

FACTS.

3C/2019

express

Photo: Satu Haavisto

Perceptions about the impact of Erasmus+ staff mobility in Finnish schools

Why would I go abroad for in-service training?

BACKGROUND

Through the Erasmus+ -program for school education, pre-primary, primary and secondary schools can get funding for projects in which they can send staff to participate in learning mobilities in other European countries. The learning mobilities may consist of in-service training, which can be realized as either a structured course, a job shadowing period in the field of school education, or teaching in a partnering school or pre-primary institution.

The projects must be based on the needs of the individual school or pre-primary institution, and benefit those needs as well as possible. It is also important that the goals of the project are linked to the curriculum and other strategic planning of the institution. The goal of the in-service training abroad is thus to affect not only the professional development of an individual staff member, but also the entire institution.

This study is based on a previous, international study, which looked at

how the project goals were met in the in-service training projects for school education (2014–2015), and how the impact of the projects was perceived in the school community. The Lithuanian national agency was the main coordinator of the study, and the researchers at Šiauliai University in Lithuania created the methodology.

The Lithuanian researchers also compiled the final report on the results of the study, based on the reports on national studies conducted by each of the participating countries. The transnational report was published in 2017. Finnish National Agency for Education conducted the Finnish national study, the results of which were briefly presented in the publication *New perspectives on everyday school work*, Facts Express 1C/2017.

In 2018, four of the participating countries of the original study: Lithuania, Estonia, Poland and Finland, launched a longitudinal study on how the impact of in-service training pro-

jects is visible in the schools a few years after the mobilities were carried out. We also looked at what kinds of factors either support or hinder the sustainability of the results. This Facts Express –publication presents some of the qualitative results of the Finnish part of the longitudinal study.

The results presented in this publication are based on data from focus group interviews of a total of 15 teachers and school leaders, who had participated in Erasmus+ mobility projects. The participants were from the same schools that were included in the original study. No pre-primary institutions were included in this data sample. In addition to the focus groups, a case study interview on one of the mobility projects is also included in the data. Three staff members from the same mobility project participated in the case study interview.



FINNISH NATIONAL
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Erasmus+



Photo: Satu Haavisto

As international activities have become a natural part of school culture, it has encouraged those staff members to participate who have previously been unsure or disinterested towards international projects.

“Our first project encouraged the teachers to test their wings. After that we have constantly had new projects with European schools.”

IN-SERVICE TRAINING ABROAD UPDATED TEACHING METHODS AND LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

The new Core Curricula in both the Basic Education and the Upper Secondary Education have created a strong need for updates to teaching methods and learning environments. Many schools have used international in-service training projects to answer to this demand.

Many teachers described changes in teaching methods as a result of the Erasmus+ - project. Some methods were introduced to the school for the first time after the project, whereas others were already in use, but were refined or developed as new skills and knowledge were acquired from the project. Methods in mathematics, the use of ICT, action-based teaching, and differentiation of teaching for children with different needs were among those mentioned.

Many schools have looked to international in-service training projects for new perspectives in creating modern and versatile learning environments. For example, some schools have increased outdoor learning and using nature as a learning environment as a result of an in-service training course on the same topic. Other schools have used the ideas and inspiration acquired from a mobility project for designing learning spaces for a newly constructed school building. In this way, the ideas

that stem from the Erasmus+ -project can be concretized for years to come.

Some of the interviewees also described a change in the schools' models of operation as a result of the in-service training project. For example, administrating and managing the technology used by the teachers and the students has become more efficient in some schools. Teachers have also developed models of co-teaching or collaborative teaching.

INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITIES BECOME ROOTED IN SCHOOL CULTURE

In many schools, international activities and a European identity have become an integral part of the school culture. Teachers and school leaders described this as the most significant change in the schools as a result of the Erasmus+ -project. International cooperation is now perceived as a normal part of the everyday activities in the schools, not as something extra or occasional. As international activities have become a natural part of school culture, it has encouraged also those staff members to participate who have previously been unsure or disinterested towards international projects.

Several teachers described the international in-service training projects as a great way of finding new European contacts with whom it has been possible to continue collaboration, or start all new projects. Many schools have



Photo: Satu Haavisto

launched a new Erasmus+ -project or some other form of international cooperation with a partner that they found during an in-service training project. Teachers' mobility projects abroad may be followed by a project where it is possible for the students to go abroad as well. Online collaboration, for example eTwinning, are another common result of the contacts created during the in-service training projects.

The new contacts from the teachers' in-service training projects have also resulted in an increase in international visitors to the schools. The interviewees stated that receiving international visitors is a good opportunity to offer the students international experiences without leaving their own school. Internationality has become such an important aspect of the school culture in some schools that it has come to be one of the "trademarks" that increases the appeal of the school. This type of image factor is especially important for small town upper secondary schools that need to compete with the neighboring, larger cities.

TEACHERS GAIN NEW PERSPECTIVES AND CONFIDENCE IN THEIR OWN WORK

Teachers who had participated in the in-service trainings abroad stated that, in addition to giving new ideas and skills, the experiences in other countries also offered valuable perspective to the aspects that are already working well in the Finnish school system. Many respondents said that they now

value their own work more and that they have acquired new confidence in what they do. On the other hand, some teachers also mentioned that being able to observe how a school works in another country has helped them realize that many aspects of school life are in fact quite universal and occur similarly in all countries.

Participating in an in-service training project abroad helped many of the participants realize that they are able to communicate in a foreign language much better than they had previously thought. This was described as a very empowering experience, and one that has even encouraged some teachers who have previously been unsure about their language skills to use foreign language in their teaching.

SHARING THE KNOWLEDGE ACQUIRED FROM THE MOBILITY WITH THE WHOLE SCHOOL IS AN ESSENTIAL PART OF THE PROJECT

Most of the teachers who participate in mobility projects share the new knowledge and ideas by telling their colleagues about them at teachers' meetings. According to the interviewed teachers, this is the most popular way of disseminating project results within the school. However, some teachers do not settle for only telling about the new ideas and methods, but instead have their colleagues try them in practice. One respondent called this the "exposure technique". Teachers talked about colleagues, or even school leaders, who initially were not



In-service training periods abroad are a great way of finding new European contacts with whom it has been possible to continue collaboration, or start all new projects.

"We have received lots of international visitors after the courses and job shadowing periods. That has really brought internationality home to our students!"



Photo: Hanna Anttila



WHAT IS ERASMUS+ -PROGRAM?

Erasmus+ is the European Union program for education, training, youth and sport. It supports different kinds of mobilities abroad, European cooperation and dialogue. The current program runs for from 2014 to 2020. The new program season is currently being prepared.

Finnish Board of Education supports internationalization and development of education and youth programs with 45 million euros this year.

Nearly 300 000 Finns have taken part in international mobilities supported by the Erasmus+ -program and its predecessors since 1992.

Experiences of the impact of Erasmus+ staff mobility in Finnish schools: oph.fi/en/ka1/results

interested in participating in the international projects but changed their minds after they were exposed to the results of the project.

The Erasmus+ -projects enable also those teachers to get in-service training, whose local training opportunities are scarce, for example in the more remote locations that are not close to larger cities. Some of the interviewees commented that access to in-service training through the Erasmus+ -program is seen as a valuable resource, and thus it also motivates the participants to share the information they have learned with the rest of the staff, so as to get the most out of the training opportunity and benefit the whole school.

The teachers who participated in the interviews were unanimous in that enough time and resources need to be allotted for sharing the new experiences effectively with the whole school community. Some suggested that it would be beneficial for the sustainability of the project results to always have at least two people participating in the same mobility, so that they have someone to share, not only the experience but also the responsibility of implementing and sharing the results. The hectic nature of teachers' work was considered to be one of the biggest challenges for the sustainability of the project results. According to the interviewed teachers, the dissemination will often remain minimal if there is no specifically allotted time for it (e.g. teacher's council or training days).

Many teachers are also actively involved in organizations and other communities outside of school, and can thus use their networks to share information about the project results and their impact to a wider audience. Many municipalities organize "pedagogical cafés", where teachers from different schools can share their thoughts and experiences. Some of

the in-service training projects have inspired the schools to start or increase collaboration with other institutions in the community, for example the library.

CONNECTION TO THE STRATEGIC PLANNING OF THE SCHOOL CONTRIBUTES TO THE SUSTAINABILITY OF PROJECT RESULTS

The school leaders and teachers agreed that for an international project to have sustainable, lasting impact and become part of the school culture, the project needs to be clearly connected to the curriculum. When the project is officially a part of the school's yearly development plan, and its aims correspond with the aims set in the curriculum, it may become a natural element in the strategic development of the school.

For example, development of new learning environments was a goal in many in-service training projects, and it was mentioned several times in the interviews. The new Core Curricula for both the basic and upper secondary education emphasize the significance of a well-functioning learning environment and promote using nature and the surroundings as a learning environment in addition to the school and the classroom. The results of the in-service training projects can thus be directly used for developing the school to meet the requirements of the new curriculum.

HOW DOES INTERNATIONAL IN-SERVICE TRAINING AFFECT THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY IN A SUSTAINABLE WAY?



★ Teacher gets ★

- self-confidence: language skills, managing new situations
- new perspective
- self-esteem

Challenges:

- lack of time for sharing the information



★ Staff gets ★

- new teaching methods
- models for co-teaching
- international contacts
- stronger European identity

Challenges:

- lack of commitment from staff



★ School gets ★

- support for implementing the curriculum
- support for strategic development
- ideas for learning environments
- ideas for models of operation
- internationality as part of everyday life
- a competitive edge

Challenges:

- if the project is not connected to other strategic development
- if the school leader does not take part in the project

Photo: Hanna Anttila



However, some teachers do not settle for only telling about the new ideas and methods, but instead have their colleagues try them in practice. One respondent called this the "exposure technique".

STRONG INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT INCREASES SUSTAINABILITY OF THE PROJECT RESULTS

Internationality has become such an important aspect of the school culture that it has given a competitive edge for the school.

"We are a small school in a peripheral area, but we are very international. We get students also from neighboring municipalities. Internationality has become our trademark."

According to the interviewees, institutional support in project planning and administration is very important when pursuing sustainable project results. Teachers and school leaders stressed the importance of a committed leadership in planning and executing a successful and sustainable mobility project. If the school leaders take an active role in the initial planning of the project and are involved throughout its lifespan, the chances of the project resulting in sustainable changes are much greater. The school leaders can make sure that the project connects to the overall development of the school, starting from the planning phase, and encourage all members of the staff to take part in the different phases of the project.

The impact of the project results was also considered to

Photo: Satu Haavisto

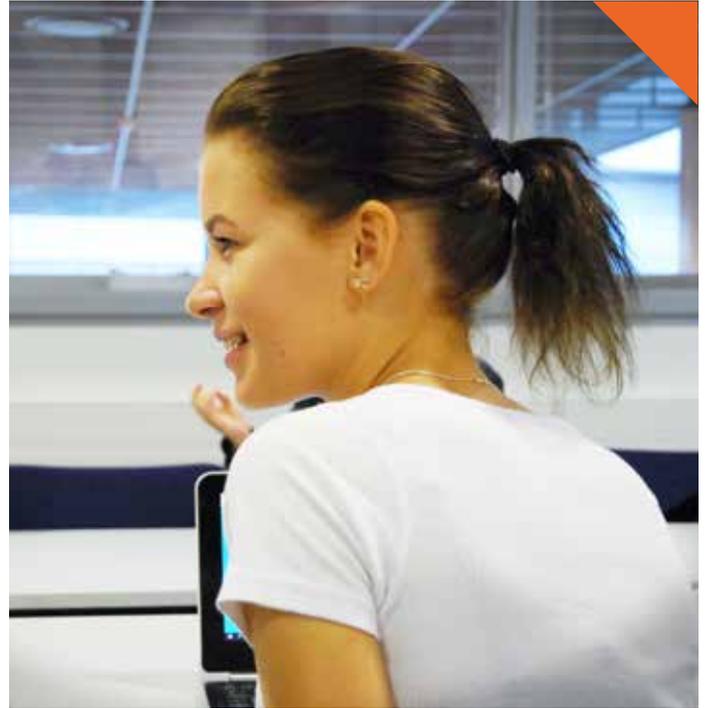


be more sustainable if the project is somehow linked to either a previous project, or for example a new collaborative project that includes also student mobilities abroad. That way the projects are not merely individual, short-term activities but instead create a continuing pattern and tradition of international projects at the school.

SUPPORT FROM THE WHOLE SCHOOL COMMUNITY PLAYS AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN SUSTAINING PROJECT IMPACT

It is rare that all members of staff are able to go on in-service training abroad. In spite of this the project should have an impact beyond the members of staff who participate in the mobilities. Encouraging and committing the non-mobile staff to take part in the project is one of the greatest challenges for sustainability of the project results. According to the interviewed teachers, it is important to plan the project together as a school community from the start, and give everyone an opportunity to participate in the planning. That way it can truly become the project of the whole school community. When a project is designed to provide an answer or solution to existing needs of the school or care center, it is likely that the results will also have a true, sustainable impact.

Photo: Elina Ruokari



Using a foreign language during in-service training abroad caused many teachers to realize that their language skills are better than they thought.

“It has a tremendous impact when a teacher, who has avoided speaking English, goes to a training and experiences that they can actually manage.”



The Finnish National Agency for Education is an agency operating in the administrative branch of the Ministry of Education and Culture. It is responsible for the development of education, early childhood education and care, and lifelong learning as well as for the promotion of internationalisation.