

# WORKING IN A MULTICULTURAL GROUP

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This project brought Dutch and Slovak students together in order to teach in schools, but also to learn from each other. There are many differences but also similarities between these two nationalities, but we would not have known or realized them if we were not working on this project. It is not easy to put two people together to teach one lesson and it is even more difficult to put two people from different countries together. There was a risk of clash among those two cooperating people, but everyone knew that, so they had to be tolerant and patient. This experience gave us an opportunity to gain an important international and interpersonal awareness.

## MOTIVATIONS FOR JOINING THE PROJECT

The motivation for participating in the project was very similar for both the Slovak and Dutch students. The overall reason for the participation was their interest in a different culture, and getting to know a new culture not only by visiting a country for holidays or reading about it. Instead they wanted to interact with people of another culture, take part in the lives of others, work together with them and visit their university. This was a once-in-a-life-time opportunity for many students, for the Slovaks, as well as the Dutch students, to really get to know the 'do's and don'ts' of a different culture.

Many students were also really interested in the teaching aspect of the project, i.e. going to a Slovak school and seeing the similarities and difference between Dutch and Slovak schools. This was the same for the Slovaks when they come to the Netherlands. The students of both countries hoped that by participating

in this project they will gain good experiences that could help them to improve themselves and to become a better teacher in the future.

Many students wanted to gain a wider perspective of the world and get a broader and more informed view on cultural differences. Some of the Slovak students saw the project as a nice opportunity to refresh their English speaking skills. The fact that some of the students could get credit points by participating in this project was hardly mentioned as a reason for joining. A large part of the students were mainly participating for the experience, adventure and for getting to know a new culture.

## WORKING WITH STUDENTS FROM FOREIGN COUNTRIES

The main reason why the students joined the project was that they could meet and work with students from a different country. The cooperation was described as satisfying or in most cases even better. Some of the students thought the cooperation between the two nationalities was inspirational. The students claimed that the work on the project enabled them to help each other. The two nationalities have many things in common but also differ in various aspects. It is known that Slovakia is called a 'dove nation' and this proved to be true when working with the Dutch students. The Slovaks mentioned that the Dutch students were more dominant when it came to make decisions. The reason might be that the Slovaks tend to adapt quickly and it is easy to cooperate with them because they rarely enforce their ideas. On the other hand the Dutch students appreciated the Slovak attitude towards the project and also towards them as guests. The Dutch students were more confident in teaching because they had more practical experience in comparison to the Slovak students. Sometimes the differences between the two nationalities, mainly the aspect of dominance, caused a little tension but also made everybody more aware and considerate of it. It was easier for the Slovak students to encourage the pupils to speak. The Dutch had to rely on the Slovak students when it came to misunderstandings in the classrooms or when the pupils did not understand, which was rather frequent. In general the students from both countries enjoyed the company of each other and the experience to teach in pairs very much. Moreover the different points of view and also the slightly different mentality were appreciated.

### **A Slovak student**

*‘Working with somebody from a different culture was often more helpful because we saw a problem from a different point of view. This is always the case when working together, but when working together with people from a different culture the variation in different points of views with different arguments is even bigger. This really made us think about our own opinion, why we consider something in a certain way and how we can understand other peoples’ opinion.’*

## **USE ENGLISH AS A COMMON LANGUAGE**

The English language was the common language amongst the students. Some students were a little bit shy of speaking English because they did not have a lot of experience. Some of them adapted quicker than others, but eventually everybody spoke English on a satisfactory communicative level. Many of the students had difficulties explaining things properly, but in the end they found ways to do so. Other students saw this exchange as a great way to get used to speaking English, to practice and eventually improve it. The majority of the Slovak students were English language students so they found it a bit easier, however they do not have a lot of opportunities to speak English outside school. On the other hand the Dutch students were more outspoken and less aware of their mistakes or just cared less about them, which was not such a big problem in an informal conversation. The only negative point was that a lot of the students felt that they could not speak as easily and naturally as they do in their mother tongue.

The other point which the students were focusing on when answering the questionnaire was that the pupils had poor language skills. It was hard for the students to get the pupils to talk, they were either very shy about speaking English or they could not find the right words. Some of the pupils did not even understand the exercises.

## **DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CULTURES**

When two groups from different countries meet, you will always find some differences between their cultures. Even though both of the countries are situated in Europe, they are evidently different, as can be shown by looking at the cultural

dimensions. At first, the distance of power between students and teachers in Slovakia is much bigger than the distance of power in the Netherlands. Teachers and students in the Netherlands are rather on the same level. In Slovakia the teacher has more power. When we analyse the communication, the Dutch students are more direct in saying what they think. The Slovak students communicate well with each other, but are calmer than the Dutch students. We think this could be because of the consequences of the Cold War. During socialist times they were not able to express themselves and nowadays they are still calm and not very outspoken. In the following quote, you can see the difference in treating teachers between Slovakia and the Netherlands:

**A Dutch student**

*'I had the idea that the Slovak pupils treat their teachers with more respect. They address them by their last name and have to knock on the door before entering the room. Teachers have more authority in Slovakia than they have in the Netherlands. In the Netherlands in higher education teachers are regarded as equal.'*

The most remarkable difference between the two cultures is that the Dutch students speak louder, make more noise and are very active. The Slovak students are more introvert and do not always say exactly what they mean. They are not used to expressing themselves and sometimes are afraid of sharing their opinion. We also noticed this in the schools where we taught. The pupils were very quiet and sometimes there was even absolute silence. We wanted them to express themselves, share their opinions and discuss with each other, but this hardly worked.

**A Slovak student**

*'I surely see differences. We Slovaks are more conservative and this is not about religion, because I am not religious, for example. Our opinions about some topics are so different. We have different views on what a family should look like.'*

The Slovaks are very conservative in their ideas about family. Divorces and homosexuality are exceptional.

As you can read, there are differences between the cultures, but these differences did not cause any problems during the cooperation. The Slovakian group as well as the Dutch group considered the cooperation between the two groups and the cultural differences that played a part in it as very interesting and inspiring.

## TEACHING IN A SLOVAK SCHOOL

- » *Teaching in a Slovak school was a completely new experience for the Dutch students. Most of the students did not know what to expect from the Slovak schools, so they were very curious. All the students agreed that the pupils in Slovak schools were very shy and that it was not easy to get them to speak. We think this is because they do not dare and are not used to speaking English. We think also that the children are not forced to share their own opinion. The students had to ask a lot of questions and even when they did, it was hard to interact and communicate with the pupils.*
- » *Overall, the schools were less modern than the ones in the Netherlands, although they all had the equipment needed for the lesson. The school buildings impressed the Dutch students, because they look totally different than the ones in the Netherlands. You can still see the traces of communism in the architecture of the buildings.*

### **A Slovak student**

*'I know that the situation in the Slovak school is not perfect, especially the very traditional way of teaching. Therefore, I would like to try and use these interactive strategies to make students speak more, so they can get used to participating in discussions and express their opinions.'*

It was really interesting for the Dutch students to meet and work with Slovak pupils. Furthermore, they liked to observe their behaviour in class and to listen to their opinions. The teachers in the Slovak schools were supposed to be very helpful and friendly. The pupils were also considered to be really friendly. They were very interested and asked a lot of questions about the Netherlands.

## PROBLEMS WITH WORKING IN A MULTICULTURAL GROUP

In general, most of the students were very satisfied with the cooperation. The difficulties most of the students had with working in a multicultural group were communication and language difficulties. Being able to express one's opinion in a different language to someone from a different culture was hard for many students.

### **A Dutch student**

*'Sometimes it was difficult to express my opinion or to say what I mean. I always had to think twice before saying something.'*

## TEACHING AND LEARNING ABOUT EUROPEAN VALUES

We all have certain stereotypical ideas of countries in Europe. That might stem from our personal experience or from stereotypes of attitudes of some nationalities that we have in our mind. We could very often see that the pupils have the same or similar stereotypical ideas of other countries, e.g. that Turkey is a very traditional country with close-knit communities or that in the Netherlands the people are always open-minded and tolerant. With the help of some of the maps we tried to verify or falsify these stereotypes. Furthermore, our aim was to show that within a country there are individuals with totally different opinions than the average of the country. For instance, even though it might seem that in Turkey a man would expect a woman to be a housewife and serve her husband, a video of some interviewed Turkish pupils revealed that they would prefer women to be strong and independent. As we prepared for the lesson, we found out many facts which were new to us or which we did not know before. In general, we learned exactly the same things that we taught our pupils. It means that the results of the maps surprised us and our pupils. Working with the maps was something new for the Slovak students, but for the Dutch students it was nothing special because most of them study geography. Nevertheless, working with maps in such a context was new for them, too. We found that some data on the maps were very surprising. The students appreciated that they gained new knowledge and learned that the attitudes vary a lot throughout Europe. A majority of the students liked to work with the maps, even though they found it difficult at the beginning. We believe that the students, as well as the pupils changed their points of view and learned a lot.

## CONCLUSION

The project, which offered the opportunity to and gain teaching experiences in Slovakia using the strategies and principles, was very nice. We met with students and pupils from a different culture, we prepared lessons, that were different from all other lessons we have ever held and we learned to work with someone we did not know before. When we look at all the reactions of the pupils and the students we can say that it was a very good experience. In the evaluation we were asked to find one word to describe the project. All the mentioned words were positive, like for example: refreshing, satisfying, interesting, impressive, good, challenging, experience and developing. We can say that every student is very glad to have taken part in the project and we can also say that the strategies and principles were very useful, so that we will definitely use them in the future.