

The impact of European Policies on teachers' professional development: The Case of Erasmus+ KA2 partnerships

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Abstract

The continually increasing participation of schools in European partnerships reflects the broad acceptance, particularly of mobility programs, with the school community. This study aims to examine how these programs affect teachers' professional development. To this end, a specially designed questionnaire was created for teachers with experience in European partnerships. Initially, the survey results highlighted challenges faced by participants, such as the lack of support from colleagues who were not involved in European programs, the time-consuming process of obtaining administrative approval for the mobilities, and the overall effort required to implement the partnerships. Regarding the impact of European partnerships on the participating teachers, the study reveals the role of these programs in shaping a unified European identity for citizens open to intercultural interaction. Additionally, teachers acknowledged the value of the experiences gained through their participation in European partnerships, which bolstered their self-confidence and contributed to their professional growth. Furthermore, the participants enhanced their soft skills and broadened their repertoire of educational practices by integrating ideas from schools abroad. In conclusion, the study suggests that involvement in European programs enhances educators' professional development in specific areas and strengthens participants' sense of European identity.

Keywords

European programs, teacher professional development, school partnerships, Erasmus+.

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Introduction

One of the particularly engaging initiatives supported by European programs is school partnerships. These partnerships foster collaboration between schools across EU countries, offering valuable opportunities for communication and the exchange of ideas at a European level, while also promoting the school's engagement with the wider community (European Commission, 2013).

Specifically, the participation of schools in European partnerships enables their staff to take part in mobility activities that cultivate a deeper understanding of what it means to be a European citizen (Novoa, 2013). Moreover, such involvement plays a crucial role in shaping a European identity (Osler, 2012), particularly through mobility initiatives implemented at the grassroots level of individual schools (Singh, 2009). This is significant because, as defined by the European Union, a key element in developing European identity is the ability of participants to gain a better understanding of themselves as unique individuals and as contributors to society (McCann & Finn, 2006). In this context, Singh (2009) emphasizes that fostering European identity should not aim to eliminate national identities but rather promote mutual recognition and respect among EU citizens. At the same time, mobility programs serve as a platform for showcasing best practices from participating countries, encouraging mutual learning among educators (Peck, 1997).

The Erasmus+ programme is designed to support the achievement of several key objectives, including: the goals set by the Europe 2020 strategy; the strategic framework for education and training (ET 2020); the sustainable development of partner countries in higher education; the overarching aims of the renewed framework for European youth cooperation (2010–2018); the promotion of a European dimension in sport; and the advancement of core European values, as outlined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (European Commission, 2013). The specific objectives of the Erasmus+ programme focus on enhancing participants' key competences and skills, particularly those relevant to the labour market and to fostering a more inclusive and cohesive society. This is achieved through increased opportunities for learning mobility and by strengthening cooperation between the fields of education and training and the world of work.

Specifically, under Key Action 2 (KA2), strategic partnerships are supported that enable collaboration between organizations and institutions in the fields of education and training, as well as in other related sectors. The aim is to develop and implement joint initiatives, organize peer-to-peer learning activities, and promote the exchange of experiences (European Commission, 2020).

A review of the literature (Chojacki et al., 2017; European Commission, 2018, 2022; Gözpinar, 2018; Karakuş, Uyar, & Balbağ, 2017; Kesik & Beycioğlu, 2020; Kosmas, Parmaxi, Perifanou, Economides, & Zaphiris, 2020; Kugiejko, 2016; Laliotou, Patsikas, Kyridis, & Vidalis, 2017; van Beek, Alvarez, Litjens, Sapulete, & Viertelhuizen, 2017; Vareikytė & Babrauskienė, 2017) reveals that European school partnerships are complex undertakings for participating schools and have not been thoroughly explored in existing research. This underscores the importance of further study, particularly in identifying the challenges faced by participants and highlighting best practices that can be adopted to effectively address these challenges.

To establish a clear conceptual framework for the analysis that follows, the next section defines two central terms as they are used in this study: impact and teachers' professional development. These definitions serve to contextualize the research focus and guide the interpretation of the findings.

Impact

For the purposes of this study, the definition of impact provided by European Schoolnet is adopted, as it emphasizes the overall achievement of a programme. Specifically, European Schoolnet integrates multiple approaches to the concept and defines impact as “the overall achievement of an intervention in the educational system.” This achievement may be described through various qualitative indicators, such as improved learning outcomes in schools or better exam performance, depending on the objectives of the implemented policies. It represents the final stage of an intervention and encompasses inputs, processes, outputs, and outcomes” (Balanskat, 2009, p. 16).

Additionally, Wainwright (2002) highlights that regardless of the perspective taken, the notion of impact includes both intended and unintended outcomes, positive and negative effects, as well as short-term and long-term results.

The main approach followed in this study is a bottom-up perspective, similar to the methodology used in Scandinavia (Ramboll Management, 2006), which measured impact through participants' perceptions. This method is based on the evaluation of

impact by the participants themselves, who are asked to reflect on how they personally experienced the effects of their involvement in the programme. This approach allows for a nuanced assessment of impact within complex environments such as schools (Balanskat et al., 2006).

Teachers' Professional Development

Professional development is closely tied to instructional practice, as teachers' skills directly influence their teaching (Krille, 2020). Feiman-Nemser (2001) describes it as a transformation in teachers' knowledge, application, and adaptability to changing educational demands. Given the evolving nature of schools and rising expectations, ongoing learning is essential for maintaining and enhancing teacher professionalism (Krille, 2020).

Often termed in-service training or lifelong learning (Bredeson, 2000), professional development involves activities that enhance teachers' knowledge, skills, and effectiveness, while encouraging reflection and growth (Morris, 2019). It is broadly defined as a set of processes aimed at strengthening teacher competencies to improve student outcomes (Day, 1999; Guskey, 2000). Bredeson (2000) outlines three types: self-directed individual growth aligned with personal interests (Broad & Evans, 2006); skill acquisition prompted by emerging technologies or school demands; and collaborative knowledge sharing, where educators exchange ideas and reflect to integrate new practices (Birman et al., 2000).

European partnerships can be powerful platforms for professional development. They engage teachers in reflective and creative practices (Bredeson, 2000), foster the exchange of best practices, and promote ICT and language skills—key goals of EU programmes. These partnerships also include informal learning, peer observation, and seminars, which align with varied forms of professional development (Morgan & Neil, 2003). As Day (1999) notes, professional development encompasses both structured and experiential learning that benefits individuals, teams, and schools while enhancing education quality.

To assess the effectiveness of development through European partnerships, it's important to explore the alignment between teachers' personal and professional needs. When professional development is tailored to teachers' interests, it improves teaching quality and classroom learning, ultimately benefiting schools (Morgan & Neil, 2003).

Furthermore, when teachers co-design the content of their development, it is more likely to meet their needs and influence their teaching beliefs and practices (Bredeson, 2000).

Effective professional development—often evident in EU projects—is integrated into the school environment and directly connected to teachers’ daily work (Bredeson, 2000). Hunzicker (2011) adds two essential qualities: relevance, when development aligns with teachers’ duties, and authenticity, when it naturally fits into school life.

Research Aim and Questions

This study aims to explore the ways in which participation in European programmes shapes teachers’ professional development, including their motivations for participation, the challenges they face, and the areas in which their professional growth is impacted.

To this end, it seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the motivations of teachers participating in European partnerships?
2. What challenges do participants encounter in the implementation of these partnerships?
3. Which dimensions of teachers' professional development are influenced by their participation in European partnerships?

Research Design and Methodology

The selected research design adopts both quantitative and qualitative orientations, in alignment with the use of mixed methods (Creswell, 2015). Regarding the qualitative component, the analysis of qualitative data involves a set of processes aimed at interpreting, categorizing, and theorizing the data to address the research questions (Iosifidis, 2008, p. 172). For processing the qualitative material, thematic content analysis was employed (Boyatzis, 1998). The basic unit of analysis was the “theme,” which could appear within a sentence, paragraph, or an entire text (Joffe & Yardley, 2004).

To support this approach, a specially designed questionnaire was developed for teachers with experience in Erasmus+ partnerships. The questionnaire was structured into four parts. The first part included demographic questions. The second part comprised primarily closed-ended questions regarding the respondents' most recent participation in a school partnership, aiming to facilitate sample organization and classification of responses. The third part formed the core of the questionnaire, divided into five subsections. The first four subsections consisted of Likert-scale items

accompanied by open-ended questions that allowed participants to elaborate on their responses. The fifth subsection differed in that it included only open-ended questions.

Sampling and Data Collection

The sampling method used in this study was convenience sampling, as the data collection was conducted online, and it was not feasible to predefine the participant pool. The questionnaire was administered electronically using appropriate digital survey software hosted on the University of Ioannina's servers.

A total of 360 completed responses were recorded, of which 335 were included in the analysis. The remaining 25 responses were excluded as they came from educators without prior participation in European partnerships.

All 335 respondents were educators in primary or secondary education. Approximately three-quarters of the sample were female. Among participant specialties, primary school teachers were the most represented. In secondary education, philologists and English language teachers constituted the largest groups, followed by ICT educators.

Roughly half of the participants were aged 51–60, with the second most represented group being those aged 41–50. About one-quarter of the respondents had 16–20 years of teaching experience, while 21% had 26–30 years of experience. In terms of educational qualifications, over half of the participants held a master's degree, with a smaller portion holding a second degree and/or a doctoral degree.

Geographically, most participating schools were in the Region of Central Macedonia, followed by the Regions of Attica and the Peloponnese. There was satisfactory representation across different types of locations (urban, semi-urban, rural). Most participants' most recent Erasmus+ experience took place in lower secondary schools, followed closely by primary and upper secondary schools, indicating balanced representation across educational levels.

Although not the majority, a significant proportion of participants held administrative responsibilities in their schools during the implementation of the partnership. As expected, nearly all respondents had prior experience with Erasmus+ projects, most of which involved student mobility abroad.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data analysis was conducted using SPSS Statistics. Initially, descriptive statistics were generated, including frequency tables and graphs, to present the demographic profile of the sample.

Next, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was performed to identify latent variables representing teachers' perceptions and to uncover underlying dimensions of how educators conceptualize European partnerships. EFA was chosen because it is a statistical technique used to analyze the interrelationships among many variables and to interpret them through their common underlying factors (Hair, Black, Anderson, & Babin, 2018). Moreover, EFA is appropriate for analyzing independent variables derived from self-reported data, such as those concerning educators' views on Erasmus+ programs (Afifi, May, Donatello, & Clark, 2019).

It is important to note that although SPSS 25 was used for EFA, the researcher manually oversaw and made the key decisions during the process, which, according to Hair et al. (2018), results in more accurate and meaningful outcomes than fully automated analyses.

The final sample size of 335 participants provided a sufficient basis for analyzing correlations among variables and met the minimum 5:1 observation-to-variable ratio required for EFA (Hair et al., 2018).

Subsequently, the suitability of the data for EFA was assessed using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy and Bartlett's test of sphericity (Denis, 2018; Hair et al., 2018). Both criteria yielded favorable results, indicating that the data were appropriate for factor analysis. Specifically, Bartlett's test of sphericity showed a statistically significant correlation among the variables in the sample ($\chi^2(990) = 10,587.525$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that the use of a factor analysis model was justified for this dataset. Additionally, the KMO index demonstrated excellent homogeneity among the variables (KMO = 0.913).

A series of factor analyses was then conducted for dimensionality reduction, resulting in the identification of seven factors explaining 59.7% of the total variance—a satisfactory proportion in the context of social sciences (Hair et al., 2018).

Next, the internal consistency reliability was assessed separately for each of the identified dimensions. The results indicated that the variables within each factor exhibited high internal coherence, both among themselves and with the respective

factor. Moreover, the removal of any individual item was not expected to increase the reliability coefficient for any factor.

Based on the EFA results, seven new composite variables were created, each corresponding to one of the extracted factors. For the calculation of each factor score, the mean value of the items loading on that factor was used (table 1).

Table 1. Mean values of the extracted factors

Factors	Mean
1 Impact on the school	3,899
2 Impact on the teacher	4,412
3 Functioning and management of the partnership	4,331
4 Educational material	3,516
5 Response from Colleagues and School Leadership	3,956
6 Dissemination within the school environment and the broader community	3,638
7 Impact on the participants	4,642

In the context of the present study, two out of the seven identified factors were used. Specifically, the factor *Response from colleagues and school leadership* was utilized to explore the challenges faced by teachers, and the factor *Impact on the teacher* was employed to determine the impact of the partnerships on educators.

The *Response from Colleagues and School Leadership* factor, which accounts for 3.7% of the total variance, refers to how the programme was received within the school unit and the extent of support teachers received from school leadership and colleagues. It includes the following five (5) variables:

1. There was adequate support from the school administration.
2. There was adequate support from colleagues at school.
3. The participation of teachers in the partnership was positively evaluated by school leadership.
4. The participation of teachers in the partnership was positively evaluated by school colleagues.
5. There was adequate support from authorities outside the school.

The *Impact on the Teacher* factor explains 9% of the total variance and relates to the influence of European partnerships on the teacher's European outlook as well as

their personal and professional development. It includes the following ten (10) variables:

1. Improved understanding of European education systems.
2. Improved intercultural communication skills.
3. Enhanced perception of the teacher's European dimension.
4. Impact on students' learning experiences.
5. Improved teachers' ability to travel in Europe for professional purposes.
6. Motivation to improve or learn new languages.
7. Acquisition of skills and experiences that enabled participation in European actions.
8. Teachers were informed about innovative and best practices in their field.
9. Teachers felt less "isolated" in their work and saw themselves as part of a broader network of collaboration.
10. Improved ability to use European tools such as Europass.

Finally, a series of descriptive and bivariate analyses was carried out to address the research questions of the study. Specifically, the non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis and Mann-Whitney tests were employed to examine potential differences across the seven scales and among individual variables not included in the factor analysis, given that the data did not meet the normality assumptions required for one-way ANOVA or t-tests (Katsis et al., 2010). Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations of the Impact on Educators.

Table 2. Means and standard deviations of the Impact on Educators

Group	Impact on Educators
Female (n=246)	4.46 (.59)
Male (n=89)	4.29 (.81)
Experience up to 10years (n=5)	4.50 (.48)
Experience 11-15years (n=57)	4.39 (.66)
Experience 16-20years (n=83)	4.38 (.60)
Experience 21-25years (n=63)	4.45 (.55)
Experience 26-30years (n=73)	4.43 (.64)
Experience 31+years (n=54)	4.41 (.92)

Results

The results of the study are presented in a structured sequence to facilitate a clear understanding of the findings. The first part examines the motivations that prompted participants to engage in European school partnerships, shedding light on the driving factors behind their involvement. This is followed by an exploration of the barriers encountered during the implementation of these initiatives, offering insight into the practical and contextual challenges faced. Together, these preliminary findings provide the necessary foundation for the focus of the results section which is an in-depth analysis of the impact of European partnerships on teachers.

Motivation

To better understand the impact of European partnerships on educators, the study first investigated teachers' motivations for participation. In this regard, the qualitative analysis indicated that these motivations were closely associated with a desire to engage with foreign educational systems and to explore innovative pedagogical approaches extending beyond the standard curriculum. These insights reflect educators' commitment to professional growth and enriching student experiences. However, some concerns were raised about participants engaging primarily for travel, potentially limiting the impact on the wider school community.

“European partnerships respond to my interests and needs beyond work, as they offer opportunities for collaboration and exposure to different educational systems and teaching practices, as well as travel with professional and educational value.” (P62)

“My need to discover new places, people, and cultures is met through such programs.” (P310)

“The projects implemented as part of these programs address important local and global issues, offering both students and teachers knowledge and interaction that the official Greek lower secondary curriculum does not provide time for—for example, topics such as careers, 21st-century skills, entrepreneurship, etc.” (P139)

“Such programs usually attract interest only with regard to travel within the broader school community.” (P160)

Barriers

To offer a comprehensive account of participants' experiences, the study extended its focus to the obstacles encountered during the implementation phase. The qualitative

analysis of responses to the open-ended questions indicated that colleagues' attitudes represented one of the most significant challenges. Moreover, two additional key barriers were identified: the heightened workload and the demanding nature of administrative procedures.

The first barrier is illustrated through participants' accounts describing colleagues who displayed negative—or even hostile—attitudes. In some cases, these colleagues attempted to join mobilities without making any contribution to the project's implementation. Such behavior created a tense atmosphere, raising concerns about internal school dynamics. Furthermore, a smaller yet non-negligible number of participants noted limited support from school management, highlighting issues in internal school relations.

“Some colleagues did not understand the importance of the programme and created a negative atmosphere at school (‘you’re disrupting the smooth operation of the school with all this travel and hosting of foreign schools...’).” (P238)

“Many colleagues want to participate in partnerships just for the travel abroad, without contributing at all. That is one of the main problems.” (P152)

“A hostile atmosphere developed at school from non-participating teachers, with constant tensions.” (P124)

“The headteacher was not always cooperative... He placed obstacles and lowered our morale and enthusiasm.” (P405)

To explore the influence of school characteristics on participants' perceptions, a Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to determine whether there were statistically significant differences in responses depending on the size of the school. The results of the analysis indicated that at the 5% level of statistical significance, there was a significant difference in school size with respect to the variable Support from colleagues and school management, $H(3)=10.871$, $p=.012$. Post hoc analysis revealed a statistically significant difference between schools with up to 100 students and those with more than 300 students ($p=.009$).



Figure 1: School size (number of students) compared with responses from colleagues and administration.

The time demands of European partnerships often deter participation, especially for school-based coordinators who bear most of the responsibility without adjustments to teaching or administrative duties, leading to significant personal time investment.

“Being responsible for the implementation of a European programme in a school requires a significant time investment, all of which comes from the teacher’s personal time. Their school duties remain unchanged, and there is no provision in the teaching schedule for time dedicated to fulfilling the project’s obligations.” (P525)

“Work is required outside of teaching hours, which is a disincentive for some teachers to participate.” (P313)

Finally, participants highlighted the excessive bureaucracy involved in securing travel permits and the challenges they faced in getting approval for mobility from relevant administrative authorities.

“The bureaucracy and workload discourage many colleagues from joining a partnership.” (P111)

“Enormous bureaucracy and a fear of responsibility when it comes to organizing mobilities. For example, to apply for leave, you need to know the exact departure and arrival times of participants, convene a staff meeting, and submit the minutes to the authorities. This is only possible if you’ve already booked tickets before obtaining approval. Everything seems designed to shift responsibility away from the authorities, without considering the burden placed on teachers.” (P511)

“The biggest problem was the failure to approve mobility permits by the education authority.” (P222)

Impact

Having examined both the motivations that led teachers to engage in European partnerships and the barriers encountered during implementation, the analysis now moves to the central focus of this study, which is the impact of these partnerships on teachers' professional development. The section begins with the presentation of the quantitative findings and then proceeds to the qualitative insights that provide a deeper understanding of the results.

Quantitative Analysis

The quantitative analysis revealed that European partnerships have a significant impact on participating educators. Specifically, the analysis of the factors derived from the Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) related to the impact on participating teachers showed a very high mean score with low standard deviation for the Impact on Educators factor (mean = 4.41, SD = .66).

However, when asked whether they believe that the implementation of a European partnership has a lasting impact on teachers who did not participate in the project activities, responses were more divided, with a notable percentage indicating no clear opinion (mean = 3.12, SD = 1.02).

Initially, the relationship between the challenges faced by participants and the impact on educators was examined. Spearman's correlation coefficient was used to test the following hypotheses:

- H_0 : There is no relationship between the attitude of colleagues and the impact on the educator.
- H_a : There is a relationship between the attitude of colleagues and the impact on the educator.

Based on the analysis results, the null hypothesis was rejected in favor of the alternative. A statistically significant positive correlation was found between the impact on the educator and the support (or lack thereof) received from colleagues and school leadership ($r = .193$, $p < .001$).

A series of hypothesis tests (Mann-Whitney & Kruskal-Wallis) were conducted to investigate the initial research questions using the sample data.

For the variables related to educator impact identified through the EFA, Kruskal-Wallis tests were used to examine potential differences across three groups based on

participants' experience with European partnerships (i.e., participation in one, two, or three or more partnerships). The analysis revealed statistically significant differences at the 1% level for Impact on Educators ($H(2) = 13.020$, $p = .001$).

Post hoc analysis showed statistically significant differences between participants involved in "three or more partnerships" and those involved in only one partnership (p-values ranging from .001 to .020), as well as between participants involved in "three or more partnerships" and those involved in two partnerships (p-values ranging from .001 to .011). No statistically significant differences were found between those who participated in one and those who participated in two partnerships for any of the variables.

A Kruskal-Wallis test was also conducted to determine whether there were statistically significant differences in responses based on the size of participants' schools. The results did not show any significant differences among the three school-size groups for Impact on Educators ($H(3) = .840$, $p = .840$). Similarly, no statistically significant differences were found in relation to educators' total years of teaching experience for the Impact on Educators ($H(5) = 4.842$, $p = .436$).

Qualitative Analysis

This section presents findings on how European partnerships impact teachers' professional development. The most notable effects include a strengthened European identity, improved foreign language fluency, and greater use of technology in teaching. Additional benefits include enhanced pedagogical knowledge from host countries and the development of professional skills.

Fluency in Foreign Languages

Participants emphasized the improvement of English, which was the main language used in almost all partnerships. However, detailed analysis suggests that the impact was primarily motivational as teachers were inspired to learn or improve their foreign language skills. This impact is weakened by the fact that only a small number of participants reported having taken language classes or obtained language certificates. Furthermore, there is limited data on the continued development of teachers' language skills after the projects ended. Finally, participants reported gaining confidence in communicating in a foreign language due to their participation.

“The fact that communication would take place in English motivated me to refresh and improve my language skills, which led me to start English lessons and obtain the ECPE (Michigan Proficiency).” (P158)

“I realized that I don’t necessarily need to speak English at a proficiency level to communicate. Also, language differences are a much smaller obstacle to communication than differences in mentality.” (P511)

“Personally, I started learning Spanish because I fell in love with the country, its people, and its culture.” (P477)

Fluency in the Use of New Technologies

The analysis indicates that the impact in new technologies was achieved through participants’ experiences using ICT tools during project activities. An additional value of the partnerships was that teachers integrated ICT into their teaching practices.

“Computers became more involved in our daily teaching. We became familiar with distance learning, virtual classrooms, and online video conferencing.” (P76)

“I’ll mention a simple example: creating videos, which was previously done by a single teacher, became part of the preparation for upcoming meetings, and involved more teachers.” (P392)

Enhancement of Teaching Practices

Notable responses included exposure to foreign educational systems and the enrichment of teaching methodologies. Participants mentioned having the opportunity to visit schools abroad, learn about their operation, and discuss partner countries’ educational systems. Later, they reported incorporating aspects of these approaches into their own teaching. The most significant insight is the teachers’ eagerness to learn about best practices from abroad and, most importantly, their newfound confidence to try them in everyday teaching.

“Visits to other schools and attending lessons abroad helped and often changed my approach to teaching the subject I teach (e.g., using a fully equipped science lab).” (P133)

“Being in contact with other foreign educational institutions enriched my ideas in teaching so that it doesn’t become monotonous over the years—firstly for myself, and consequently for my students.” (P742)

“I can say my horizons expanded regarding new methods I now apply in the classroom, and I have more confidence in using them.” (P111)

Improvement of Professional Skills

The research findings highlighted the influence of European programmes in enhancing teachers' professional skills, such as the use of experiential teaching methods. Among the reported outcomes, participants particularly emphasized the cultivation of their critical thinking skills through their involvement in such programmes.

Additionally, the analysis revealed the positive effect of these programmes on strengthening teachers' self-confidence within the school context. This finding indicates the need to further investigate how teachers feel during their daily presence in the classroom and to explore the underlying causes of diminished self-confidence in the school environment.

“My participation in a partnership had a positive impact on my personal development, as it enhanced my critical thinking and made me more flexible in my relationships with both students and colleagues.” (P150)

“I use experiential teaching methods more frequently now.” (P160)

“My self-confidence as a teacher was boosted, and I realised how essential I was for the implementation of the programme. I became more valuable to my school, both in terms of working with students and colleagues, and in my contribution to the success of the programme—advising the partners on many issues, such as when I had the opportunity to guide them in using eTwinning (both Greek and foreign partners).” (P232)

Enhancement of Leadership Skills

The key point that emerged was the improvement of participants' organizational skills, which resulted from their experience in managing demanding projects such as European partnerships. Another key area highlighted by participants with leadership roles was the improvement in collaboration with school staff and the overall administration of the school unit. These findings reflect the educators' need to further develop their skills in school management and organization to become more effective in leading their institutions.

“After participating in one Comenius and two Erasmus projects—being the coordinator in the first of the two Erasmus—I now feel much more confident in writing and coordinating a project, giving clear directions to all participating schools.” (P392)

“On a personal level, I gained valuable insight into how an educational institution operates, especially from the perspective of the headteacher.” (P160)

“I have gained experience in collaborating with the entire teaching staff and supporting them with any questions related to the project tasks. I adapt more easily and solve problems more effectively.” (P383)

Discussion

The findings shed light on both the motivations and challenges experienced by teachers, as well as the transformative effects of European partnerships on their professional growth. The discussion that follows situates these results within the broader context of existing research and explores their implications for educational practice.

The findings reveal that teachers primarily participate in European partnerships to become acquainted with foreign educational systems and to exchange best practices with colleagues from other countries. These motivations are also acknowledged in recent literature, as several studies (European Commission, 2018d; Karakuş, Uyar, & Balbağ, 2017; Kosmas et al., 2020; Athanasakou, 2021) highlight the significance of engaging with diverse European cultures and the value of sharing educational practices. The study next explored internal challenges faced by participants, notably tensions with colleagues within their schools. These stemmed primarily from the negative attitudes of non-participating teachers, who often showed limited support or expressed opposition to the projects. Some participants also noted that certain colleagues sought involvement in transnational mobilities without contributing to the broader implementation efforts. This issue is well-documented, with several studies (GES, 2007; Karakuş et al., 2017; Kesik & Beycioğlu, 2020; Arampatzi & Paspaliari, 2020; Voulgari, 2018) highlighting similar patterns of limited collaboration and strained relations between project teams and their peers. Although such conflicts are widely acknowledged in the literature, they are rarely addressed in the official evaluations of European programmes.

Another significant obstacle is the increased time commitment required. The heavy workload and lack of available time consistently emerge as key barriers (Cook, 2012; Kyridis et al., 2018), largely linked to the lack of administrative support in Greek schools, where teachers are solely responsible for managing the projects (Laliotou et al., 2017). In the international literature, special emphasis is placed on bureaucracy, especially in terms of the time and effort needed to meet administrative requirements

(European Commission, 2018c; van Beek et al., 2017; Vareikytė & Babrauskienė, 2017).

The analysis identified the approval of mobilities by administrative authorities as a major obstacle, frustrating participants who felt it impeded projects they were committed to. The lack of a clear regulatory framework or Ministry of Education guidelines worsened the issue. Notably, such challenges are mostly reported in studies on the Greek educational system (Laliotou et al., 2017; Moniou, 2019; Athanasakou, 2021; Voulgari, 2018).

The study highlights important findings on the impact of partnerships on teachers' professional development, particularly in shaping their educational identity. Participants expressed strong interest in international best practices and, more significantly, increased confidence in applying them. Many reported a readiness to adopt new approaches in their schools despite obstacles such as limited technological resources, reflecting greater professional self-efficacy. Interaction with diverse educational systems has been widely recognized in the literature as a major benefit of European programs (GES, 2007; Kesik & Beycioğlu, 2020; Arabatzi & Paspaliari, 2020; Chatzipetrou, 2019). Kyridis et al. (2018) similarly note that exposure to different pedagogical models broadened participants' perspectives and encouraged experimentation with innovative methods. These findings align with European Commission reports (2012, 2018), which affirm that participation enhances teaching practices. Only Karakuş et al. (2017) raise concerns, suggesting that while awareness of foreign systems increased, actual changes in classroom practice were limited.

The analysis further revealed the impact of partnerships on participants' linguistic development. Teachers were motivated to improve their foreign language skills, particularly English, and reported increased confidence in using these languages for communication. Although several studies highlight this linguistic benefit (Kugiejko, 2016; Maiworm, Kastner, & Wenzel, 2010; Athanasakou, 2021; Davveta, 2020), few specify the extent or dimensions of this impact. An exception is Kyridis et al. (2018), who noted improvements in communicative competence, while CIEP (2012) observed that such experiences helped educators empathize with learners struggling with language acquisition.

Participation also familiarized educators with digital tools, which many later integrated into their teaching—a finding aligned with European Commission reports (2012). Furthermore, partnerships contributed to the development of soft skills, such as

project-based learning, teamwork strategies, interdisciplinary approaches, and outdoor teaching. Teachers reported increased confidence in applying these skills, especially those previously known but difficult to implement. Similar trends appear in other studies (CIEP, 2012; Gözpınar, 2018; Kugiejko, 2016; Davveta, 2020; Kesik & Beycioğlu, 2020), which associate this confidence boost with improved professional performance and greater interest in alternative methods like experiential learning.

Finally, findings indicate enhanced organizational competencies, including time management, budgeting, and team coordination—though this was most evident among school coordinators, as noted by CIEP (2012). Kyridis et al. (2018) point to mixed perceptions among education leaders regarding this impact, while Gözpınar (2018) and Athanasakou (2021) suggest improvements, albeit without clarifying the breadth of effect across all participants.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the impact of teachers' participation in European school partnerships within the framework of the Erasmus+ programme. It focused on educators' motivations for engaging in such collaborations, the challenges they encountered during implementation, and the dimensions of their professional development that were influenced by their involvement.

Participants evaluated their involvement in the partnerships positively, recognizing their value for professional development despite encountered challenges. A primary motivation for engagement was the opportunity to explore foreign educational systems and exchange best practices with peers across Europe. Endorsed by most participants, this incentive underscores educators' commitment to professional growth, consistent with Morgan & Neil (2003) and Bredeson (2000).

Despite the overall positive experiences reported by participants, several challenges were identified, particularly concerning intra-school dynamics. Teachers described instances of negative attitudes and resistance from colleagues not directly involved in the projects, which in some cases led to internal tensions and conflict. Additionally, participants noted that some staff members appeared primarily interested in mobility opportunities, without engaging meaningfully in other phases of the project. These dynamics often resulted in a clear division among staff: those actively contributing to the design and implementation, those focused mainly on mobility, and

those skeptical or opposed to the initiative altogether. Such fragmentation poses a risk to the effective implementation of European projects, as a collaborative and supportive school culture is a key enabler of success. Notably, the study found a statistically significant positive correlation between the impact experienced by educators and the degree of support they received from colleagues and school leadership. This suggests that the presence—or absence—of a supportive professional environment plays a critical role in shaping the overall effectiveness and perceived value of participation in European partnerships for teachers' professional growth.

Building on the discussion of barriers, although the projects entailed additional workload and administrative demands, participants maintained the effective fulfillment of their regular duties, reflecting their strong professional commitment and responsibility.

The present study highlighted the dimensions of professional development influenced by involvement in European programmes by measured impact through participants' perceptions (Ramboll Management, 2006). In particular, participants reported improved competencies in foreign languages and digital technologies. Their teaching practices were enriched, and their overall professional skills were enhanced which comes in line with the literature (Peck, 1997; Birman et al., 2000; Morris, 2019, Bredeson, 2000) and the goals that European Commission had set for the European programmes (European Commission, 2023). Furthermore, the project had a notable impact on the development of their administrative capacities.

Significantly, the findings suggest that participation in school partnerships contributes primarily to strengthening teachers' self-confidence across multiple aspects of their professional growth. Considering the limited duration of transnational meetings, this result is not unexpected; rather, it underscores how European programmes contribute to shaping educators' professional identity. Specifically, the results show increased confidence among educators in implementing teaching approaches encountered abroad, even in the face of challenges such as inadequate technological infrastructure. Additionally, participants reported greater confidence in communicating in foreign languages, particularly English.

Research Limitations

The study explored the impact of European school partnerships on teachers' professional development, using data collected through questionnaires sent to

participating schools. While this provided valuable insights, the large volume of data required considerable time and effort to process. Additionally, the research coincided with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which hindered communication with schools.

Suggestions for future research

This study focused primarily on teachers, examining their goals, motivations, project implementation, and the impact of European partnerships on their professional growth. Future research could explore these programmes from the students' perspective, as well as the preparation stage, particularly community involvement. Findings indicate schools tend to avoid long-term mobility, often due to limited funding and regulatory constraints—an area warranting deeper investigation and policy recommendations. Further studies could also examine the role of National Agencies through research with experienced project managers, ideally using interviews to foster trust and encourage open, candid responses.

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