

Finland

Encounters (Kohtaamisia)/Sorrila School

This school with students from pre-school to grade 6 (age 6-13) has a focus on socio-cultural as well as economic and ecological sustainability. It is involved in the “Encounters” programme (see FIN.003, “Encounters (Kohtaamisia- hanke) /Keinumäki School (Hospital School) Espoo”). Teachers make use of various learner-centred methods in interdisciplinary projects, and the school cooperates with community members, with whom students communicate also via ICT (Skype, email etc). There is a “common living room” with sofas, where a screen and DVD player can be used for learning activities. A school council enhances student participation and commitment and ensures that students’ opinions can be taken into account. Innovations are focused on the needs of the people at the school, making use of the staff’s experiences and knowledge, encouraging them to take the responsibility for new initiatives.

Main Focus of Innovation: LEARNERS, TEACHERS, CONTENT, RESOURCES, ORGANISATION

Other keywords: non-formal/blended

General Information

Name of the ILE: Encounters (Kohtaamisia)/Sorrila School

Location/Address: Sorrila School, Koulukatu 13, 37600 Valkeakoski, Finland.

Website: <http://www.peda.net/veraja/valkeakoski/sorrila/kohtaamisia/sorrilan>

Rationale

Why do you suggest that it should be included in the project? How does it respond to 21st century learning challenges?

Sorrila School has been developing its learning environments for years as part of ENSI-school network, followed by several projects like Comenius (2003-2006) and Encounters learning environment developing project (2008-2010). These projects and programmes form a developing process, which is in line with the ethos of the school, being an ESD-school of its own kind and developing from its own needs. Sorrila is the other partner of the Encounters project. The other one is Keinumäki School from Espoo. However, this case deals only with the developing process implemented in Sorrila School. Learning is seen in the socio-cultural framework. It is a process of transformation which changes both the learner and the environment.

It is transformative learning which concerns the whole school community and challenges it to use each one's strengths and abilities. Learners are looking for their 'niches', optional learning opportunities and flexible and transactional spaces in the environment.

Our project responds to 21th century learning challenges by training the students and teachers to face learning opportunities with an open mind. The local community can offer a rich variety of multi professional cooperation if the school is ready to go for it. Local, national and international networking brings learning opportunities and the project funding gives resources for it. The objectives of our project are wide and flexible enough, which gives multiplied ways for implementation. Everyone can feel the commitments and participation. ENSI and its EU-projects like Support give the guidelines for the developing. Sustainability is the 'leading star'. Its socio-cultural aspect is the most important but ecological and economic sustainability are intertwined in it. The objectives of the United States Decade of Education for Sustainable development for 2005-2024 are also the basis of our project. According to the socio-cultural learning theories students are subjects of their own learning and learning is based in social interaction, emotions and real life situations. Students can also take part in the planning of their learning environments, suitable for them personally and as a group.

The long history for being an ENSI-school has given especially the coordinating teacher experiences and competence. She has been able to meet several teachers, scientists and stake holders from various ENSI-countries. (ENSI was originally was created under the 'umbrella' of OECD/CERI.) The best practices and core objectives of ENSI have been 'filtered' into Sorrila School along the years. International interaction has been part of the school traditions and sustainability has developed over the years from simple environmental education into an ESD, underlining the human perspective and participation.

Evidence

Is there any evidence or indications showing that this initiative achieves the outcomes that it is aiming at?

'Encounters' is one part of the developing process implemented in Sorrila School. Its experiences are also part of the doctoral theses defended in Helsinki University in January 2009. The title of the research is 'Journey in the Landscape of the Sustainable School Development'. It is narrative action research made by a classroom teacher of Sorrila School/the coordinator of the projects/the writer of this proposal English abstract below at part 13). The research period was seven years (2002-2008), but the 'journey' continues. By the research results the aims of ENSI were reached to a great extend. It also showed that developing school in a 'sustained way', using each one's abilities, strengths and commitment is successful.

This case study tells about the best practices implemented during the developing period, concentrating on the latest experiences. Evidence from the former Comenius project is reported in English in the school website (<http://www.peda.net/veraja/valkeakoski/sorrila/comenius1>). Reporting about the Encounters project is in Finnish language (<http://www.peda.net/veraja/valkeakoski/sorrila/kohtaamisia/sorrilan>). The plain school website is: <http://www.peda.net/veraja/valkeakoski/sorrila>.

Different projects cannot be separated from the 'flow'. They all are part of innovative and constantly developing learning environments.

Learning Aims / Intended Learning Outcomes of the ILE

What are the core learning aims and which knowledge, skills or attitudes are to be acquired? (These may include outcomes related to learners' social, interpersonal, or meta-cognitive development)

Aims and objectives of the project:

1. By varying and learner centered teaching/learning methods students take part in surging and developing their learning environments in cooperation with stake holders, authorities and scientists using the ICT as a tool, not a means (Skype, Smart Board, email, videos and photos).
2. Widening the learning environments outside the school towards cooperation with the multi professional stake holders in the local community.
3. Enhance participation via school councils in order to increase the commitment and peer learning among the students. Taking the students' opinions and suggestions into consideration in planning and developing the learning environments.

The core learning aims are commitment and participation and learning into sustainable life style in schools and in families. Parents' organisation is an important link between the school and the community.

The project is applying different aspects of learning environment.

1. Local aspect: families, veterans/senior citizens, local authorities and companies.
2. Physical aspect: developing learning environments by changes in the school building ('common living room', benches, sofas, dining room renewals). Developing learning in non-formal environments like museums, art centres other schools and institutions, local companies, other municipal departments, parents' working places.
3. Social aspect: relies on the social interaction among the students, students and reaches, family members, town citizens, authorities, university and other ENSI-network schools.
4. Technical aspect: a diversity of ICT-tools to enhance the learning and interaction (Skype, Smart Board, emails, video/photos), blogs, web pages, PP-presentations)
5. Didactic-pedagogical aspect: the most important environment is the 'attitude of open mindness'. Being aware of the possibilities does not need much money, but some extra resources give a wider range of opportunities (busses, tickets) a chance to come true. The ILE is based on the 'Pedagogy of connection', ability to form meaningful and integrated learning entities.

Learning in this ILE is social, interpersonal and it benefits each one's own meta-learning: helping each one to find his or her own 'niche' for learning.

Learners

Which group(s) of learners is it aiming at? Who is eligible to take part? How many learners are there? What are their ages?

The ILE is a 'whole school approach'. All pupils from the pre-school groups (6 -year-olds) to the 6th graders (12-13-year-olds) take part in it.

Facilitators

Who are the teachers/facilitators? Who are the leaders? What are their professional backgrounds? What are their roles?

All members in the school community take part in the project. It means the students and all staff members (teachers, principal, kitchen-and cleaning staff, janitor, school aids and the school secretary). Because the learning is 'collaborate transformative learning', it concerns also the co-operators and the families. The coordinating team consists of the coordinating teacher, the principal and two teachers, but all teacher acts as important actors, taking also their student's opinions and suggestions into consideration. The principal of Keinumäki School in Espoo has the main coordinator the whole project Encounters and its budget, Sorrila is responsible for its own reporting and its share of the budget.

Organization of the ILE

How is learning organised? How do learners and facilitators interact? What kind of pedagogy do they follow? What curriculum is used?

This project or ILE is not very structured or strictly directed. By the research results of the teacher researcher, developing approaches which comes from the needs of the people in the institution have the best possibilities to succeed. The learning is based on the wide lines of national/local and school curricula. The minimum is kind of widened 'and 'fed' by the possibilities of the networking and connections: catching the opportunities and being open minded for them. In Finland teachers are well educated (masters degree) and in the primary education the interdisciplinary and integrated themes are easily applied. This way the 'pedagogy of connection' and 'niche-thinking' has become a logical way of developing the learning and an environment enhancing each one's optional learning.

Learning Context

In which context does learning take place? What does the physical learning environment look like? Are community resources used to facilitate learning and how?

The learning context varies by the learning area. It may be in the classroom, but still the 'mental' learning environment may be very wide, if the informal learning of the students is taken into consideration. ICT (Skype, Smart Board, Internet etc) are natural tools for learning. Special learning environments developed during the ILE project is e.g. the 'common living room', room furniture by sofas and Smart Board interactive white board. It is a room for watching DVD's, videos, TV, or shares the Internet screen. It is also a room for reading a book, or meeting the teachers for a 'pedagogical afternoon', sharing of pedagogies and best practices. Benches outside or on the halls, makes a collaborative or individual learning possible.

There is no single 'context' for the learning, but all learning, arranged in the classroom or outside of it may be innovative. Using the different possibilities in a flexible way is the challenge as well as a strength of the ILE. Nearby shops, municipal offices, local farm, art centre, woods, forests, lakes, historic/prehistoric places (hill forth, medieval church) are examples of the physical learning environments which are common in our school.

History of ILE

Who initiated it? For what reasons was it started and with what purpose? Have these changed since?

The initiative for the ILE approaches was made by the coordinating teacher of the projects and the teacher researcher of the school (writer of this proposal), but without the common will and aims the work would not have succeeded. By the behavioural role model 'Aunt Green' (the coordinator) the environmental approaches have been applied into the whole school. The learning environment developing project/ILE Encounters was a natural consequence of the earlier projects. In the developing process the school has applied so called 'sustainable school development', which uses the strengths and abilities of all staff members and former experiences and 'tacit knowledge' and 'collegial memory' as the basis.

This was possible by a 'sustainable leadership', a principal who encourages all members to take the responsibility for new initiatives.

The co-ordinating teacher came to the school in 2001 and started small approaches for environmentally friendly actions. Gradually the affect spread out wider and by the international networking (ENSI-Comenius- Support) the school became its own kind of ESD-school. Sustainability is not a narrow concept but includes the whole curriculum and all learning environments. Social well being is the basis of a successful learning.

The aims have changed over the years from ecological sustainability and narrow concept of environment into the concept of learning environment being connected to all learning and the task of the school is to benefit everyone's optional learning in optional ILEs.

Funding of the ILE

How is it funded?

Funding for the ILE comes partly from the normal budget of the school. Many of the renewals are 'mental' and need only inspiration and initiatives (recycled furniture, painting/curtains in the school cafeteria). Extra resources come from the national funding from the government, which was launched funding for developing the learning environments. The idea for this funding/project came from the ENSI coordinator working in the Department of Education. Two ENSI-schools started the project and made common plans which gave both schools freedom to develop on their own way, still learning from each other and other ENSI schools.

Learning Outcomes

What are the learning outcomes achieved by the ILE, including academic, social, interpersonal and meta-cognitive outcomes? How is learning assessed?

Learning outcomes were already explained in part 4. Learning is connected to various school subjects. However, most closely to art, history, natural sciences and environmental education, all learned in an integrative way. New Comenius-project, starting in autumn 2009 will widen the ILE into European sphere and encourages using English language as part of a natural interaction. Learning outcomes are connected to all learning and integrated into the real life of the students (families, relatives, town inhabitants, pupils in other ENSI-schools, Encounters partner school and future European Comenius partner schools). Commitment, empowerment and participation are competences the students achieve by being able to learn in different ways. Formal, non-formal and informal learning are equally important ways for learning. All benefit each other. They form a real life.

The learning is assessed in a normal way, self evaluation, by school exams, observations and discussions with the teachers. Learning connected to the ILE project Encounters is also assessed/evaluated by a teacher trainee who has chosen it a subject as his master's theses. Climate change campaign, connect, being part of the project, will be reported into the campaign website (sustain.no). The results will also be discussed and evaluated collaboratively among the schools taking part in the campaign. New Comenius project 'Opening Windows to European Communities' will be assessed in various ways, determined in the applications. Everything is connected and follows the earlier projects in the developing process of Sorrila School.

Documentation describing or evaluating the ILE

Is there documentation on this learning environment? Is there a website? Films? Research reports or evaluations? Other forms of documentation? (please supply references or links)

There is a website for the Encounters, but it is in Finnish language (<http://www.peda.net/veraja/valkeakoski/sorrila/kohtaamisia/sorrilan>).

However, there are photos showing some of the activities and physical removals made as part of this project.

Web page: <http://www.peda.net/veraja/valkeakoski/sorrila/comenius1>

It is a report of Sorrila school former Comenius project 'Exploring and Interacting with our Environment'. It started the development towards socio-cultural sustainability, although the WWF-activities were closely connected to the ecological aspects. Recycling and sorting have been and still form the sustained living style, normal tradition in Sorrila School. There is a model for Sorrila sustainability plan 'Sorrila sustained weekdays' at page

http://opspro.peda.net/valkeakoski/viewer.php3?DB=sorrila&mode=2&document_id=117

Open file: Tiedosto (kekesorrila7.doc) Sorrila Sustainability plan: 'sustained weekdays')

Pupils take videos and make PP-presentations as part of the normal curriculum activities. Some of them could also serve as documentation of the project.

A teacher trainee is making master theses on the ILE Encounters, concentrating on the Sorrila's activities.

Other information you consider to be relevant to describe the ILE

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A teacher trainee is making masters theses on the ILE Encounters, concentrating on the Sorrila's activities. Abstract of the doctoral theses of Mervi Aineslahti:

“A Journey in the Landscape of Sustainable School Development” is a story of the Sorrila School development process. This research deals with a school development project as a process, and as a part of international projects on Education for Sustainable Development, with ENSI (Environment and School Initiatives) being the most important.

The main purpose of the study was to analyze the change process as a general phenomenon as well as the learning connected to it. The research describes the development period 2001–2008 at the Sorrila Primary school. The research questions are as follows: 1. What did pupils learn during the research and development period? 2. How did the coordinating teacher develop personally? 3. How were the ENSI targets and other closely linked projects reached? 4. What was the feedback from the pupils, their parents and other teachers at the school? 5. How did the developing process proceed in 2001–2008?

The method used was integrating action research, which also had ethnographical elements. Narrative was the form of the data as well as the manner of reporting. The method as a whole was integrating, ethnographical action research as a story. The research data consisted mostly of Knowledge Forum notes written by the teacher-researcher. Knowledge Forum is an Internet-based collaborative knowledge-building programme. Pupils’, parents’ and other teachers’ feedback, newspaper articles and students’ writings complied the data, which consists of material from seven years.

Sustainable development was the basis of the school improvement. The targets of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005–2014) were part of the development projects. According to the research results the school was seen as part of complex systems where manifold and interactive learning took place. The learning of pupils, teachers and the school as a community can be characterised socio-cultural. The school was able to reach a level of collaborative transformative learning. As well as several concrete projects, such as Comenius school project, school development consisted of networking at many levels. Along with the projects and networking, the school was able to apply the pedagogy of connection, by carrying out integrative and cross-disciplinary themes and using various learning and teaching methods. International cooperation was a natural part of the work. A figure of Aunt Green, the role model of the teacher researcher, was an innovation which resembled a change agent. The other role of the teacher-researcher as a coordinator was important for her own professional development. According to the results the change process, which relied on sustainable school development, led the school along a road of positive renewals. It was not a series of projects but an ongoing process. The objectives of the international projects were accomplished to a great extent during the research period. According to the principles of action research, the main results were put forward in order to help others to develop their schools. Frictions and problems as well as positive experiences and rejecting dualities were seen as change forces.

Keywords: education for sustainable development (ESD), sustainable school development, teacher professional development, integrating, pedagogy of connection, transformative learning.