Cachia & Punie, 2012), which can be interpreted as being influenced by various factors that are not necessarily related to collaboration with colleagues.

In conclusion, the importance of effective communication and the necessity of developing communication skills in educational work are confirmed by the findings of this research. Effective communication is crucial for collaboration and networking, and the prerequisites for achieving effective communication include knowledge of language, interaction skills, and cultural knowledge (Miljković & Rijavec, 2002), and more recently, knowledge related to e-communication, which represents a modern form of communication (Jurković, 2012). While it is often assumed that successful communication is the norm, especially in educational circles, good communication is the exception (Miljković & Rijavec, 2002), which makes it essential to continue developing communication skills in all forms.

CONCLUSION

Communication, collaboration, and networking among educational professionals are part of the pedagogical culture of collaboration, which is defined by the values of inclusion, integration, and interaction. These are also the values of the European School Education Platform, which aims to improve the quality of education across Europe. Furthermore, the approach and use of digital technologies can help reduce the educational gap between different socioeconomic contexts. Educational institutions, which are also communication networks, now have unique opportunities for communication, collaboration, and networking on platforms such as ESEP, which are more accessible than ever before.

Global trends and contemporary lifestyles present numerous challenges for educators, including e-communication, communication in foreign languages, intercultural communication, cooperative learning, teamwork, and the use of digital tools in communication. All of these factors demand that educational professionals be prepared for lifelong learning to achieve high-quality educational practices within the context of modern society. The ESEP and its component, eTwinning, aim to address the challenges of tomorrow by encouraging educators to share experiences, showcase good practices, and exchange ideas. By embracing new technologies and connection opportunities, educators become key stakeholders in positive social change within their communities, as they create opportunities for the continuous development of both children's and their competencies.

Following a previous study, aimed at determining participants' knowledge and experiences regarding the ESEP and eTwinning projects, as well as their attitudes toward communication, collaboration, and networking, the results revealed that more than half of the respondents are familiar with the ESEP. Furthermore, a very high percentage of respondents possess knowledge about eTwinning projects, regardless of the type of educational institution in which

they work. Most of the information about the ESEP and eTwinning projects was obtained from colleagues and within their institutions. However, in terms of awareness of the platform's available features and their utilization, this percentage is significantly lower, with employees in preschools lagging behind their counterparts in primary and secondary schools. A greater disparity in results was evident in terms of participation in and creation of eTwinning projects, as well as in obtaining the quality label for eTwinning projects and the eTwinning School label awarded to institutions. Based on an analysis of the results from the experience evaluation scale for eTwinners, it can be concluded that their experiences vary greatly, unlike the attitudes of educational professionals regarding communication, collaboration, and networking with other educators, which appear to be fairly consistent. In conclusion, it is essential to emphasize the importance of effective communication and the necessity of well-developed communication skills in educational work, a point supported by the findings of the research.

REFERENCES

Acar, S., & Peker, B. (2021). What are the Purposes of Teachers for Using the eTwinning Platform and the Effects of the Platform on Teachers. *Acta Didactica Napocensia, 14*(10). https://www.researchgate.net/publication/355796579_What_are_the_Purposes_of_Teachers_for_Using_the_eTwinning_Platform_and_the_Effects_of_the_Platform_on_Teachers

Antolović, K., & Sviličić, N. (2020). *Komunikacijske vještine – verbalne i neverbalne persuazivne tehnike*. Kerschoffest: K&K Promocija.

Baketa, N. (2012). Europeizacija obrazovanja odraslih u Hrvatskoj. *Andragoški glasnik, 16*(1(28)), 55–67. https://hrcak.srce.hr/103416

Başari, F.B. i Ada, Ş. (2023). The Relationship between eTwinning Activities and 21st Century Education and Teaching Skills. International Journal of Social Science and Education Research Studies, 3(5). https://ijssers.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/16-1505-2023.pdf

Bettini, E. (2023). *eTwinning projects*. In D. Nucci, A. Tosi, & M. C. Pettenati (Eds.), *The impact of eTwinning on continuing professional development of teachers in Italy: Studies, highlights and prospects of the Italian community*, Rim: Carocci editore. https://www.carocci.it/prodotto/the-impact-of-etwinning-on-continuing-professional-development-of-teachers-in-italy

Buljubašić-Kuzmanović, V. (2009). Kooperativno učenje kao indikator kvalitete odgoja i obrazovanja. *Život i škola, LV* (21.), 50–57. https://hrcak.srce.hr/37081

Cachia, R., & Punie, Y. (2012). *Teacher collaboration in the context of networked learning. Current eTwinning practices and future perspectives. Proceedings of the 8th International Conference on Networked Learning.* https://www.researchgate.net/publication/324747913_Teacher_Collaboration_in_the_Context_of_Networked_Learning_Current_eTwinning_Practices_and_Future_Perspectives

Crisan, G.I. (2013). The impact of teacher's participation in eTwinning on their teaching and training. *Acta Didactica Napocensia, 6*(4). https://www.researchgate.net/publication/309757100_THE_IMPACT_OF_TEACHERS'_PARTICIPATION_IN_ETWINNING_ON_THEIR_TEACHING_AND_TRAINING

European School Education Platform. (2024). *About ESEP*. https://school-education.ec.europa.eu/en/about

European School Education Platform. (2024). *eTwinning*. https://school-education.ec.europa.eu/en/etwinning

Gehrmann, S. (2008). Međunarodna i interkulturalna suradnja u obrazovanju. *Pedagogijska istraživanja, 5*(1), 81–86. https://hrcak.srce.hr/118270

Giannis, T. (2022). Interpreting the Statistics of eTwinning: European Quality Label. *International Journal of Educational Innovation, 4*(2). https://journal.eepek.gr/assets/uploads/manuscripts/manuf_528_tH6YvzGBNR.pdf

Gulbay, E. (2022). Empowering future teachers' intercultural awareness with eTwinning. U M. Fiorucci I E. Zizioli (ur.), *La formazione degli insegnanti: problemi, prospettive*

e proposte per una scuola di qualità e aperta a tutti e tutte (pp. 89–92). Lecce: Pensa MuliMedia. https://www.pensamultimedia.it/download/1824/5169439d748f/parallele-22-09.pdf

Horvat, N. (2022). eTwinning portal – alat profesionalnog razvoja odgojitelja. *Bjelovarski učitelj, 27*(1–3), 123–128. https://hrcak.srce.hr/293559

Huertas-Abril, C., & Palacios-Hidalgo, F. J. (2023). eTwinning and the development of language teachers' digital literacy: A comparative study between two European universities. *Ensayos Revista de la Facultad de Educación de Albacete. 38.* 86-101. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/376991317_eTwinning_and_the_development_of_language_teachers'_digital_literacy_A_comparative_study_between_two_European_universities

İzgi Onbaşili, Ü. (2022). Experiences of qualified teachers of the future in the scope of ana international eTwinning project. International Online Journal of Primary Education, 11(2). https://www.researchgate.net/publication/378056321_EXPERIENCES_OF_QUALIFIED_TEACHERS_OF_THE_FUTURE_IN_THE_SCOPE_OF_AN_INTERNATIONAL_ETWINNING_PROJECT

Jurković, Z. (2012). Važnost komunikacije u funkcioniranju organizacije. *Ekonomski vjesnik, XXV*(2), 387–399. https://hrcak.srce.hr/94882

Kostas, A., & Ioannidou, D. (2023). Learning Communities and Teacher Professional Development: The Case of eTwinning Seminars. *Creative Education, 14*. https://www.scirp.org/journal/paperinformation?paperid=130250

Leproni, R. (2023). Primary English teachers' practice analysis & language self-evaluation questionnaires (PET-PA & PET-LSE): eTwinning strategies for Second/Foreign Language teachers' professional self-/hetero-assessment. *Ensayos, Revista de la Facultad de Educación de Albacete, 38*(2), 123–145. http://www.revista.uclm.es/index.php/ensayos

Lewis, S., & Decuypere, M. (2023). 'Out of time': Constructing teacher professionality as a perpetual project on the eTwinning digital platform. Tertium Comparationis Journal fur International und Interkulturell Vergleichende Erziehungswissenschaft, 29(1). https://www.researchgate.net/publication/368507116_'Out_of_time'_Constructing_teacher_professionality_as_a_perpetual_project_on_the_eTwinning_digital_platform

Ličanin, S. (2023). Uspješna suradnja čimbenika odgojno – obrazovnog procesa. *Varaždinski učitelj, 6*(12), 91–96. https://hrcak.srce.hr/300283

Miljković, D., & Rijavec, M. (2002). *Komuniciranje u organizaciji.* Zagreb: IEP.

Ministarstvo znanosti, obrazovanja i sporta (2015). *Nacionalni kurikulum za rani predškolski odgoj i obrazovanje*, NN 05/15. Zagreb: Republika Hrvatska.

Nucci, D., Tosi, A., & Pettenati Carocci M. C. (2023). *The impact of eTwinning on continuing professional development of teachers in Italy.* Rim: Carocci editore. https://www.carocci.it/prodotto/the-impact-of-etwinning-on-continuing-professional-development-of-teachers-in-italy

Özen, E., & Çiray Özkara, F. (2023). Investigation of Online Education Readiness of Teachers Involved in eTwinning Quality Processes in the Context of Various Variables. *Anadolu Universitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi, 23*(3), 873–898.https://www.researchgate.net/

publication/374273507_Investigation_of_Online_Education_Readiness_of_Teachers_
Involved_in_eTwinning_Quality_Processes_in_the_Context_of_Various_Variables_
Example_of_Eskisehir_ProvinceeTwinning_Kalite_Sureclerinde_Gorev_Ala

Pietrzak, A. (2009). Significance and Development of the eTwinning Programme in Poland as Compared to other European Countries. U E. Gajek I P. Oszytek (ur.), *eTwinning – A way to education of the future* (str. 11-30). Koszalin: Zaklad Poligraficzny Polimer. – Alicija Pietrzak. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236650010_eTwinning_-_A_way_to_education_of_the_future.

Rouse, M., & Rouse, S. (2005). *Poslovne Komunikacije*. Zagreb: Masmedia.

Srok, N., & Skočić Mihić, S. (2012). Odgajatelji i stručni suradnici u savjetodavnoj ulozi. *Dijete, vrtić, obitelj, 18*(70), 19–21. https://hrcak.srce.hr/123767

Strelec, D. (2023). Važnost pozitivnog suradničkog odnosa između odgojitelja i roditelja. *Varaždinski učitelj, 6*(12), 134–138. https://hrcak.srce.hr/302068

Zorić-Beslema, K. (2013). Europski pogled na suradnju s kolegama. *Dijete, vrtić, obitelj, 19*(72), 10–11. https://hrcak.srce.hr/145498