

THE ERASMUS PLUS PROGRAM AS A FACTOR TO INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION IN SCHOOLS: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

Content and methods of education implemented in schools are changing rapidly. One of the reasons fuelling these changes is implementation of such programs like the Lifelong Learning Program (LLP) Erasmus Plus, which motto „Learning for life” is gaining more and more followers. For the purpose of proving this theory, the researcher presents below the profiles of two primary schools (Primary School in Krosno and CEIP Villa Romana in Spain), which participate in this international cultural and educational exchange.

The researcher paid special attention to the assumptions of the LLP project, tourism mobility and achievements resulting from the international cooperation between the educational institutions. To present the problem, the researcher used one of the qualitative research methods for case studies. It determined the careful analysis of the individual interviews as well as participating observation of the program coordinators and teachers' behavior showed how much potential lies in the cooperation of teachers and pupils participating in such educational exchanges. The undertaken research (including interviews with the staff and observation of the projects management) and its analysis confirmed the hypothesis that every type of school, regardless of its location (city or countryside) can benefit from participation in an international exchange. The main limiting factor, noticeable especially in the schools located in rural areas, is the mentality and fear from participation in an international program, challenging the language skills of the staff and resulting in more administrative work. However, the success of the Erasmus Plus program is best measured by the fact that after initial participating, both village schools continued the project in the following years.

Key words: *case study, Erasmus Plus, international mobility, school education.*

Introduction

A fresh look at the content and teaching methods in schools is introduced in almost all types of educational institutions in Poland and Spain. The main purpose of the exchange program is to activate the children during classes by tourism activity and recreation. This way the students gain skills helping them to take decisions, become more creative and identify better with the surrounding environment (Kugiejko, 2015). One of the ways¹ (Kugiejko, 2016) (http://erasmusplus.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/odnowione_ramy_wsp%C3%B3%C5%82pracy.pdf) allowing them to develop their potential and acquire new

¹ A new look at the content of education and teaching in schools is realized in almost all types of educational institutions in Poland. The innovative character of the form involves direct contact with students and their activation in the classroom. By undertaking the tourist and recreational activity, the children and youth learn composure, improve their decision-making process and become more creative.

abilities is participation in Erasmus Plus program (<http://erasmusplus.org.pl/edukacja-szkolna/>). Its' primary goal is to exchange experiences between students and teachers from different EU countries. By offering them the possibility to visit different schools participating in the program, they are able to meet new cultures. Moreover, they learn to respect foreign cultural heritage as well as promote the knowledge of their own culture. The Erasmus Plus program is a popular project both in Poland and Spain which brings together diverse types of school (both urban and rural). In this research the profile of two partnering schools was described along with their program agenda and achievements, taking into consideration different locations. Particular attention was paid to tourism mobility and the resulting benefits (<http://erasmusplus.org.pl/edukacja-szkolna/>).

Erasmus Plus Program at School

The educational policy in European Union is regulated by the Treaty of Maastricht and its primary goal is promoting the sense of European integration among young people, teaching languages of the Member States, supporting the students and staffs' exchange, recognizing foreign diplomas and degrees (The Maastricht Treaty on European Union, 1997). These assumptions are realized by supporting cooperation in the field of education through programs which enhance the knowledge sharing and improve education level, according to the assumption of building a "Europe without borders and barriers" (Członkowska-Naumiuk & Smolarczyk, 2015). These projects are allowing the international cooperation, offering a chance to learn about new solutions which can be applied to local teaching methods. By implementing such EU programs like Erasmus Plus the Member States are promoting international exchanges between educational institutions in order to create communal teaching programs and share good practices improving the level of teaching. By using case studies, the researcher analyzed thoroughly the tourism activities organized in two schools cooperating with each other under the Erasmus program. The description of carefully selected events is also closely dependent on the fact, that the LLP program was divided into two modules: one is focusing on mobility among teaching staff (KeyAction1 - Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices) (<http://erasmusplus.org.pl/edukacja-szkolna/akcja-1/>) while the other support the exchange process of students and teachers (KeyAction2- <http://erasmusplus.org.pl/edukacja-szkolna/akcja-2/>).

In practice such cooperation requires the creation of a group consisting of at least three schools from different EU countries and additionally two other associated countries (like Turkey or Switzerland) (http://www.erasmus.org.pl/odnosniki-podstawowe/o-programie#Kraje_uczestniczace_). The main task of each of the partners is to cooperate in the framework of European Educational programs focusing on topics of interest to majority of the organizers, like cultural heritage, environmental protection, education or technology. This concept applies to the whole group and forms an integral part of the education of all participants. The motto of the surveyed schools was „Back to the future – learning from the past”. The choice of the theme was based on an interdisciplinary approach, so that the program is addressed to all parties engaged in school education and not only students and staff, but also local governments and institutions (erasmusplus.org.pl/relacja-ze-spotkania-podziel-sie-sukcesem-deor/).

To present the problem, the researcher used one of the qualitative research methods for case studies (Sztumski, 2005 & Silverman, 2008; Yin, 2003). By using the monographic method two specific entities (schools) were examined, along with the implemented processes carried out by specific project teams. Moreover, the research was conducted in cooperation with the teachers during the school years of 2014/2015 and 2015/2016. For the purpose of the project, two educational institutions were selected for the analysis, which were chosen randomly among all primary schools from the Poznan county in Poland (from the database of Education Information System, 2016). A careful analysis of the individual interviews as

well as active observation of the program coordinators and teachers' behavior, showed how much potential lies in the cooperation of teachers and pupils participating in such educational exchanges. The knowledge, gained through the analysis of the activities of the LLP program, and the mobility, expressed by the children and their teachers in both participating schools, presented the different ways of implementing innovations in the theory of teaching. Special attention was focused on understanding how the implementation of these innovations is carried out and what differences are in the organization of cooperating schools. It was also crucial to obtain the personal feedback from the teachers about the existing program to understand the pros and cons from the organizational level. The most important questions were if despite the fact that the staff did not have earlier experience with such projects, they still want to continue participating in them and what are the most problematic issues from their perspective. In the next step a written request was sent to the headmaster with invitation to cooperation in the study. In case of a positive reply the headmaster had to appoint the partnering school abroad with which the institution had a good record of cooperation. The relevant variables in the study were the type of school (primary, secondary and junior high school, as well as its location (rural, rural-urban or urban). For the purpose of this study the researcher chose two rural schools with a similar number of students: 382 in Krosno, Poland and 354 in CEIP Villa Romana, Spain. This big research sample was selected deliberately for the justified qualitative nature of the research (Frankfort- Nachmias & Nachmias, 2001). The selection of respondents, including two program coordinators, two school headmasters and 14 teachers was deliberate. The individual interviews had a form of unstructured, 15-20 minutes long conversations which transcript is attached below. The scope of the interviews included 13 questions focusing on the organization and execution of the activities connected with implementation of Erasmus Plus program, including the requirements for students and staff before the exchange, the profile of the visit, preparations for the project and the students and teachers' attitude towards it. During the research based on analysis of case studies, various methods, techniques and tools were used, such as: research documentation, observation during the researcher's internship in the selected institutions, interview and survey methods.

Results of the Research

As mentioned before, one of the assumptions of the LLP program is to support the knowledge sharing and improve education level among the schools participating in the international exchange. The developed agendas assumed the creation of common tasks (like school language dictionary, blog, logo design). Currently the KeyAction2 project includes six different types of students' activities and the results are presented to an international audience during the staff's exchange visits (Table 1). However, the issue of calculation and reporting on the level of improvement is troublesome. According to the interviews conducted by the researcher, there are no written records measuring the level of change, only subjective opinions confirming the validity of participation in Erasmus Plus program: „It is hard to say, but internally one can feel positive enthusiasm and a lot of work (...)", "It is difficult to estimate, but the changes are definitely positive".

Table 1. Characteristics of schools.

	CEIP Villa Romana in Spain	Primary School in Krosno
The method of recruiting participants	In this edition children do not go abroad, only teaching staff (KeyAction1)	In this edition children do not leave, only teaching staff (KeyAction1)
	In the next years 2016-2018 24 people (including students and representatives of the staff)	In the next years 2016-2018 24 people (including students and representatives of the staff)
Founded number of participants	24 people (only teaching staff)	24 people (only teaching staff)
The main language of communication	English language	
Common schedule of classes	Visit duration: 5-7 days (costs covered by the grant), participation in class, school life, sightseeing tours	Visit duration: 5 days (always starts on Wednesday and ends on Sunday). Three days devoted to work on the project, and two days for sightseeing and recreation.
Cooperating states	Italy, Ireland, Slovakia, Poland and France	Italy, Ireland, Slovakia, Spain and France
The duration of the project	3 years	

Proposal Partnership for the Years 2016-2018

The headmasters and project coordinators use the chance offered by different modules of the program to implement European level of education to their institutions by using the good practices shared with the partnering schools. Within the current framework for 2016-2018, every school participating in Erasmus Plus program is going to develop the following tasks:

- **September - December 2016** – every school develops the “Fashion Fusion” task; pupils create a mood board of the traditional outfit in their country/region. Through this activity they aim to provide a setting to develop and experiment on creativity and team work, as pupils will eventually have to invent a costume as a team.

- **January – March 2017** – every school develops the “Think Out Loud” task; pupils in each country have to design a building using LEGO blocks. Once they finish, they take a picture of it from every side and send it to another school. Pupils in that school have to copy the building from the picture, organising their work as a team.

- **April - June 2017** – every school develops the “Story train” task: the first country draws a scenario and some characters and sends it to the second school. This school has to begin the story with the material received and must draw the next scenario and send the story and the both scenarios to the next school and so on. The final product will be a book, including the pictures of the students from all the school story. Through this task the pupils communicate with each other using a foreign language (English).

- **September - December 2017** – every school develops “Recipe for success” task: developing a brochure which highlights the traditional foods of their country/region. Each school shares in it the recipe of one traditional dish. By this activity the schools promote healthy eating habits and cultural heritage.

- **January – March 2018** - every school develops the “Active body, active mind” task: each school records a dance to show it to the other schools. This way they work on personal well-being of their students through physical education

• **April - June 2018** – every school develops the “Colour Tunes” task: each country shares a song that can be considered typical for the region. Pupils have to draw freely what they feel when they listen to that song, using dark colours. Working on emotional intelligence, they reflect their feelings, what causes them and how they identify and express them.

The above mentioned tasks (agreed and accepted by all Member States) deliberately point to the cultural, geographical and historical differences. The core value of the program is to promote science, experience and acceptance of diversity (erasmusplus.org.pl/o-programie/priorytety/). Through those tasks and activities, all the schools involved should learn more about the others, finding things in common and patterns which may help them improve future cooperation both as teachers and as future employees in different fields than education. “We expect to make people realize that we are all different but most importantly we should look for ways of respecting each other differences” - summarized the project coordinator from CEIP Villa Romana. The exchange of ideas is an invaluable source of knowledge about Europe – shared directly by the teachers and students, but also by employees working in the educational institutions. “Due to our participation in the program we were able to extend core curriculum of integrated teaching, including language and art” - commented, the project manager from the school in Krosno, Poland. The preparation part prior to the international visit take quite some time and commitment. The respondents didn’t try to hide how stressful the exchanges are for them both before, during and after the event takes place. The process of planning the trips starts with the meeting of all project coordinators where they set up the agenda and all the details. In the next step the coordinator starts arranging the transportation and accommodation, requests a permission from third parties for the trip (parents, local police, headmaster, etc.) and estimates all expenses. The work in the project is very intense and doesn’t slow down during all two years. All coordinators underlined that it required sacrificing one’s free time, including the student’s families. Every trip included a series of touristic and cultural events. However, all teachers (n=18) underlined that the participation in the program is a source of satisfaction for them and the students’ enthusiasm and amazing results – an additional benefit (Table 2). Moreover, the respondents are happy to be able to practice their language skills as all communication with the partnering schools is done in English. For the staff it is also a motivation for professional development. “In order to participate in the project you need to present a Europe’s C.V. and a Motivation Letter. Then school deputy and coordinator decide which teachers are the most appropriate to travel according to those two criteria” - explained a teacher from the school in Spain. The opportunity to go abroad and visit international schools helps in building self-esteem for teachers and helps them in modernizing the existing environment.

Table 2. Erasmus Plus - assumptions and execution.

	CEIP Villa Romana in Spain	Primary School in Krosno
Questions	Answers	
When the program was introduced in the school?	From September 2013 but in 2015 launched a new project in the school, this time under the name of Erasmus Plus	From September 2013 but in 2015 launched a new project in the school, this time under the name of Erasmus Plus
Where the idea to come from to take part in the Erasmus Plus program?	through self-education English teacher trips meetings with other teachers	the director and one of the newly employed teachers working earlier in the program
How do the preparations for exchange look like?	“busy! as coordinators for the project need to organise the teaching meeting that will take place, supervise the documents designed” “buying plane tickets, arranging the accommodation, calculating the expenses, etc.”	direct cooperation with traveling teachers and students, discussing the upcoming tasks collecting all the required items
Are students willing to participate in activities, and trips?	very willing to work, both at school and travelling	children willing to work in the program all the time even as if they are not traveling i.e. by helping with implementing the tasks described above
Does the program help schools to be higher in the rankings?	“hard to tell, but it feels positive enthusiasm and a lot of work” “definitely yes, the local community is very involved in the program and it is very well received”	“hard to say, but certainly this is something positive”
Do children compete to participate in the program?	“they are little jealous of teachers but they are willing to help them and injure about new things to do”	“yes, this is definitely a positive element in the development - a positive rivalry “

Discussion

Referring to the quote of Louis Pasteur, „science has no homeland, because human knowledge covers the whole world” and to the individual opinions of the respondents, the researcher’s theory has been confirmed (FRSE). Developing young people and teaching staff’s knowledge about the diversity of cultures and languages and understanding its value, is reinforcing the quality and scope of EU educational system. It is worth emphasizing that every school, teacher and student has a chance to participate in the program. The location of the educational institution, rural or municipal, is not a factor excluding from participation, because the key objective is the goal of the project and the willingness to take action. The benefits achieved by the respondents are the best proof for implementing the Erasmus Plus program.

Feedback from Teachers (18 in total)

Among the most commonly mentioned benefits of the confrontation of the educational systems in Poland and Spain were the improved knowledge on the EU Member States. During the project the staff made lasting relations with foreign teachers. The four teachers who held the role of project coordinators turned out to have impressive skills for planning events for big groups, because the success of the trip depended on them. Both of the institutions were accurate at planning their expenses which was vital since the grant (24 000 € for each school)

was not enough to cover everything. The respondents emphasized that due to the exchanges they improved the tools of working in groups and use more IT tools in their teaching methods. Additionally, the teachers participating in the exchange receive certificates confirming the acquirement of new skills (certificate of participation). In fact more than 10 teachers underlined their improved English skills and two of them – higher proficiency in French and Spanish. Individual benefits are crucial for professional development, although it is the final results of the collaborative work of the whole team that determine the success of the whole project.

Feedback from Students

There were in total 800 students in the researched schools. One of the postulates included extending the participation in the educational activities to as many pupils as possible. Based on the results of the research, young people gain and perfect their skills and competencies crucial for effective participation in their future professional life, like knowledge of foreign languages and IT technologies. According to the teachers' opinion (n=18) the students improved most their social skills and the ability to work as a team. Important factor is also the possibility to make relationships with their peers from different nationalities using their language skills in practice. Based on the survey, nearly 90% teachers noticed that the students express a high interest in foreign countries and their cultures. Also, their understanding of foreign education conditions and school reality in the partnering countries significantly increased. Moreover, the students proved more tolerant towards different nations and their cultures, which fuelled their motivation for learning new languages (84%, n=15). As a result, their level of proficiency in English significantly increased (students make mistakes but they try to speak a foreign language). Additionally, the participating students learned to respect their own cultural heritage and promote it abroad. Unfortunately, during the school year while the researcher visited the schools, the children were not visiting the schools but only the staff. However, as per the project coordinators reassurance, in the near future (school year 2016/2017) the international exchanges will include the students. The Erasmus Plus program allows only for a specific amount of participants, however the preparations process and execution of the tasks includes nearly the whole school. „Although not all children and youth can participate in the exchange, they are all willing to help and see the benefits of their engagement”, added project coordinator from the school in Krosno, Poland.

Conclusion and Implication

Presenting survey *results* is a report about two primary schools (Primary School in Krosno, Poland and CEIP Villa Romana in Catarroja, Spain), which participated in an international cultural and educational exchange (Erasmus, LLP). The presented characteristics of business schools, implementation of the program for subsequent years and the ongoing international cooperation is an evidence that even small schools situated in rural areas can take up the challenge and be successful. Motivating is also the fact that the cooperation did not end on one project, but it is a driver for ongoing cooperation. The undertaken activities are managed in a way to involve as many people as possible (among pupils, teachers and parents), both from the groups taking part in the exchange itself and those supporting local tasks.

The ultimate goal of participation in Erasmus Plus program is to develop a strong and lasting cooperation between the schools and strengthen the European education system. This is the initial stage of familiarizing the youngest pupils with efficiency in personal and professional life, which in the future should become a solid element of education system. The reports published by the European Union on Erasmus Program confirm that that over the years 2014/2016 the number of trips increases and what consequently, more and more allocated

funds for new projects and trips (rc.amu.edu.pl/?_task=mail&_action=get&_mbox=INBOX&_uid=8245&_part=2&_frame=1&_extwin=1). It is expected that in Europe between 2014-2020 more than 25.000 schools and businesses will be involved in it, and the estimated budget is 14.7 billion Euro (only in Poland in 2014 over 12.7 million Euro was spent, while another 13.7 million Euro is planned in 2016). As a result, the Erasmus program is becoming increasingly popular not only among students, but also in schools or institutions. It can be assumed that the reason for this are the young people who once benefited from good practice in college and want to continue the “adventure” in their current place of employment as coordinators of the Erasmus exchanges. The case study with the two small schools from Poland and Spain proved this evidence, because it was their young staff that was the driver behind the introduction of the Erasmus Program Plus (KA1, KA2) in these educational institutions.

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