Systematic Analysis of Special Education Projects in eTwinning

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A R T I C L E I N F O	**A B S T R A C T**
	In this study, Turkey-partnered special education projects carried out in eTwinning (European School Education Platform) were analyzed using the systematic analysis method. Projects implemented between 2017-2019 were examined and analyzed. Twenty-five projects that met the inclusion criteria were analyzed as part of the research. As a result of the analysis, it was seen that the number of projects increased over time, the majority of the projects were carried out with Turkish partners, and among the program countries, Turkish teachers formed partnerships with Romanian teachers at the highest rate. It has been determined that more awareness activities are carried out in the projects. In addition, it has been observed that the projects generally do not meet the validity standards. It has been determined that the academic, social and technological skills of teachers and students have improved through the projects. As a result of the study, suggestions for other studies and teachers are described.

1. INTRODUCTION

eTwinning is a platform where educators in Erasmus+ countries and partner countries can organize educational activities at a national or international level in order to develop cooperation with their colleagues and produce various projects(Gajek, 2009). For the purpose of putting the inclusive school vision to work, eTwinning serves thousands of education personnel, especially teachers, to reach the latest information and communication technologies and be instantly informed about the newest developments (Gajek, 2007; Camilleri, 2016). At eTwinning events and conferences, the users create networks and form professional collaborations to offer the best possible educational environment for their students (Făt, 2012; Demir and Kayaoğlu, 2022;). eTwinning platform, founded in 2005, operates in 44 countries consisting of 27 European Union countries and others including Jordan and Tunisia (Döğer, 2022).

eTwinning section under the European School Education Platform provides teachers with an online social networking environment where they can create projects, share and learn together, in line with project kits, application examples, references and interests of its users (ESEP, 2022). eTwinning

users can network, share and collaborate with other registered users and schools by joining rooms, eTwinning groups and European projects through the offered social networking features (ESEP, 2022). Based on the principle of lifelong learning, the eTwinning community aims to carry out educational activities in cooperation with all participant countries (Crisan, 2013). Thus, it hosts webinars, online collaborative seminars, conferences and professional development opportunities. These activities allow teachers to network, learn together, and feel part of the same community (Crisan, 2013). However, in order to organize all these activities, it is necessary to be an approved user in eTwinning (eTwinning Türkiye, 2023). To become an approved user on School Education Platform, the official site of the eTwinning platform:

First you need to fill out the application form. In order for the teacher who fills out the form to become an approved user, he/she must receive approval from his/her country's National Support Service (NSO) (ESEP, 2022)

The NSO is a national body authorized by the Central Support Service (CSS), the main governance mechanism of eTwinning (eTwinning Türkiye, 2023). This board operates under the Ministry of National Education in Turkey and uses the Ministry's personnel database to approve users. Therefore, the NSO requires users to have official teacher or teacher candidate status (eTwinning Türkiye, 2023). In addition to verifying user records, the NSO carries out tasks together with the CSS, such as keeping the platform secure, providing support and guidance, issuing National and European Quality Labels to teachers, and approving written projects (Bacescu, 2016; ESEP, 2022).
Since knowing the working process of the projects facilitates the understanding of this study, the processes related to eTwinning projects are explained in the next heading.

1.1. eTwinning Projects

eTwinning projects are a type of non-funded collaborative project in which teachers at European schools and students, through teachers, participate (ESEP, 2022). All stages of the project were carried out on www.etwinning.net before 2022. However, after a certain transition period, it can be carried out through the European School Education Platform now. All processes such as project application, finding a European partner for the project, executing the planning processes of the project, and making award applications for the project are carried out actively and quickly on the European School Education Platform (Döğer, 2022). In addition, it provides a secure online environment since the "ab login" login system is used to log in to the platform (ESEP, 2022).

After the project application stages are completed, a project page is created where the operation process of the project can be managed; in projectthis page where members can be added, the project plan and project products can be uploaded, project-related announcements can be made, and many other tasks and processes can be carried out is named Twinspace (Crisan, 2013). The Twinspace page is the management panel of the project. At first glance, all the products of the project and all the related processes can be monitored regularly on the Twinspace page (Leto, 2018). Twinspace pages are highly functional with their features to manage project processes from a single place and to act as a kind of file for processes such as award applications (Karakaşlar-Gezgin and Gökbaş-Çubuk, 2021).

Considering that all these processes form a broad framework of the projects, the main review criteria of the study can be understood. The most important component that meets this inclusion criterion is what the project is about.

It is known that eTwining projects can be applied in every subject and discipline. However, the adequacy of projects implemented in the field of special education or that enable the participation of individuals with special needs is undoubtedly of great importance (Yıldırım Doğru et al., 2014). The fact that the main subject of the projects investigated in this study is special education and individuals with special needs requires an overview of the special education projects implemented in eTwinning. This situation is discussed in the next heading.

1.2. Special Educational Projects in eTwinning

Considering that projects contribute to the development of various skills of teachers and students (Fansa, 2021); It is understood that providing educational environments suitable for the developmental conditions of individuals with special needs through projects is of great importance in terms of developing educational activities for these individuals and ensuring their social integration of them. (Yıldırım Doğru et al., 2014). Hence, there is a critical need to examine and analyze projects. When the literature is examined, it has been observed that the studies on eTwinning projects for special education are insufficient. It has been detected that the few studies identified generally focus on the professional development of teachers (Başaran et al., 2020; Gençtürk Erdem et al., 2021;) and are based on teacher opinions (Avcı, 2020; Fazlı, 2022; Küçüktaşçı, 2022). In addition, it has been determined that some studies focus on a single skill of the student(s) rather than the analysis of eTwinning projects (Tsampatzidis, 2021; Çevik, et al., 2021; Fazlı, 2022). Apart from this, it has been determined that studies examining projects generally only provide a general perspective about the projects or examine only a single project. (Boronat, et al. 2015; Čibej, 2022)

Accordingly, it is important to examine projects dealing with the subject of special education/individuals with special needs in this study. The main reason for choosing eTwinning projects is the easy access to the project page (Twinspace) where we can evaluate the outputs (Leto, 2018). On the other hand, choosing projects with high quality values among the projects published on the platform will make this work more meaningful. That is the reason why we chose to focus on award-winning projects in this study. Which award-winning projects are in eTwinning and the next heading explains the awarding process.

1.3.Reward System

A reward system called "National Quality Label" and "European Quality Label" is implemented to evaluate teachers' success in eTwinning projects(Vuorikari et al., 2012). The National Quality Label concretely demonstrates the high level of success of teachers' eTwining project activities. In other words, it shows that the project complies with certain quality standards (Papadimitriou and Niari, 2019). The European Quality Label is a secondary quality award given by the Central Support Service (CSS), provided that the countries involved in the projects that qualify for the National Quality Label are

recommended by at least one National Support Service (eTwining Turkey, 2023). In order to receive the European Quality Label, at least two partners must have previously received the National Quality Label. The European Quality Label is awarded annually and is considered a prerequisite for participation in the eTwining European Awards Competition (Giannis, 2022; eTwinning Turkey, 2023)

Quality labels, not only contribute positively to teachers' professional development, but also increase their visibility within and outside the society. (Vuorikari et al., 2012). On the other hand, it increases the possibility of finding partners in the next eTwinning projects they will be involved in, proving that their projects reach the European standards. This provides an advantage while applying for Erasmus+ projects. eTwinning also provides a prerequisite for candidacy for European awards. (Döğer, 2022)

In this study, projects that received a quality label were specifically selected because the fact that a project received a quality label proves that the project has reached European standards (Papadimitriou and Niari, 2019) and that the project is sufficient in some aspects. It also shows that the project was evaluated by an independent authority and received a valid rating. Therefore, award-winning projects form the main axis of the study.

2. PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

This research aims to systematically analyze the special education projects made on the eTwinning platform between 2017-2019 according to the following review criteria; a) disciplinary areas b) target audiences c) partner countries c) scientific evaluation methods used d) their activities and e) Web 2.0 tools they use.

Since eTwining projects for special education are discussed in this study, it will serve as a guiding source for other studies in the literature. Because the studies conducted in the field of special education are limited. It prevents a clear understanding of what skills eTwinning projects generally develop in teachers, what subjects they need to work on, and which countries teachers are partnered with. With regard to this study, we will determine which topics teachers generally focus on in projects, which countries they prefer to work with, which technological skills they have developed, and to what extent they can use scientific methods in projects.

In addition, this study reflects a systematic view of the special education projects carried out in eTwinning between 2017-2019, in general in terms of the following principles:

Applied discipline areas, targeted audience, scientific methods used, partnering countries, implemented activities, Web2.0 tools used.

3. METHOD

In the research, special education projects made between 2017-2019 on the eTwinning platform were systematically analyzed. The systematic review is an examination method that examines, evaluates, summarizes and compares studies according to objective criteria. (Hanley and Cutts, 2013)

3.1. Data Collection

Various inclusion criteria were chosen while determining the projects to be included in the systematic review process. These criteria are:

• Being a special education project - including activities for special needs

• Being a project initiated in or participated by Turkey

• Received at least one of the national or European quality label awards

• Being able to see the products, plan and results of the project on the Twinspace page

• To be finished in 2019 and before

The following keywords were used to find the projects on www.etwinning.net (accessed on 08.11.2021): "özel eğitim" "özel gereksinimli" "engelli" "special needs" and "special education". The results were filtered by the country, "Turkey". Turkey joined eTwinning in 2009 (eTwinning Türkiye, 2023). However, during the screening, it was determined that no special education projects were carried out until 2015. Apart from this, 122 projects were found in the search results. However, in 89 of these projects, the Twinspace page, where we find the contents of the projects, could not be accessed. The oldest accessible special education projects date back to 2016. However, all of the projects carried out in 2016 (f:8) were excluded from the research because they did not meet the inclusion criteria (e.g. receiving a quality label). At the end of the screening, all projects (f: 25) that were implemented and completed between January 2017 and December 2019 and met the inclusion criteria were included in the study. When projects are included, it is an important criterion that they be completed by 2019 at the latest. Since the Covid-19 epidemic started in 2020, projects in 2020 and later were not included in this study.

3.2. Data Analysis

The projects included in the research were classified in terms of the awards they received, the year they were first implemented, and the partnered countries. Afterwards, these projects were classified in terms of their target groups, subjects, activities, whether the scientific method was applied or not and the web 2.0 tools used. In addition, an analysis of these classifications was made by another expert. The main purpose here is to reach the correct and reliable information. As a result of the comparison, 100% consistency was achieved between the data obtained. Thus, the intercoder reliability was determined to be 100%.

3.3. Limitations

The limitations of the research are listed below:

- The research merely covers special educational projects in eTwinning.

-Only the projects between 2017 and 2019 were included in the research.

- Exclusively the projects with Turkish founders were examined in the research.

4. FINDINGS

The projects invested within the scope of this research were classified in accordance with the review criteria. Accordingly, they are classified in terms of the year they were initiated, partnering countries and the quality label awards they received. Afterwards, the projects were examined in terms of their target groups, disciplinary areas, activities applied, the condition of whether scientific evaluation methods are applied or not and Web 2.0 tools used. The results are presented in tables, graphs and pictures.

Special education projects published on the eTwinning platform are classified in Figure 1 in terms of the year they were implemented.
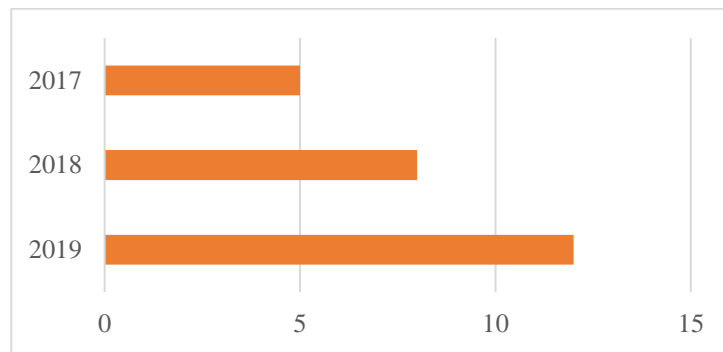

Figure 1: Distribution of projects by year of implementation

In Figure 1, it is seen that the distribution of projects varies according to year, and 2019 is the most active year. The distribution shows that 5 projects in 2017, 8 projects in 2018, and 12 projects in 2019 were initiated.

The distribution of the projects according to the number of partnering countries is presented in Figure 2.
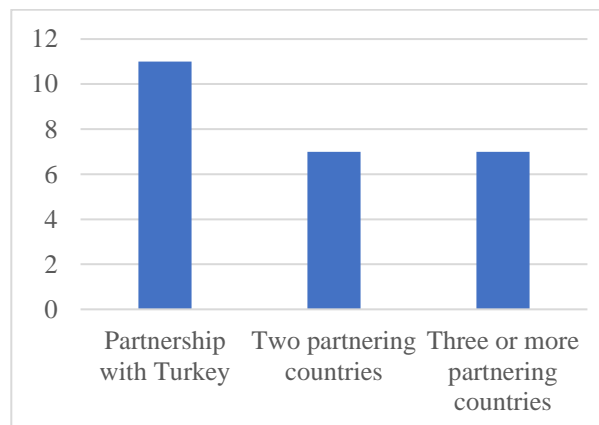

Figure 2: Distribution of the projects according to the number of partnering countries

When the distribution is examined, it is observed that only the projects with Turkish partnerships are more than the other projects. The number of projects with only Turkish partnerships is 11 (44%). In 7 projects (33%) Turkey collaborated with one country, and in 7 projects (33%) three or more countries worked together.

The distribution of the countries that have partnered with Turkey is shown in Table 1.

Country	Number of Project in Partnership
Romania	5
Azerbaijan	4
North Macedonia	3
Portugal	2
United Kingdom	2
Ukraine	2
Poland	2
Italy	2
Georgia	2
Lithuania	2
Slovenia	1
Greece	1
Bosnia and Herzegovina	1
France	1
Bulgaria	1
Croatia	1
Albania	1
Estonia	1
Jordan	1
Tunisia	1

Table 1: Distribution of the countries that have partnered with Turkey

The table presents that the number of projects of the countries that have partnered with Turkey does not show significant variations. The country with the highest number of partnerships is Romania with 5 projects, followed by Azerbaijan with 4 projects and North Macedonia with 3 projects. Turkey has established partnerships with Portugal, the United Kingdom, Ukraine, Poland, Italy, Georgia and Lithuania in 2 projects, and with Slovenia, Greece, Bosnia and Herzegovina, France, Bulgaria, Croatia, Albania, Estonia, Jordan and Tunisia in 1 project each.

The distribution of the projects regarding the National Quality Label and/or European Quality Label awards is shown in Figure 3.
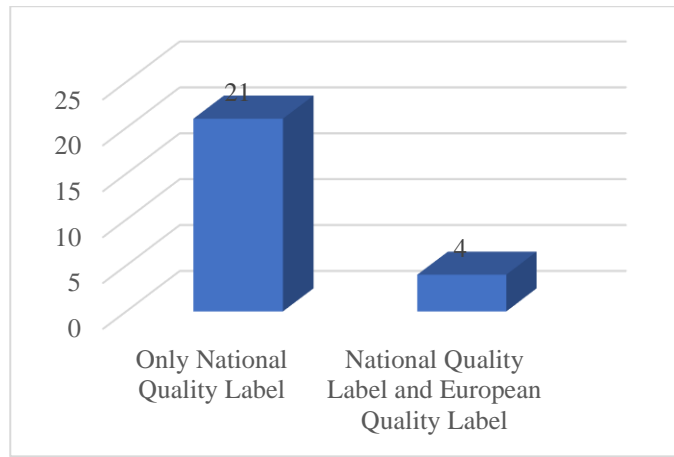
Figure 3: Distribution of projects according to quality label awards

Figure 3 shows that the number of projects that received only the National Quality Label is 21 (85%), while the number of projects that received both National and European Quality Labels is 4 (15%).

The distribution of the projects according to the target group of special needs, their peers, teachers and families are presented in Table 2.

Distribution of Projects by Target Group	Number
Special needs only	7
Peers only	3
Teachers only	0
Families only	1
Both special needs and peers	9
Both peers and teachers	1
Both teachers and families	1
Both special needs and teachers	1
Special needs, peers, teachers, families	2
Total	**25**

Table 2: Distribution of the projects according to the target group

The table shows that the projects with the target audience of special needs and their peers have the highest number of projects with 9 (36%). Projects in which only special needs are selected as the target group come next, with 7 projects (28%). It is followed by projects in which only peers are selected as the target audience with 3 (12%) projects and projects where individuals with special needs, their peers, teachers and their entire families are selected as the target group with 2 (8%) projects. Only the projects in which families, both peers and teachers, teachers and families, and special needs and teachers were selected as target groups remained in 1 project each. No projects have been carried out for teachers only.

The distribution of the projects with respect to the disciplinary areas is presented in Figure 4
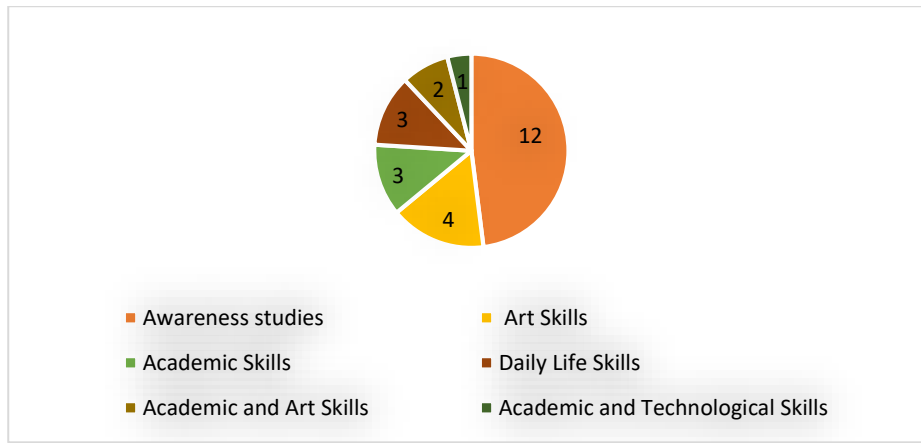
Figure 4: Distribution of the projects with respect to the disciplinary areas

Figure 4 shows that 12 of the projects, approximately half (48%), focus on Awareness Studies. On the other hand, the number of projects in which Art Skills are studied is limited to 4 (16%). The number of projects where Academic Skills are studied and projects focused on Daily Life Skills is 3 (12%). While the number of projects where Academic Skills and Art Skills are worked together is limited to 2 (8%), it is seen that the least studied disciplinary area is Academic Skills and Technological Skills with only 1 project (4%). It was determined that there was no project in which only Technological Skills were studied (f:0).

The data on the classification of the activities implemented in the projects are shown in Figure 5.
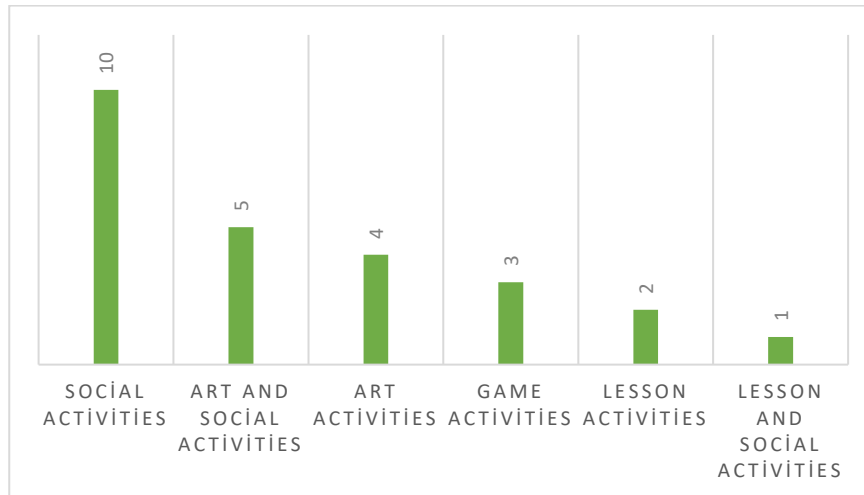

Figure 5: Distribution of the activities implemented

As seen in Figure 5, Social Activities were implemented in 10 projects. The number of projects including Social Activities and Art Activities plus Social Activities together was 5 followed by; Art Activities in 4 projects; Game Activities in 3 projects; Lesson Activities in 2 projects; and Lesson Activities plus Social Activities in 1 project.

The data on whether scientific evaluation methods are applied in the projects are shown in Figure
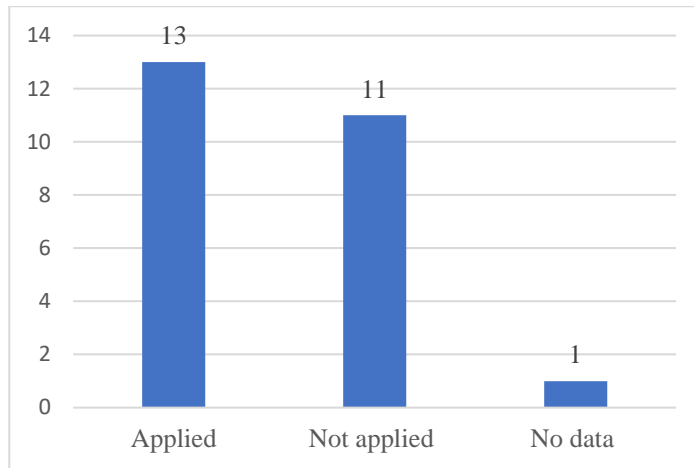
Figure 6: Distribution of whether scientific evaluation methods are applied or not

The graph shows that the scientific evaluation method was applied in 13 (52%) of the projects. However, no scientific evaluation method was applied in 11 (44%) of them. In 1 (4%) project, there was no data on whether scientific evaluation methods were applied or not. In the examination of which scientific evaluation methods are used in order to better interpret the data regarding the findings, it is seen that only the survey method is applied in all of the projects (Table 3).

Methods used in projects applying scientific evaluation methods	Number	Percentage
Survey Method	13	100%

Table 3: Distribution of methods applied in projects using scientific evaluation methods

The ability to use Web 2.0 tools actively in all projects on the eTwinning platform is considered an important skill (Papadakis, 2016). Therefore, by the word cloud made through the Mentimeter, it is possible to see the data about which Web 2.0 tools the projects use and how often. (Picture 1)
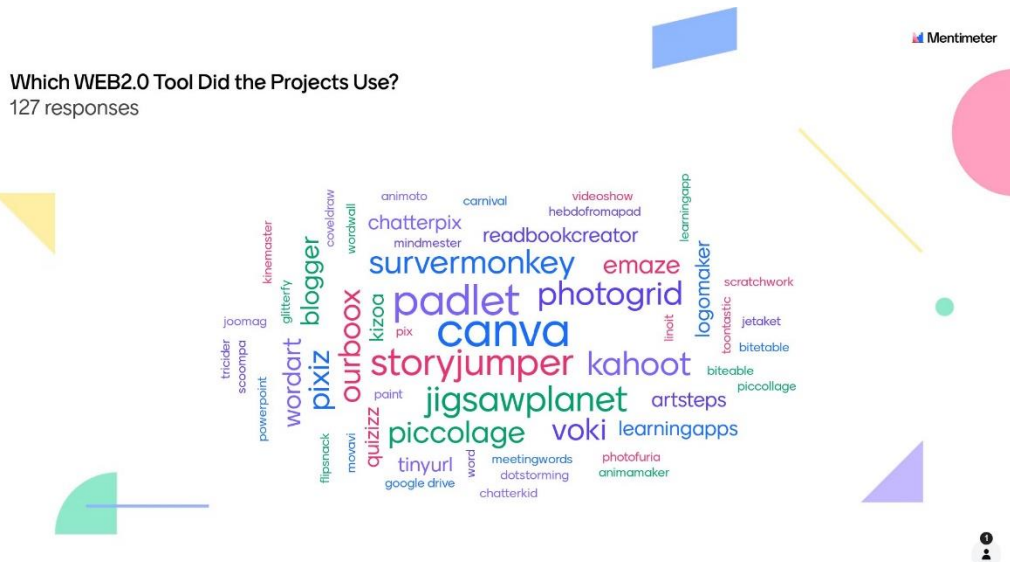
Picture 1: A word cloud showing which Web 2.0 tools are used and how often in projects(www.mentimeter.com)

In the word cloud, the order from the most frequently used Web 2.0 tool to the least used Web 2.0 tool goes from the centre to the corners. In other words, the tools written in large fonts in the middle are the most frequently used ones. The picture shows that the most frequently used Web 2.0 tool is Canva. The other frequently used tools seem to be Padlet, StoryJumper, and Jigsawplanet after Canva.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The consistent increase in special education projects on the eTwinning platform over the years indicates that teachers' digital skills required by the platform have developed over time. Considering that these projects, which can be managed through a network-based system, require active use of digital skills (Bozdağ, 2017), it is believed that the increase in projects over the years is a parallel result of the improvement in teachers' digital skills.

The majority (f:11) of the special education projects carried out on the eTwinning platform being partnered with Turkish teachers demonstrates the willingness of Turkish teachers to collaborate with fellow Turkish teachers in projects. The main reason for teachers who have limitations in working with any European partner is believed to be language barriers. This inference aligns with the findings of a study conducted by Ersoy (2013) based on focus group interviews with teachers participating in Erasmus+ projects.

In the Erasmus+ Program Guide published in 2022, member countries are divided into three groups for the grant support amounts for Staff Mobility (Table 4). This categorization is primarily based on the standard of living levels in countries. When the findings regarding the countries with which Turkey has established partnerships in eTwinning projects are interpreted according to this categorization, it can be observed that the most partnerships are formed with the 3rd Group countries, including Turkey. This could be due to economic and cultural reasons. When examining Table 1, it can be seen that countries such as Romania and North Macedonia, which share a common history and similar cultures with Turkey, rank high. However, considering the complexity of the process of involving partners in projects, this is a limited inference. On the other hand, when looking at the development levels of countries, it is understandable that the 3rd Group countries have a similar profile, which leads to the selection of these countries for partnerships. This finding is also supported by the fact that no partnership was established with any of the 1st Group countries. The 1st Group countries are classified as the most developed countries. Despite partnerships being established with four of the 2nd Group countries (Italy, France, Greece, Portugal), the notable finding is the absence of any partnership with Germany. This is significant because Turks constitute the largest ethnic group in Germany (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). Therefore, an analysis is needed to understand the reasons why teachers inclined to work with Turkish partners do not establish partnerships with a country like Germany, which has a dense and active Turkish population, as shown in Figure 2.

Focusing on the countries that are not included in the groups in Table 4 (Table 5), it is seen that Azerbaijan is the second most partnered country. The proximity of Azerbaijani and Turkish languages, Azerbaijan's similar cultural structure to Turkey, and the neighboring relationship between the two countries are inherent reasons for this finding. It is also possible that partnerships were established with the rest of the countries for similar reasons, except for the United Kingdom.

1st Group of Countries	Denmark, Finland, Ireland, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Norway, Sweden
2nd Group of Countries	Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Malta, Netherlands, Portugal, Republic of Cyprus, Spain
3rd Group of Countries	Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, **Turkey**

Table 4: Table on Categorization for Erasmus+ Staff Mobility Grant Support Amounts. (Erasmus+ Programme Guide, 2023, Version 2)

Other Countries	Albania, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Jordan, Tunisia, United Kingdom, Ukraine

Table 5: Classification of Countries not included in the categorization in Table 4

The fact that the number of projects that have received the National Quality Label (f:21), which concretely demonstrates that the teachers' eTwinning project activities have achieved a high level of success, is more than 5 times the European Quality Label (f:4), proves that the implemented projects do not reach European standards in terms of quality. Two separate factors may have contributed to this situation: primarily conducting projects with only Turkish partners and implementing projects that do not meet quality standards. Therefore, Turkish teachers need to collaborate with more European partners and pay more attention to quality standards.

When examining the data related to the target audience of the projects, the results obtained align with the study conducted by Yıldırım Doğru and others (2014) on special education projects. However, this finding is limited due to the study not including a classification similar to Table 2 and not examining eTwinning projects. Although the mentioned study found a sufficient number of projects for teachers, this study could not identified any projects specifically targeting teachers. The data for projects targeting families show similarities to the mentioned study. On the other hand, despite the absence of a specific identification or classification of projects targeting peers in the mentioned study, this study has reached significant data on projects targeting peers. This indicates that peers are frequently selected as the target audience in projects conducted in the field of special education.

According to the findings related to the disciplinary areas in which the projects operate, awareness-raising activities are the most commonly preferred disciplinary area. This finding aligns with previous literature studies emphasizing the need to prioritize awareness-raising activities for individuals with special needs (Melekoğlu, 2013; İlgar, 2017; Nalbant, 2018; Cremin et al., 2021). eTwinning projects provide suitable environments for awareness-raising activities as they bring individuals from different nations together. Therefore, the findings of this study meet the expectations of the study. On

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the other hand, it is surprising that there are no projects solely focused on developing technological skills. eTwinning considers the development of technological skills as an important goal. The reason for this may be the teachers' biases that individuals with special needs cannot acquire technological skills. However, since this study does not provide any evidence in this regard, this situation is only expressed as an interpretation by the author.

It is an expected result that the majority of the projects include social skills activities. This is because another significant contribution of the platform is to enhance socio-cultural interaction and bring people from different cultures together. The fact that social activities are the most implemented activities in this study supports the qualitative study conducted by Huertas-Abril and Muszyńska (2022), which stated that eTwinning projects contribute to the increase of individuals' socio-cultural skills.

When examining the literature, no studies were found regarding whether eTwinning projects include scientific evaluation methods. Therefore, it is important to examine projects in terms of this aspect. When looking at the 25 projects examined, the fact that scientific evaluation methods were used only in 13 projects indicates that the evaluation criteria for awarding projects are insufficient. Considering that only award-winning projects were examined due to the aim of the research, this becomes an even more noteworthy result. It is important to know what kind of criteria are included when projects are awarded. This would allow for the updating of evaluation criteria. However, it should be noted that all the data obtained are limited to this study sample.

Although the use of surveys in all projects that include scientific evaluation methods can be associated with the fact that surveys are frequently preferred in scientific studies (Arıkan, 2018), it indicates that the evaluation mechanisms of the projects are insufficient. This is because of that groups such as teachers, parents, and students actively participating in the process through various practices, sometimes necessitating the use of multiple evaluation methods. In this regard, effective evaluation processes are ensured for project outcomes.

Using Web 2.0 tools throughout the project is a prerequisite for generating an effective eTwinning project. (Alexander, 2006) According to studies that emphasize the contribution of Web 2.0 tools to the development of various skills (Karakaşlar-Gezgin and Gökbaş-Çabuk, 2021; Çetin-Cengiz and İzci, 2021; Castellanos-Vega & Durak, 2022), it has been found that the use of Web 2.0 tools in eTwinning projects enhances their effectiveness. Therefore, it is clear that as the number of Web 2.0 tools used increases, the effectiveness of the projects also increases. When examining Figure 1, it can be observed that a wide variety of Web 2.0 tools are used in the projects included in the research. Thus, it can be stated that the examined projects pay attention to the diversity while using the Web 2.0 tools.

6. SUGGESTIONS

The following are some suggestions for future studies and project implementations based on this research:

1. Examining projects over a broader time range would provide a larger sample and contribute more to the literature. Therefore, it is recommended to repeat the study with wider time intervals.

2. The study can be conducted in areas other than special education.

3. Research can be conducted to examine the quality label process of projects.

4. Recommendations can be provided to help projects meet the quality label criteria.

5. Measures can be taken to promote collaborations with more partners and establish partnerships with countries that are not currently engaged.

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