# Greek Cypriot primary school teachers' narrations of "Erasmus" as a space of professional development: at the intersection of the personal and the professional

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**Abstract**
This article focuses on the European Programme Erasmus for schools (KA110-SCH and KA220-SCH) as an instantiation of the broader project of creating a European Area of Education (EAE) to explore its enactment as narrated by primary school teachers in Cyprus. Although numerous different models of teachers' professional development (PD) have been proposed in the literature, Erasmus seems to combine several aspects of those in a particular way. Moreover, how it is enacted during teachers' lives has rarely been studied. Adopting a biographical approach, we were able to explore teachers' PD during Erasmus at the intersection of their personal and professional lives, as well as of their local school contexts and broader institutional (national and European) contexts. This was made possible through life histories, which were compiled through a series of long interviews with eight Greek Cypriot primary school teachers with varied and multiple Erasmus experiences over the last 20 years. The interviews were thematically coded and analysed and so were the life histories; the cross-analysis of the latter allowed the tracing of numerous Erasmus experiences which formed three distinct spaces of PD: pedagogical, leadership-professional and personal-sociocultural. Across all three spaces, Erasmus was narrated as PD creating distinct personal and professional opportunities in constant interplay, despite placing demands on both the personal and professional realms throughout teachers' lives; it was thus construed as going beyond merely typical forms of PD, but rather as infusing their lives with a long-term European dimension. Although demanding, this interplay seemed to sustain teachers' pursuit of Erasmus. These findings are discussed in relation to debates about the Europeanisation of education, teacher governance and teacher professional development.

**Keywords**
Erasmus, Europeanisation, teachers' life histories, teacher professional development, teacher personal development.

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## 1. Introduction

The European Union's policies have strategically framed teacher skills, qualifications, and career pathways as central policy concerns and have mobilized a wide range of actors and instruments across educational and political sectors. Erasmus[3] mobility programmes have been such a policy (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2021), expected to enhance professional skills through voluntary transnational mobility between European partners as a form of soft power/governance in international relations (see Ferreira-Pereira & Mourato Pinto, 2021). Some studies have underscored the pivotal role of Erasmus in fostering teachers' PD by promoting mobility and institutional collaboration across borders, while exploring how it is mediated differently across member states (Symeonidis, 2021). Discourses of professionalization, stressing intercultural and linguistic competences, curriculum adaptability and lifelong learning as essential qualifications for modern, adaptable, and competitive teaching professionals have been traced in both student teacher (Pedersen, 2023) and teacher PD policies (Caena & Margiotta, 2010) as expected to contribute to a European teacher identity (Simões, Lourenço & Costa, 2018).

Against this backdrop, and within this special issue entitled *The contribution of Erasmus+ mobility to the creation of European teachers,* we focus on eight Greek Cypriot teachers participating in Erasmus over the last three decades to explore its influence, as traced in teachers' whole-life narrations of their professional careers and personal trajectories. By adopting a biographical approach, which does not impose a normative stance on teachers' lives but rather takes an interpretative stance seeking to understand them in context and as persons (Goodson, 2019), this study expands the lenses through which we examine PD and European teacher policies, because it explores their impact over repeated participations long-term. In other words, the life history methodology enables us to acknowledge theoretically and account empirically for the life-long duration of teachers' both personal and professional lives, while also situating them amidst school, institutional (national and European), and broader sociopolitical contexts. We thus explore teachers' PD during Erasmus as an instantiation of broader "soft" as horizontal processes of Europeanisation (see Radaelli, 2004; 2018), an example of a European policy fueling the broader project of creating a common EAE, among other policies (see, e.g. Lawn & Grek, 2012).

In what follows, we first provide an overview of current discussions surrounding teacher policies and professional development in Europe. This sets the stage for presenting how the study compiled extended life histories of eight Greek Cypriot teachers. Through their rich and textured narrations, we explore how these teachers mediated Erasmus policies, integrating them into their everyday professional and personal lives as different "spaces" of PD: pedagogical, leadership-professional, and personal-sociocultural. We argue that Erasmus as teacher PD was not a merely technical or procedural undertaking for participants, but a profound transformative experience that informed teachers' lives and shaped them both as professionals (in their classrooms

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[3] In this article, the term *Erasmus* is used as an umbrella term encompassing teachers' participation in earlier versions of the programme including Comenius, Socrates, and the original Erasmus, at first focusing on university student mobilities, the pre-2014 Erasmus and the recent iteration of Erasmus+ (2014–2020). Under the latter, Key Action 1 (KA1 – KA110-SCH) refers to short-term or accredited learning mobility projects for school staff, aiming at professional development abroad, whereas Key Action 2 (KA2 – KA220-SCH) supports cooperation partnerships between schools and other educational organisations to develop, share, and implement innovative practices. This study explores the experiences of teachers engaged in both these two Key Actions within the school education sector.

and schools, education system and the profession within and beyond Cyprus) and as persons (in social, cultural and European dimensions).

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Teacher governance, policies and PD in/for an EEA

The Erasmus+ programme, regulated by EU legislation (EU Regulation No. L189/1/2021), became a principal mechanism for facilitating mobility and enhancing international collaboration, pedagogical innovation, and "educational quality" as an integral component of teacher PD. This expectation is clear in both international and national reports e.g. by the European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2021), and by Cyprus's Foundation for the Management of European Lifelong Learning Programmes (IDEP, 2023); these gather financial data, implementation frameworks, and statistical outcomes related to mobility, approaching Erasmus+ from technical, financial and administrative perspectives and illustrating EU's eagerness towards it.

Several studies on Erasmus mobility have primarily concentrated on higher education students' or academics' experiences (e.g. Souto-Otero et. al., 2008; Nada & Legutko, 2022) and in relation to employability and identity formation (e.g. Feyen & Krzaklewska, 2013; Cairns et. al., 2018). Other studies have problematised the mobility of Erasmus university students as part of neoliberal governance strategies promoting "neoliberal hypermobile subjectivities" (Courtois, 2020). EU mobility policies have also been comparatively analysed; this identified a common aim of "students' skill acquisition", but different priorities between school and university education: internationalisation for the former aims to strengthen European institutions and "European citizenry", whereas for the latter, forging a "global citizenry" necessary for global economic competition (Dvir & Yemini, 2017). Indeed, Brooks (2021) has argued that policy influencers actively construct "Europe" as a spatial imaginary within such policies.

Researchers have also shown the increasing impact of European policies on teacher governance and professional identity. Schratz (2014) and Symeonidis (2021) observe the emergence of a "European teacher" identity in EU teacher education policies, shaped by shared European norms, values, and socio-political contexts. This professional identity is fostered through participation in European mobility programmes (for both initial and continuing PD) and a growing awareness of multiculturalism and diversity within the EEA, encouraging educators to embrace both local and European dimensions in their professional roles. Empirical studies highlight how participation in Erasmus contributes to skill acquisition and to processes of personal and professional transformation, as teachers renegotiate their identities within diverse educational settings. For example, exposure to different educational systems and pedagogical approaches was found to enable teachers to reflect critically on their own practices, encourage the adoption of innovative methods, and enhance both professional confidence and language skills through intercultural exchanges (Stamelos & Vassilopoulos, 2013). Mouraz et al., (2024) argued that Erasmus encouraged teachers' curriculum agency in Ireland and Portugal through collaborative communities of practice. Other researchers have analysed Erasmus+ KA2 projects to document effective approaches and "good practices" in teacher training (Alonso-De Castro & Garcia-Penalvo, 2022), rather in teachers' own practice. Martins et. al. (2024) argued that Erasmus+ KA1 mobilities in Portugal fostered teachers' reflective practice,

reconstructed their professional identity (with regards to their teaching approach and educational practice) and inculcated a European identity. Together, these studies contribute to understanding the multifaceted influence Erasmus on teachers' professional growth.

However, research focusing on the complexity of teachers' lived experiences during Erasmus and seeking for a deeper understanding of such implications is still limited. In this paper teachers' narratives of their Erasmus participation experiences have been the main data source, premised on the assumption that, as with life history research more broadly (Goodson & Choi, 2008), it would offer valuable insights into how the Programme informs their personal and professional lives. Although Goodson and Lindblad (2010) have conducted narrative inquiry and narrative analysis amongst teachers in Europe to examine professional transformations by comparing their experiences across different national educational settings, providing important knowledge of how educational restructuring in Europe influences teachers' professional knowledge and identities, no specific focus on Erasmus has been identified. As teachers' narrations in this study involved several aspects of different PD models and approaches, connected to different conceptualizations of professionalism and schooling, the following section provides an overview of relevant literature to further demonstrate the gap this study is addressing i.e. how teachers' narrations construed Erasmus as a PD space epitomised by several characteristics of different PD models, which however were brought together in unique ways.

## 2.2. Teacher Professional Development

"Teacher professional development" is just one term amongst others to denote the ongoing education teachers might need or pursue after graduating with or obtaining a teaching qualification: "training", "learning", "continuous" or "lifelong", "collaborative" or "community" are some of these terms and reveal the diverse ways in which it is theorised and researched. There seems to be agreement today amongst researchers that any education for teachers once in the profession should be pursuing knowledge *for* practice (rather than *of* or *in* practice) (e.g. Guskey, 2002; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009); needs duration and iterations to nurture reflection and collaboration between different actors (e.g. academics, researchers, others), including between teachers continuously (e.g. Kelchtermans, 2004) as groups who, ideally, may transform into "communities of practice" (Wenger et. al., 2002). Such literature often brings together what used to be seen as strictly distinct pathways through which PD could be enacted: formal opportunities—such as structured seminars, mentoring, and independent study—which are embedded within administrative and institutional processes; and non-formal or informal opportunities as experiential learning occurring organically through teachers' daily practice, reflection, and interaction with peers (Ganser, 2000). PD has thus been re-conceptualised as a dynamic process that extends beyond traditional in-service training or narrowly conceived career progression (Glatthorn, 1995), but rather seen as "a process of renewal and improvement of thinking and practice" (Day, 2003, p. 22 in Laursen et. al., 2003), and as "a process through which professionalism and/or professionality is enhanced" (Evans, 2008, p. 30). Such conceptualizations foreground a transformative (rather than a transmission) view of PD, understanding it not only as a means of improving classroom techniques developed by external "experts", but as a socio-cultural and political process which fosters teachers' personal and professional growth by collaboration with others (e.g. Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Kennedy, 2014).

As PD has extended in scope and depth to include such nuance, it becomes intriguing to inquire Erasmus as a space of PD which may be characterised by some of these aspects and not by others, as well as by unique aspects beyond what we already know in PD literature. Within this framework, exploring PD here is not about listing "good practices" or acquiring competencies, but serves as a proxy for teachers' narrated selves in relation to shifting personal, institutional, and sociopolitical landscapes. PD experiences have, for instance, been studied as reconfiguring the trajectory of teachers' careers over time, depending on specific contexts and shaped by sustained reflective engagement (Vitanova, 2017). Ultimately, PD is increasingly pursued as a holistic, situated, and relational process, intimately connected to teachers' evolving understandings of themselves and their roles within broader educational and societal structures. How does this apply in the case of Erasmus, a programme primarily designed to prioritise mobilities and which, at the same time, teachers narrated as a space of PD with distinct characteristics? As we argue in the paper, teachers' life histories can shed light on how Erasmus experiences influence them both personally and professionally. We highlight the complexity of Erasmus as a space for teacher PD foregrounding it as distinct from other forms of PD commonly described in the literature, exactly because of its personal character which enhances its capacity to inform teachers' selves over time. The life histories methodology thus provides sensitive lenses to capture how the personal and the professional coalesce, as we explain below.

## 3. Methodology

A biographical approach was adopted, and teachers' life histories were developed to provide the groundwork for investigating the educational experience from within, from the perspectives of those directly involved in the process (Smith, 2013; Tsafos, 2021). This approach facilitates a profound exploration of how teachers' professionalism evolves in response to both personal and institutional experiences, while also connecting the social construction of these experiences with the broader sociopolitical context (Goodson, 2019).

### 3.1. Participant Selection and Data Collection

Eight Greek Cypriot primary school teachers, six women and two men, who each had over 18 years of work experience (at the time of the first round of data collection in 2021) participated. They were selected through purposive convenience sampling (Hartas, 2010) based mainly on their involvement in multiple variations of Erasmus KA1 and KA2 projects throughout their careers. The participation of both men and women as well as from different administrative districts was achieved (see Table 1). They participated in the study voluntarily, and their informed consent was secured with the assurance of anonymity and confidentiality, following the relevant national bioethics authority procedures. All names/surnames below are pseudonyms and were selected to denote cultural and gender sensitivities.

**Table 1: Summary Table of Participant Teachers' Erasmus Experiences**

| Teacher (pseudonym) Gender District | Age | Position in education (2021) | Years of service | Years in Erasmus (until 2021) | Erasmus participation experiences under KA1 & KA2 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **(1) Minas Diamanti**<br>• **Male**<br>• **Limassol** | 51 | Headmaster | Since 1992, 29 years | Since 1998, 23 years | • Teaching staff mobility for professional development (seminars, conferences)<br>• Teaching staff mobility (educational visits) |
| **(2) Pavlina Grammatikou**<br>• **Female**<br>• **Nicosia** | 47 | Teacher | Since 1995, 26 years | Since 2006, 15 years | • Teaching staff mobility for professional development (seminars, conferences)<br><br>• Teaching staff mobility (educational visits)<br>• Student mobility accompanied by teachers |
| **(3) Chara Nomikou**<br>• **Female**<br>• **Nicosia** | 51 | Assistant Headmaster | Since 1991, 30 years | Since 2014, 7 years | • Teaching staff mobility for professional development (seminars, conferences)<br>• Teaching staff mobility (educational visits) |
| **(4) Danae Iliadi**<br>• **Female**<br>• **Nicosia** | 42 | Teacher | Since 2001, 20 years | Since 2017, 4 years | • Teaching staff mobility for professional development (seminars, conferences)<br>• Teaching staff mobility (educational visits)<br>• Student mobility accompanied by teachers |
| **(5) Alexandros Aronis**<br>• **Male**<br>• **Limassol** | 51 | Headmaster | Since 1992, 29 years | Since 2006, 15 years | • Teaching staff mobility for professional development (seminars, conferences)<br>• Teaching staff mobility (educational visits)<br>• Student mobility accompanied by teachers |
| **(6) Nasia Argyrou**<br>• **Female**<br>• **Nicosia** | 45 | Teacher | Since 1999, 22 years | Since 2006, 15 years | • Teaching staff mobility for professional development (seminars, conferences)<br>• Teaching staff mobility (educational visits)<br>• Student mobility accompanied by teachers |
| **(7) Evgenia Gliki**<br>• **Female**<br>• **Nicosia** | 44 | Teacher | Since 1999, 22 years | Since 2004, 17 years | • Teaching staff mobility for professional development (seminars, conferences)<br>• Teaching staff mobility (educational visits)<br>• Student mobility accompanied by teachers<br>• Teacher exchange mobility for working in a foreign school for one year |
| **(8) Vasia Dragoumi**<br>• **Female**<br>• **Larnaca** | 46 | Teacher | Since 2003, 18 years | Since 2007, 14 years | • Teaching staff mobility for professional development (seminars, conferences)<br>• Teaching staff mobility (educational visits)<br>• Student mobility accompanied by teachers |

Data collection involved two long biographical narrative interviews (Tsiolis, 2006) with each teacher based on semi-structured interview protocols between November 2021 and April 2022. The first interview encouraged a broader narration of the teacher's life from their own childhood and school years, up to deciding to study for a teaching degree, their teacher education (initial and continuing) and experiences once in the profession from one appointment to the next and up until their current position at the time. The second interview was customized to focus on specific aspects and

episodes recounted in the first interview, but mainly on their Erasmus participations from the first one up until their most recent one, eliciting detailed descriptions of experiences, persons, and events. On average, interviews lasted 3 hours with each participant. The transcribed texts of both interviews were sent to the teachers for any changes or additions to their narratives they saw fit. Member-checking was conducted to ensure the trustworthiness of the results (Creswell & Miller, 2000), with participants reviewing and approving the transcriptions eventually included in the analysis.

## 3.2. Data Analysis

The data was analysed using a combination of thematic analysis and content analysis. Thematic analysis sought the identification of patterns and underlying themes (see Braun & Clarke, 2012), while content analysis helped trace the ways in which these themes were negotiated within the transcripts (see Franzosi, 2004). First, the transcripts of the two interviews were read several times to develop familiarity with the data and to conduct initial inductive and deductive coding of teachers' narrations. Next, salient patterns of meanings across the collected data were determined and themes were generated, including those related to PD, before finalization of the coding in Atlas.ti.8. The thematic analysis focused on identifying patterns across the data, while the content analysis allowed for a more detailed examination of specific themes in teachers' narratives once codes were defined. Finally, the themes and codes were reviewed with sample quotations and interpretations, allowing a comparative analysis of similarities and differences between the eight teachers' life histories. In this paper, the codes in focus are: *Professional and personal development within Erasmus; Networks of supportive agents – Erasmus*; and *Inteplay of professional and personal life (in Erasmus),* as those capturing how the teachers' participation in Erasmus was experienced as PD. These were later vertically coded into the four themes presented below, each theme accounting for how Erasmus was narrated by teachers as:
a) a space for pedagogical growth and enrichment,
b) a space for professional leadership within and beyond schools,
c) a space for personal and sociocultural transformation, and
d) a space demanding persistence despite challenges.

In what follows, we first focus on the ways in which Erasmus was narrated as distinct from any other form of PD recounted by teachers. Moreover, as these findings emerge from whole-life narratives (and not only from Erasmus experiences), they are foregrounded with this fundamental realisation in sub-section 4.1: Erasmus participations were not a surprising "break" or "outlier" in their professional or personal trajectories. Rather, they were interpreted as a meaningful and consistent extension of their pre-existing personal ambition and professional ongoing commitment to development and transformation—an opportunity that aligned with, deepened, and, in many cases, accelerated the discourses already constitutive of their professional subjectivities (Tampouras, 2024).

## 4. Findings

Teachers' narratives were overtly positive of Erasmus, perhaps an expected finding given the nature of the sample, comprised of teachers with multiple and repeated participations over twenty years. However, the life history methodology documented this obvious finding with layers of meaning, emotion, and reflection. Erasmus was not merely described as a beneficial professional opportunity, but rather as a transformative experience that resonated deeply both personally and professionally, valued, for

instance, as an "amazing experience" (Minas, Chara); "a valuable experience with incredible gains" (Nasia, Vasia); "very beneficial and very constructive" (Danae); a personal "gain" (Alexandros), entailing "countless experiences" (Eugenia) and as "very important for a teacher" (Pavlina, Chara). After their first experience, they sought further participations in Erasmus, as it appeared to each time offer something new or different, breaking their personal and professional routine. Their narratives were rich with powerful metaphors denoting their conceptualization of Erasmus as a space of PD, such as referring to it as "a whole school," "another school," or even "another life," underscoring the depth and power of its impact. In this section, we first account for how Erasmus was positioned in their narrations as an instantiation of broader struggles and pursuits in their lives, before we present what PD contents they ascribed to it.

### 4.1. Erasmus as an instantiation of an ongoing personal and professional journey

This finding was not anticipated and would not have been possible prior to the compilation of the eight teachers' life histories, as those allowed us to see that they consistently narrated themselves, as children, pupils and later student-teachers or early career teachers who constantly sought different kinds of recognition and recognisability, long before Erasmus appeared in their timelines. Although there were several examples, a key one seemed to be passing the highly competitive entrance exam to the Pedagogical Academy or the University to study to become teachers—a goal deeply rooted in personal aspirations or even a childhood "dream", as Vasia put it (T1_VD_1, lines: 196–198, 285–286). This also entailed high social recognition, since teaching in the public sector was highly desirable at the time. Others stressed academic excellence: "Studying to become a teacher meant I was considered part of the selected few, an excellent, one among the excellent, placing me within an elite" (T1_PG_1, line: 324). Such desire for excelling was also traced when explaining the pursuit for postgraduate studies later in life: "I felt that there was a gap after I finished my degree. That I needed to study again. I didn't feel well" (T1_VD_1, lines: 444-449).

Once established in the profession, and in addition to the institutional obligations by the Ministry of Education for specific mandatory types of PD, all teachers narrated multiple instances of actively seeking professional and personal development opportunities such as voluntary seminars, conferences, training sessions, projects and workshops, even second degrees, all requiring their own initiative and proactive engagement. This search seemed constant, from early in their career up until the year of this study; this is why Erasmus was not an isolated or coincidental event, but was rather narrated as another, albeit different, space for PD. The analysis that follows demonstrates how teachers narrated Erasmus as a space for pedagogical growth and enrichment; for professional leadership and networking; for personal, sociocultural transformation (including as Europeans); and as space of exercise in persistence.

### 4.2. Erasmus as PD

#### 4.2.1. Erasmus as a space for pedagogical growth and enrichment
One of the most recurring motifs in the eight life histories once Erasmus participations started was that it was narrated as a space wherein teachers found inspiration and challenge in the pedagogical aspects of the profession, i.e. in what they were doing in their classrooms and schools with and for their pupils. This pedagogical content was often referred to as "good practices"; although it is also policy jargon, teachers used this terminology to narrate processes of assessing and filtering from practices encountered abroad. As Pavlina explained in detail:

> My participation in Erasmus, the interaction and communication with colleagues from abroad, equips me with various elements: knowledge, experiences, skills, good practices, methodologies, communication elements, both verbal and non-verbal, which I try to gather from my observations, to see which of these fit my own context, which can be adapted to my own needs. Those that I consider unsuitable, I may present to my colleagues, but I won't use them myself (S2_PG_2, lines: 1212–1215).

Her narrative illustrates how the teachers' gaze in Erasmus was not neutral, but entailed selection and/or adaptation of those deemed beneficial, while rejection or filtering out of other practices on several grounds, including when not aligning with their own professional or national context. The good practices deemed as beneficial related to alternative ways for student assessment, classroom organization and management, teacher-student collaboration, innovative pedagogical approaches like theater and dramatization, and the integration of new technologies. Teachers also emphasized the increased use of digital tools—such as educational software, tablets, and digital books. For example, during his most recent participation in 2022, Minas visited a school in Iceland where he observed extensive use of technology in lessons through computers, tablets, and specialized software, attributing it to the country's abundant equipment and resources (S2_MD_2, lines: 1955–1961). Inspired by this experience, he purchased tablets for his own school and encouraged his colleagues to integrate them into their teaching (S2_MD_2, lines: 2029–2037). This is an example of the kinds of practices teachers considered worthwhile endorsing while pushing for their local contexts to adapt.

Beyond such rather anticipated impact, all teachers referred to valuable elements which were inherent (and less visible) in each unknown national context. Those were deemed highly meaningful, as offering deeper insights and exercising them in open-mindedness to the unexpected and unintended, well beyond Erasmus's planned or structured components. Teachers repeatedly referred to the value of visiting schools, attending seminars, and comparing different approaches with those in Cyprus.  As Alexandros vividly explained:

> When you have an agenda and you say, "I'll bring you as an example to this space, this school, or this organization to show you 3-4 things I want." But when you're on-site, you end up picking up 10, 20 other things that were never meant to be shared with you. It operates on its own, and you keep drawing from it. As long as you're open and receptive (S2_AA_2, lines: 1323–1327).

Erasmus thus became a space of pedagogical growth by providing direct exposure to "foreign" educational systems, which allowed teachers to observe alternative pedagogical practices, become aware of their own, and, at times, reflect on them.

One set of practices Erasmus facilitated engaging with was those related to the curriculum; this is highly structured in subject-areas in Greek Cypriot primary education curricula, but Erasmus projects challenged teachers to rethink it in interdisciplinary or cross-curricular ways to effectively address the policy themes of various calls. Thus, projects often involved curriculum-making within or between specific areas such as Greek, Art, Music, Natural Sciences, Life Education, History, Geography, and Physical Education, with Mathematics being less frequently involved. As Evgenia explained:

> We integrated technology and connected various subjects with Erasmus, such as Greek, Mathematics, Art, Music, Geography, Technology, and Theater, in a way that the curriculum of these subjects was infused with the Erasmus Programme (S2_NA_2, lines: 1388–1408).

This was an implication of Erasmus themes being rather broad, such as Culture, Language, Ecology-Environment, New Technologies, and Sports, or combinations thereof. Beyond subject-specific content, teachers understood this curriculum-making as fostering their pupils' openness to diversity, broadening their horizons, and enhancing their social, communication and collaboration skills. Interdisciplinary approaches provided ground for creating original and meaningful learning experiences, which teachers thought of as enriching the official curriculum and influencing their pupils in ways they were particularly proud of.

Such discourses of pedagogical meaning and progressive notions of experiences for pupils were coupled with notions of social equity in teachers' narrations. Offering their pupils experiences otherwise inaccessible -especially for those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds- was crucial for some teachers, especially in projects which involved travelling, an opportunity some of their pupils wouldn't have if it weren't for Erasmus. As Danai noted for her pupils, "to travel, to meet children from other countries and their schools, to collaborate, to communicate… to live life experiences" (S2_DI_2, lines: 1370–1374) was rewarding for her as well. In addition to travelling, these experiences were made possible through various cross-border collaborative actions, which included, as narrated, alternative ways of engaging students with peers from other countries—such as remote or in-person participation in shared lessons by partner teachers with two or more classes, online interactions with pupils from abroad, the creation of shared activity calendars, and the exchange of views and ideas through joint action plans-all these teachers learnt during Erasmus.

Finally, Erasmus was narrated as a space of pedagogical growth due to its unique feature of requiring and facilitating exposure to other colleagues—either by observing or being observed in classroom and school settings. This was consistently described by all teachers as impactful, fostering growth in knowledge, skills, values, teaching methods, and communication, which they valued as connected with their everyday practice. As Nasia noted:

> The experiences of interacting with other teachers and the opportunities to collaborate with them, share experiences, knowledge, and participate in lessons abroad, also help me break free from my stereotypes and try new methodologies and approaches in my classroom. I become more open-minded and less insecure about implementing some innovative actions, without the fear of failure or criticism (S2_NA_2, lines: 1655–1658).

This is indicative of the kind of pedagogical growth other teachers narrated (Nasia, Alexandros, Minas, Chara, Pavlina). Overall, they felt that such experiences reduced professional insecurities, refined their pedagogical approach, and boosted their willingness to implement change.  Overall, Erasmus was narrated as a space for PD through engagement with new or different to their known pedagogical practices in classrooms, schools, or generally in relation to what they were offering to their pupils. Beyond the classroom, Erasmus offered a new position and perspective on the teaching profession itself, which is the focus of the following section.

### 4.2.2. Erasmus as a space for professional leadership within and beyond schools

While narrating Erasmus experiences, teachers simultaneously narrated a broader professional self who would not only benefit as an individual, but who would also contribute to their colleagues' growth and act as an agent of educational change within their local contexts, emphasizing the dissemination of good practices to colleagues as both a professional obligation and a "mission". All eight teachers explicitly referred to sharing knowledge and practices gained through Erasmus with colleagues, informally or via structured training, positioning themselves as facilitators of peer development in their own, but also in other schools. They described dissemination taking multiple forms—presentations at staff meetings, training seminars, or professional learning days across Cyprus—valuing them all for their potential transformative power and envisioning them as collaborative and reflective processes rather than mere information transfer. This was clearly articulated when explaining the value of Erasmus for colleagues: "teachers get involved in thinking and applying a good practice in their own context and see if it can work" (Minas); "my colleagues thinking of applying a good practice in their own context, so that they can progress and improve or improve the practice itself" (Chara); "providing ideas to colleagues, so they can improve their practices and actions" (Danae); "to allow others to see something new, so they can progress and improve, making the change" (Eugenia). Some teachers also referred to this having a "cascade" effect in the profession, since it involved "others to take the knowledge you gained and transfer it to other teachers and apply it in their own context" (Vasia); schools becoming "training centers" for teachers with good practices from abroad (Alexandros) and "creating a learning community" (Nasia); these were visions of Erasmus as PD beyond their schools.

This strong missionary rhetoric was evident in the way all eight teachers interpreted the European institutional framework as promoting and requiring the dissemination of "good practices". Rather than viewing dissemination as a mere bureaucratic requirement, which they already had to address at the application stage as a condition of applying and obtaining funding, the teachers articulated it as a "duty"—a moral imperative to contribute to the PD of their colleagues and to the advancement of the wider educational community; as Pavlina put it, "involving more teachers in the Programme, so that they can change the way they see the world". In adopting this stance, the teachers simultaneously assumed the role of professional leaders as trainers and multipliers of professional knowledge, a logic also becoming embedded in their schools' priorities and evaluation frameworks. As Nasia recounted:

> During my last participation, both I and my school as a whole became a core hub for the dissemination of good practices developed within the Programme, as well as at the school level. The wider educational community showed great interest in being informed and in transferring these practices to their own schools […] As a result, our school evolved into a learning community and became recognized within the educational community as a "pioneering learning school" (S2_NA_2, lines: 1142–1283).

The repetition of such ethical commitment by all teachers exemplifies professional ownership and leadership as well as the reciprocal relationship between teachers and the Erasmus policy framework: institutional expectations were being internalized as authentic professional commitments towards the school, a broader network of teachers and schools in Cyprus, and eventually, the profession.

Such sense of professional expansion was also connected to their involvement in broader educational networks and developing a sense of belonging to a European educational community. Teachers narrated Erasmus as a space for building local and European educational networks through inter-school collaborations, enabling the creation of long-term professional networks across Europe. Networks were seen as a valuable resource, not only for the design and implementation of new Erasmus projects, but also for collaborations extending beyond the Programme itself. Teachers emphasized that these networks facilitated a continuous exchange of knowledge, which was not confined to the immediate participants, but extended to other schools in their regions. Participation in these networks was described as transformative, expanding teachers' personal and professional horizons and encouraging them to think beyond the boundaries of national educational frameworks. Many framed this engagement as deeply personal, fostering a growing sense of belonging to a wider European educational community. As Minas noted:

> The networking I did, I believe, is something that distinguishes me from the rest of the teaching body, because through this networking, I feel like a member of a broader "European family" of teachers (S2_MD_2, lines: 2447-2448).

Furthermore, based on the trust and familiarity from prior Erasmus collaborations, teachers explained how they could exercise greater autonomy in selecting future partners, drawing on their own experience and evaluative criteria, such as reliability, communication skills, and willingness to cooperate. As Alexandros pointed out:

> The communication I maintain with partner colleagues I met [through Erasmus] helped me to make use of their experience, their advice on collaborations with other organizations, and even their suggestions for further partnerships (S2_AA_2,lines: 1463–1477).

In this way, the Programme facilitated the formation of more flexible, personalized, and reciprocal professional relationships, allowing teachers to act as active agents in shaping their transnational collaborations, while simultaneously challenging local institutional hierarchies in which they enjoyed less autonomy or visibility. Crucially, these professional interactions and networks were narrated as reinforcing a strong sense of leadership over their professional development. They viewed their participation in Erasmus not as a passive experience, but as an active process of engagement, where they took responsibility for their profession and own development and grew confident in doing so. As Vasia explained:

> Being part of Erasmus has given me a new sense of confidence in my abilities as a teacher. It's made me more proactive in seeking new opportunities for growth and more willing to experiment with new ideas in the classroom (S2_VS_2, lines: 3071–3073).

For many teachers, Erasmus was not just a Programme, but a key turning point in their professional journeys, one that allowed them to see their roles as educators in a new light. Alexandros referred to this as "an escape from the confines of the Cypriot educational system," enabling him to gain a fresh perspective (S2_AA_2, lines: 1336–1341). This comparative lens—inherent in the design of Erasmus requiring mobilities—

emerged as a recurring theme in all narratives. Teachers identified both advanced features and shared challenges across education systems. Danae, for instance, noted how in Portugal the profession "is not recognized, even though it is a very exhausting profession" (S2_DH_2, lines: 1449–1455). Such realizations helped teachers see their own work "with different eyes" and were consistently narrated as moments of meaningful professional growth. Yet, Erasmus's impact did not stop at the profession. As the following section shows, participation was also viewed as enabling deep personal and sociocultural transformation.

### 4.2.3. Erasmus as a space for personal and sociocultural transformation

Although pedagogical and broader professional growth was recurring in teachers' narratives, it seemed that much intensity of these narrated experiences derived from how personal at the same time they all were. Teachers narrated a changing self through Erasmus, experiencing processes of personal, social, and cultural transformation. "Networking" emerged not only as a source of professional growth and leadership —as noted before—but also as a deeply transformative, multifaceted experience, because it involved the development of long-term, personal, and often familial relationships. These relationships, forged through repeated encounters and sustained communication, extended beyond the project duration and into teachers' personal lives. Teachers explained this as cultivating ties with people "on the same wavelength" (Minas), who "fit into [their] lifestyle and way of thinking" (Pavlina), or "match with [her] character" (Chara). Minas exemplifies how these relationships evolved into personal ones:

> I developed personal-family relationships with people I met, as we continued to communicate even after the end of a project, collaborated on other Erasmus projects, helped me with personal issues, hosted me in their homes, and I hosted them as well. Overall, I developed amazing relationships. Relationships for life (S2_MD_2, lines: 2386-2414).

Erasmus-facilitated networking blended professional growth with enduring personal bonds, narrated as enriching teachers' lives emotionally and socially, and enhancing their sense of European belonging. Such personal connections fueled the desire for more projects, illustrative perhaps that Erasmus was viewed as a space beyond structured professional growth. Pavlina noted that networking and meeting new people made her "more open-minded and willing to communicate and collaborate with people who see things in a similar way" (S2_PG_2, lines: 1094–1096) or, on the contrary for Danae, "with people who have different worldviews" (S2_DH_2, lines: 1399–1402). Similarly, Chara believed that her contact with European colleagues "helped her combat stereotypes, changed her character, and made her more open to communicate and collaborate with others" (S1_CN_1,lines: 762–767) and Vasia that it "broadened my horizons and helped me to be more open to the foreign and the different" (S2_BD_2,lines:1487–1489).

These testimonies underscore that Erasmus networking was narrated as transcending structured types of PD and other institutional boundaries, fostering relationships that profoundly shaped teachers' perspectives, attitudes, personal and social growth. Such narrations pointed towards Erasmus influence in teachers' sense of self, including seeing themselves as Europeans. Minas referred to their longstanding involvement in the Programme as a "European journey" (T1_MD_1, line: 1053), explaining that it endowed them with "the quality of being European—no different from the other Europeans participating in the Programme, but being recognised as such"

(T2_MD_2, lines: 1809–1810). Alexandros emphasized how Erasmus offered him a "sense of completion" he had long been seeking as a teacher (T2_AA_2, line: 2258): "it completes you, because it gives you the dimension of the European teacher— someone who can communicate, engage in dialogue, and collaborate with other educators, who, although working in the same field, may approach it slightly differently" (T2_AA_2, lines: 2253–2256). These testimonies are illustrative examples of the blending of the personal and the professional, of Erasmus forging European professionals—an identity desired for affirming their belonging within a broader educational community which changed them as persons as well.

### 4.3. Erasmus as a space demanding persistence despite challenges

As shown in the analysis so far, teachers narrated their Erasmus participations as a space for pedagogical, professional leadership, and personal-sociocultural growth, each accounted for in the previous three sections, respectively. However, these narrations were not simple or romanticised accounts of Erasmus as merely opportunities for PD, but rather as achieved despite challenges.  In this section, the challenges teachers faced are unpacked, as well as how they narrated a "persistent" self who learned from them. Challenges included difficulties in translating newly acquired knowledge and practices into their everyday teaching contexts (often constrained by limited resources and inconsistent institutional support); international collaboration difficulties; school-level tensions; excessive workloads due to language barriers, tight timelines, bureaucratic-financial matters (such as communication with local and European offices or changing regulations like local restrictions of teacher mobility numbers),  travelling-related issues (particularly of pupils). Rather than discouraging participation, these challenges appeared to strengthen their decisiveness to adapt and persevere, viewing them as educative experiences themselves. Language was a key example of how both Pavlina and Danae narrated such a challenge-turned-opportunity: the need for English was intimidating to some teachers who didn't "have fluency in a foreign language" (S2_PG_2, lines:1293–1295). Pavlina was highlighting a structural limitation alienating otherwise willing teachers and then narrated a pragmatic, community-driven solution they came up with: through informal mentorship and school-based collaboration, less experienced teachers could still benefit by "following in the trip those who are already familiar with the foreign language… gaining motivation to improve their English" (S2_PG_2, lines: 1295–1298). There were similar examples of teachers overcoming barriers by mobilizing community and structural resources. It is in such instances that Erasmus was differentiated in their narratives from other PD experiences: the perceived growth was valued more than the difficulties encountered, and difficulties became learning experiences themselves.

A similar pattern emerged in the eight teachers' narratives around difficulties stemming from tensions Erasmus created between their professional and personal lives. Due to their repeated and diverse Erasmus participations, they learned to balance the two—a recurring pattern described as a "mutual or cyclical relationship". Although such balance was narrated as impossible without strong family/partner support in their personal lives (Minas, Alexandros, Pavlina, Danae, Nasia, Vasia), teachers also learned to work around it: Erasmus was not pursued during specific phases due to personal or family-related challenges. For instance,  Pavlina paused her participation during a particularly demanding period in her child's life, such as the university entrance exam phase (S2_PG_2, lines: 1451–1498), while Eugenia (S2_EG_2, lines: 1337–1405) and Nasia (S2_NA_2, lines: 1287–1312) referred to times when health issues—either their own or those of close family members—prevented them from being actively involved.

These pauses were temporary, and participation was pursued again once personal circumstances changed. Learning to navigate Erasmus professional timelines along their personal ones seems to point to the persistence of the teachers, also made possible by the intermittent structure of the Programme.

Another major concern was Erasmus' emphasis on cross-border collaboration, which, while structurally required and personally enriching, was described by Chara, Alexandros, Nasia, and Vasia, as a "difficult process" requiring ongoing engagement with unfamiliar colleagues or institutions. This demanded not only pedagogical coordination, but also the establishment of trust and openness—conditions not always present. As Chara explained the Programme:

> requires collaborations with "unknown" colleagues or organizations from other countries... this is an essential prerequisite and dimension of the Programmes... but many times you also recognize the negative side of people, and you cannot continue collaborating with them or the collaboration becomes difficult (S2_CN_2, lines: 1438–1442).

The success of Erasmus projects and the quality of collaboration with "all these many and different people" were never guaranteed. Difficulties frequently arose in negotiating project themes, selecting suitable modules, and agreeing on common actions among international partners. Locally, tensions were linked to teacher selection processes in the school, distribution of mobility opportunities, workload imbalances, and informal hierarchies within Erasmus teams. Alexandros highlighted the tension between personal vision and shared understanding, stressing processes of developing, rather than assuming as granted, clear communication, a cooperative, trusting environment, and an alignment of ideas and common goals (S2_AA_2, lines: 1816–1822).

Erasmus participation was thus not narrated as frictionless, but rather, as navigating complex interpersonal dynamics, institutional structures, and cultural expectations. It is precisely through this often-challenging interplay that teachers explained how they developed deeper professional autonomy, strategic thinking, and interpersonal awareness, redefining, in their understanding, professional development as a transformative, non-linear process shaped by lived complexity everyday. The teachers' narratives portrayed Erasmus as PD exactly because of its demanding and challenging nature; their persistence reflected an understanding of Erasmus as having to "offer" them personal and professional transformation. This is why their participation was not narrated as merely (another) PD, but another kind of ongoing development as teachers and persons, who, despite challenges, sought renewal and recognizability beyond those routinised by their personal experience or school and institutional contexts of the national education system.

## 5. Discussion

EU teacher policies frame PD as intrinsically linked to European integration processes and the fostering of a shared European Education Area, substantiating another domain of member-states' Europeanisation. Erasmus serves as a flagship programme operationalizing these aims by facilitating teacher mobility and contributing to the development of a "European teacher" (e.g. Schratz, 2014; Symeonidis, 2021). This paper provides evidence for how this might be taking place in the minutiae of teachers' daily lives and over time, as they narrated Erasmus as a valued space for PD throughout most of their professional life histories. As shown earlier, Erasmus was embedded in

their life as a meaningful source not only of professional (pedagogical and professional leadership-wise) enrichment, but also of transformative life experience in terms of their personal selves, a finding enabled by the life history methodology. Indeed Erasmus was narrated as distinct from other experiences of PD in how it required and produced a constant intersection and mutual enrichment of their personal and professional lives. Although difficulties were narrated as well, teachers persisted and sought further participations, manifestly because it "offered" more than it "took": recognisability, growth, renewal and a sense of service (to their pupils, school and profession, individually and collectively, locally and in Europe). Their stories revealed a dynamic vision of PD, perceived as an ongoing journey shaped by personal commitment, professional autonomy and collective engagement-the collective here being comprised of like-minded teachers in their schools and across Europe. Three issues we consider significant to discuss here.

There has been extensive research in Cyprus focusing on tracing Europeanisation in education in the case of official school curricula, textbooks, timetables (e.g. Philippou, 2012; Philippou et al., 2016; 2019). However, through the case of Erasmus, this study provides evidence of how Europeanisation materialises horizontally (see Radaelli, 2018) in the life histories of teachers down to the detail of their daily routines in primary schools, showcasing it as a day-to-day phenomenon (Tampouras, 2024). It also helps us interpret its narrated as deep impact: it is perhaps "effective" because it is "affective", because it so closely intertwines participants' personal and professional selves: it assumes voluntary participation, and once experienced, stands out as a unique space of PD repeatedly pursued to nurture them, pedagogically, professionally and personally-socioculturally, despite or even through difficulties. Life history methodology also made possible to trace that neither mobilities nor PD were "outliers" in these teachers' trajectories: Erasmus was an instantiation of ongoing themes in their life histories, rather than a singular event. It served as space of PD "filling in" personal and local/institutional gaps of both pedagogical inspiration and vision as well as of professional service and visibility. Endorsing and, in time, embracing/embodying the Programme's values and discourses of disseminating "good practices"; of forming professional networks; of mobility; of learning as lifelong; of collaboration, the teachers narrated professional and personal selves who had made significant strides since their first Erasmus experience and turned into PD agents themselves, recognizable within a European broader educational community as professionals, not just in Cyprus.

This is in stark contrast with existing literature documenting Greek Cypriot teachers' seeking of state guidance through PD as per the historical experience in the profession or their critique towards PD positioning them as mere "receivers" of knowledge by the MoE, requesting new kinds of PD instead (e.g. less knowledge-centred, less uniform, more customized, more contemporary, local-school based etc. (e.g. Hadjitheodoulou-Loizidou et al., 2020; Philippou et al., 2016). Yet for teachers such as the participants in this study, and despite adding to their workload, Erasmus provided an "escape" as it multiplied the topics, foci, and forms of PD extending the national pool to a European one, providing access to PD experiences distinct in nature from those locally available, as well as making it possible to distinguish oneself in a context which, they argued, institutionally and professionally pushes them towards homogenisation: Erasmus assumed professional initiative and autonomy and cultivated a sense of designing one's path instead.

This also relates to debates around knowledge and PD: contrary to the historical experience in the profession overall, where it has been difficult for teachers in the context of traditional educational research to make their knowledge public (e.g.

Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), Erasmus requires teachers to work in groups and networks to produce and disseminate (particular types of) knowledge, rendering them visible in ways rare in the profession. This recognisability, of becoming another of type of teacher as professional subject (Tampouras, 2024) is beyond the scope of this paper, but it does partly show why Erasmus as PD was so valued amongst these teachers. It also begs for more research, into the inner workings and hierarchies of the learning communities both the policy and the teachers suggested were being formed. Learning within professional learning communities, "involves active deconstruction of knowledge through reflection and analysis, and its reconstruction through action in a particular context, as well as co-construction (of knowledge) through collaborative learning with peers" (Stoll et al., 2006, pp. 233–234). Although reflection was often mentioned as a benefit, further analyses of these life histories are needed to map the kinds of reflection such PD experiences might have produced. Could there be dangers, for instance, of non-direction or over-direction by the EU of what values in education without the reflexivity and theoretical principles encountered in academically-guided types of PD to address questions such as: what are the pedagogical and political grounds of "good practices"? Who and why evaluates them as good (or not)? Given Erasmus's intermittent structure of short-term projects, where deadlines and evidence of "success" are required for the completion of each project, how does reflection play out?

Finally, we note how these life histories provide testimony, through the case of PD, of the changing nature of the state and national education systems: a realm of education policy which used to be defined and funded by national ministries as sole or main providers of PD in each country, is rendered more complicated as new actors enter the scene: the EU, other countries' national agencies or networks and bodies, but also other social actors taking initiatives in unpredictable ways (albeit within the boundaries set by the calls e.g. mobility regulations, topics, financials, etc.), were narrated as involved in providing, facilitating and disseminating Erasmus activities (KA1 and KA2). Teachers narrated Erasmus as a space of PD exactly because they had to learn to navigate this complex landscape to be able to participate. These narrations suggested a de-centring of PD, a devolving of nation-state power where the state continues to govern, yet at a distance and within an evolving EAE (see Lawn & Grek, 2012)-it is this space in between that teachers filled with their search of meaning professionally and personally. The break from a "mould" of nationally centralised provision of PD was narrated as attractive; however other moulds seemed to be less visible to teachers.

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