

Learning from Finland: From European Erasmus+ Mobility to the Dissemination of Educational Experience in a Special Education School

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Abstract: This study examines the Erasmus+ training mobility of three teachers from the E.E.E.EK. of Komotini to Finland and the subsequent dissemination of the knowledge and experiences acquired. The mobility included training activities and visits to schools, through which the participants became acquainted with aspects of the Finnish education system and different approaches to school organisation, the adaptation of teaching to students' needs, and their active participation. Following their return, dissemination activities were carried out within the school and the wider educational community. The study is organised as a case study and draws on observation, training activities, and the evaluation of both the mobility and the dissemination activities. The Kirkpatrick model is used to assess the participants' experience. The results indicate a positive evaluation of the mobility and dissemination activities, which contributed to informing teachers and created opportunities for discussion and professional reflection. The study thus highlights the potential of European mobility to move from individual experience to the dissemination of knowledge within the school community.

Keywords: Erasmus+, IKY, professional development, Special Education

1. Introduction

The continuously changing and diverse needs of students make it necessary for teachers to continuously renew and develop their knowledge, teaching methods, and pedagogical approaches. This need is particularly important in Special Education, where teachers are required to respond to different abilities, support needs, and ways of participating in the learning process. Continuing education and professional development can therefore contribute to enriching teachers' knowledge and practices and to identifying ways of responding more effectively to their students' needs.

Teacher professional development is not limited to participation in isolated training activities but constitutes a continuous process of learning and development. It is particularly important for teachers to have opportunities to acquire new knowledge, collaborate and exchange experiences with colleagues, receive feedback, and reflect on their own educational practice. Darling-Hammond et al. [1] point out that elements such as active participation in learning, collaboration, feedback, and reflection contribute substantially to teacher professional development. Training therefore becomes more valuable when the knowledge and experiences acquired can be used in everyday educational practice.

Contact with different educational environments can also provide an important opportunity for professional learning. Becoming familiar with other ways of organising schools and teaching, observing different educational practices, and communicating with teachers from other countries can offer new ideas and stimuli. At the same time, these experiences can provide teachers with opportunities to reflect on their own practice and consider what might be done differently or improved. This does not mean, however, that what is observed in another education system can be transferred unchanged. Every new idea needs to be examined and adapted to students' needs and to the particular conditions of each school.

In this direction, European Erasmus+ mobility programmes provide teachers with opportunities to receive training in new educational practices and methodological approaches, become familiar with different educational environments, and exchange experiences with colleagues from other European countries. Research on Erasmus+ mobility has shown that such experiences can contribute to teachers' personal and professional

development [2]. At the same time, the value of mobility can extend beyond the participants themselves when the knowledge and experiences they acquire are shared and discussed within their school community [3].

The value of mobility is not limited to what the participating teachers themselves gain. After returning, they can share the knowledge and experiences acquired with colleagues and discuss ways in which some of what they encountered might be adapted to the needs of their own school. In this way, a training experience acquired by a small number of teachers can be disseminated both within the school and to the wider educational community. The knowledge, experiences, and new stimuli transferred can subsequently become a starting point for collective reflection and discussion around different educational approaches.

The approved Erasmus+ project of the E.E.E.EK. of Komotini, "Learning from Finland: Bridges of Inclusion for Education without Exclusion," included the training mobility of three teachers from the school to Finland. The aim of the mobility was to become familiar with the Finnish education system and with ways of organising education and supporting students with special educational needs, as well as educational practices and approaches that promote inclusion.

The mobility programme included training presentations, experiential workshops, collaboration and discussions with teachers from other European countries, and visits to schools. Through these activities, the participants had the opportunity to observe aspects of the Finnish education system in practice and to reflect on issues such as school organisation and administration, flexibility and the adaptation of teaching to students' needs, opportunities for student choice and active participation in their learning pathway, and the importance of collaboration, safety, and supportive relationships for the school climate.

After the teachers returned from Finland, dissemination activities followed. An internal dissemination activity was first held at the E.E.E.EK. of Komotini, followed by a broader presentation to the educational community. These activities presented aspects of the Finnish education system and issues that had emerged during the training activities and school visits, while also providing opportunities for discussion about what had been presented and its relationship to the school reality of the E.E.E.EK. of Komotini.

This study examines the Erasmus+ training mobility in Finland as an experience of professional learning and the subsequent dissemination of the knowledge and experiences acquired. More specifically, it explores how the mobility contributed to the participants' acquisition of new knowledge and educational stimuli and how this experience was transferred, shared, and discussed within the school and the wider educational community after their return.

2. Methodological Approach

This study is organised as a case study of the specific Erasmus+ training mobility and the subsequent dissemination of the knowledge and experiences acquired by the participants. The material derives from school visits and on-site observation during the mobility, training presentations and experiential workshops, discussions with teachers, mobility documentation, and the records and evaluations of the three participants. The assessment of dissemination also includes evidence from the activities carried out after their return.

The study does not seek to generalise the observations to the Finnish education system as a whole. The observations concern the specific schools and educational activities in which the teachers participated during the mobility. The aim is to present and assess what the participants encountered and observed and to examine the extent to which this experience contributed to enriching their knowledge and educational perspectives.

A questionnaire was administered to the participating teachers to evaluate the mobility. Some questions addressed key themes of the mobility and were used in both the initial and final evaluations, allowing a descriptive comparison of participants' responses. The final evaluation was additionally organised with reference to the four levels of the Kirkpatrick model: Reaction, Learning, Behavior/Transfer, and Results. The participants' experience of the mobility, the knowledge and educational stimuli they believed they had gained, and the way this experience was disseminated after their return were examined.

Following completion of the mobility, dissemination activities were also carried out at the E.E.E.EK. of Komotini and for the wider educational community. A separate questionnaire was used to evaluate these activities among the teachers who attended them. Questions concerned their information about the Finnish education system and what was presented from the mobility, the usefulness of the activity, the reflection it generated, and interest in further discussion of the issues presented.

The questionnaires included Likert-type scale questions and open-ended questions so that responses could be represented both quantitatively and through participants' views and observations. Owing to the small number of direct mobility participants, the data are examined descriptively and are not used to draw generalisable or causal conclusions.

For the presentation of observations from the mobility, the material was organised around key themes that emerged during the training activities and school visits, including school organisation and operation,

adaptation of teaching to students' needs, opportunities for student choice and active participation, and collaboration and relationships within the school community.

3. From Mobility to Dissemination

After the three teachers returned from Finland, an internal dissemination activity was first carried out at the E.E.E.EK. of Komotini. During the activity, teachers at the school were presented with aspects of the mobility experience, the training activities, and the school visits that had taken place.

The presentation included key information on the structure and operation of the Finnish education system, the organisation and administration of schools, decision-making processes, and the role and working conditions of teachers. Observations were also presented concerning flexibility and adaptation of the educational process to students' needs, opportunities for choice and active participation, and collaboration and relationships within the school community.

A broader, open dissemination activity was subsequently held for the educational community and interested participants outside the school, with the participation of the Secondary Education Quality Advisor for the region. Through the two activities, the aim was to ensure that the knowledge and experiences acquired during the mobility did not remain solely with the three participants but were shared and discussed with other teachers.

4. Results

4.1 Evaluation of the Mobility by the Participating Teachers

The comparison of the initial and final self-evaluations of the three participants showed a positive change in all six areas examined. In particular, self-evaluated knowledge of the basic characteristics of the Finnish education system changed from 1/5 before the mobility to 5/5 after its completion. A corresponding change, from 1/5 to 5/5, was recorded for knowledge of the organisation of education and support for students with special educational needs in Finland.

Knowledge of different pedagogical approaches for supporting students with different educational needs changed from 3/5 to 5/5. At the same time, self-evaluated ability to adapt teaching to students' different needs and abilities increased from 2/5 to 4/5, as did the provision of opportunities for active participation and initiative, which also changed from 2/5 to 4/5. Finally, familiarity with different ways of organising teaching and the learning environment changed from 3/5 to 4/5.

These results concern participants' self-evaluation and, because of their very small number ($N = 3$), are presented descriptively and are not used to draw generalisable conclusions.

The final evaluation was additionally organised according to the four levels of the Kirkpatrick model. At the Reaction level, the available responses indicated a particularly positive evaluation of the mobility. Positive evaluations concerned the extent to which the mobility met expectations, the relevance of its content to the needs of the E.E.E.EK., the usefulness of the training activities, communication with teachers from other countries, and the overall mobility experience.

At the Learning level, the available responses indicated a positive evaluation of improved understanding of inclusive education, differentiation and individualisation of teaching, the importance of active student participation, a safe and supportive learning environment, and collaboration among teachers. Open-ended responses not related to See the Good particularly referred to adapting teaching to the student, opportunities for choice and active participation, and contact with a different educational culture.

At the Behavior/Transfer level, participants' self-reports referred to disseminating knowledge and experiences to colleagues, increased reflection on educational practice, interest in adapting activities to students' needs, abilities, and interests, and creating more opportunities for choice and active participation. These reports reflect the participants' own assessments rather than independent observation of changes in educational practice.

At the Results level, according to participants' assessments, the main outcomes were dissemination of the experience within the school community, the interest and discussion generated among teachers, and the exchange of knowledge and experiences. The open-ended responses also highlighted the need to adapt what was observed in Finland to the particular needs and abilities of students at the E.E.E.EK., as well as the limited time available after the teachers' return.

4.2 Evaluation of the Dissemination Activities by Teachers

Twenty-four teachers participated in the evaluation of the dissemination activities ($N = 24$). Questions concerning the See the Good approach were excluded from the present analysis because they are not the subject of this study.

The overall evaluation of the dissemination activities was particularly positive. The presentation appears to have contributed to informing participants about the Finnish education system, as gaining a clearer picture of

its organisation and operation received a mean score of 4.62/5. Specifically, 23 of the 24 teachers selected the high ratings of 4 or 5. Broader understanding of how schools operate received a mean score of 4.50/5, with 22 of the 24 participants selecting 4 or 5.

Issues concerning school organisation and administration were also evaluated positively. The presentation of administration and decision-making processes received a mean score of 4.50/5, while information about teachers' roles, working conditions, and remuneration received a mean score of 4.46/5. The contribution of the presentation to reflection on similarities and differences between the Finnish and Greek educational contexts received a score of 4.62/5.

The dissemination of the mobility experience itself was rated particularly highly. The statement that the activity helped teachers better understand what the participants had gained from the mobility received a mean score of 4.67/5, with 22 of 24 selecting 4 or 5. Similarly, the creation of opportunities for discussion and exchange of views on education and Special Education received a mean score of 4.67/5, with all participants (24/24) selecting 4 or 5.

The importance of disseminating the outcomes of European mobility programmes within the school and the wider educational community was also evaluated positively ($M = 4.42/5$). Finally, the statement that the activity provided ideas or stimuli for participants' professional reflection received a mean score of 4.58/5, with 23 of the 24 teachers selecting 4 or 5.

Open-ended responses concerning the Finnish education system highlighted interest in different aspects, including school organisation and operation, student autonomy, the individualised approach to teaching, administration and decision-making, teachers' working conditions and remuneration, and the school environment and relationships within it. The responses also expressed interest in further discussion and exploration of the elements presented in relation to the realities of Special Education.

Overall, the data indicate that the dissemination activities were evaluated positively both in terms of informing teachers and creating opportunities for discussion and professional reflection. Particularly high evaluations concerned understanding the participants' mobility experience and creating discussion and exchange of views. Based on the responses, dissemination was not limited to presenting information about Finland but also created opportunities for discussion of issues relevant to the school and educational community.

5. Discussion – Conclusions

The results indicate that the Erasmus+ mobility provided the participating teachers with an opportunity for professional learning and contact with a different education system. Becoming familiar with different ways of organising the school and the educational process provided new stimuli and opportunities for reflection on their own educational practice. At the same time, the dissemination activities enabled the knowledge and experiences from the mobility to be shared with other teachers and to serve as a starting point for discussion around issues of education and Special Education.

This finding is related to the understanding of professional development as a process strengthened through collaboration, knowledge exchange, and reflection on educational practice [1]. Similarly, research on Erasmus+ mobility highlights the contribution of such experiences to teachers' professional learning [2]. In this case, it is particularly important that the experience did not remain solely with the direct participants but became the subject of dissemination and discussion within the school and the wider educational community.

At the same time, what was observed in Finland cannot be transferred unchanged to a different educational environment. It needs to be considered in relation to students' needs and the particular conditions of each school. Mobility can therefore serve as a stimulus for new ideas and reflection, without implying that the approaches observed can be implemented in the same way under different educational conditions.

The study has certain limitations, mainly due to the small number of direct participants in the mobility and the limited period of time before its evaluation. The results are also largely based on participants' self-reports and on the views of teachers who attended the dissemination activities. For this reason, no generalisable conclusions or conclusions about long-term changes in educational practice can be drawn.

In conclusion, the value of European mobility is not limited to the experience of the teachers who participate directly in it. In this case, the experience in Finland served as a starting point for professional learning, while through the dissemination activities the participants' knowledge and experiences were shared with other teachers and created opportunities for discussion and professional reflection. In this way, the mobility experience moved from the individual level to the school and the wider educational community.

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