

Erasmus+ program as a tool to reinforce democracy at schools

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ABSTRACT

Erasmus+ is the EU program in the field of education that, among others, aims to equip participants with the skills needed for their coexistence in democratic and inclusive society. A partnership of four schools from four countries within the Erasmus program has been formed to study the history of the Holocaust in the past two years. The Greek school is the coordinating school, and schools from Italy, Romania and Hungary are the participating schools. Two meetings have taken place so far, with a total of 21 pupils attending the first meeting in Iasi, Romania (onset of project activities) and 44 pupils attending the second meeting in Sarkad, Hungary (midterm project activities). The Barometre was used in both meetings to assess the democratic profile of all participants before and after their participation in the Erasmus+ project and to measure any change towards them coexisting in a more or less democratic way at their schools. The Barometre is a tool designed by the Institute of Educational Policy in Greece in the Likert Scale, gauging democratic tendencies in a scale from +3 (strongly agree) to -1 (the opposite happens). Our findings show that participation in the Erasmus+ project improved each school's democratic profile, except for the school in Romania which had achieved better scores before its participation in the project. More research is needed to pinpoint factors affecting democracy in classrooms, such as governmental policies and the effect of the pandemic.

Keywords: Erasmus; democracy; Barometre; school; project;

1.Introduction

Erasmus+ is the EU Program in the fields of education, training, youth and sport. One of its key actions in the past involved the strategic partnership of schools and the mobility of pupils for teaching, training and learning activities (KA229). Within this action, one school from Greece (1st Evening Highschool of Patras) started a partnership as a coordinating school with four other European schools: the National College in Iasi (Romania), the Ady Endre – Bay Zoltan Highschool in Sarkad (Hungary), the Technical-Economical Institution “Jacopo Barozzi” in Modena (Italy) and Poppenbüttel Highschool in Hamburg (Germany). The aim of this partnership was for teachers and pupils to travel to each other's school and study together the Holocaust. The title of the project was “Against a Final Solution: Teaching European History and the Holocaust Can Eliminate Discrimination and Promote Social Inclusion in the Classroom”. Project start date was 01/09/2019. With the Sars-CoV-2 pandemic suspending all European school projects that involved activities abroad, the project was allowed an extension until 08/2022. So far, two mobilities have taken place. The first mobility took place in December 2019 in Iasi and the second mobility took place in

November 2021 in Sarkad. The German mobility has been cancelled altogether due to issues pertaining to the pandemic. The Italian mobility is being scheduled for April 2022 and the Greek mobility is being scheduled for May 2022. During the two mobilities that have taken place, pupils completed a questionnaire that assesses their democratic coexistence at schools. The aim of the questionnaire is to show if pupils' participation in a European project affects their democratic coexistence in classrooms.

2. Methods

The Barometre is a tool designed by the Institute of Educational Policy in Greece in the Likert Scale, gauging democratic tendencies in a scale from +3 (strongly agree) to -1 (the opposite happens). It can be used as an index of human rights and democracy at schools and in classrooms. It comprises 33 sentences divided in the areas of Human Rights and Dignity (6 sentences), Democracy and Democratic Coexistence (9 sentences), Participation, Responsibility and Decision Making (7 sentences) and Inclusion, Cooperation, Mediation (11 sentences). Pupils can respond to them either in written, or visualizing it in space, taking steps for each corresponding point (from +3 to -1). Its visualization is highly encouraged by its creators, as it gives pupils a chance to gauge tendencies among all pupils in real time. The Barometre was used at the first meeting in Iasi (project input) to assess pupils' democratic coexistence before their participation in a European project, and at the second meeting in Sarkad (project output), to compare and contrast democratic tendencies after pupils' participation in a European project. Scores here have been collected as a sum of all the points (from +3 to -1) given by pupils, with the maximum of performance being 99 for all 33 sentences.

3. Results

The overall effect of the Erasmus+ project on the democratic coexistence of all participants was deemed positive. Total average score for all four countries (GR for Greece, IT for Italy, HUN for Hungary and ROM for Romania) involved for project input was 70,37. It increased by 6% at project output (74,6) (table 1).

Table 1: Overall project input-output

	PROJECT INPUT 2019	PROJECT OUTPUT 2021
	GR – IT – HUN - ROM	GR- IT – HUN - ROM
AVERAGE	70,37	74,60
	INCREASE PERCENTAGE 6%	

Analysed for every country, results show an increase in democratic coexistence for Italy (11,3%) and for Hungary (10,84%). There is a decrease in the overall democratic coexistence for the Romanian school by 11,25% (table 2).

Table 2: Overall results per country at project input - output

	GR	IT	HUN	ROM
PROJECT INPUT 2019	91	72,5	62,25	65,33
PROJECT OUTPUT 2021	90,94	80,7	69	57,8
Percentage of difference	**	+11,3%	+10,84%	-11,25%

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Analysed for each different section of the questionnaire, the percentage of difference is statistically insignificant for the section Human Rights – Dignity for the Greek, the Italian and the Hungarian school. There is a decrease by 17,6% for the Romanian school (table 3).

Table 3: Results per country at project input – output for the section Human Rights-Dignity

	<i>Human Rights – Dignity</i>			
	<i>GR</i>	<i>IT</i>	<i>HUN</i>	<i>ROM</i>
<i>PROJECT INPUT 2019</i>	17,75	14,5	12,5	12,44
<i>PROJECT OUTPUT 2021</i>	17,63	14	12,75	10,25
<i>Percentage of difference</i>	**	**	**	-17,6%

For the section questioning democracy and democratic coexistence at school, there is increased performance for all schools at project output except for the Romanian school (table 4).

Table 4: Results per country at project input – output for the section Democracy-Democratic Coexistence

	<i>Democracy – Democratic Coexistence</i>			
	<i>GR</i>	<i>IT</i>	<i>HUN</i>	<i>ROM</i>
<i>PROJECT INPUT 2019</i>	23,25	20,50	13,75	19,78
<i>PROJECT OUTPUT 2021</i>	24,38	22,44	20	15,38
<i>Percentage of difference</i>	**	+8,64%	+45,45%	-22,24%

For the section questioning Participation-Responsibility-Decision Making, the Italian school performed better at project output than other schools. There was decrease in the performance of the Romanian school, compared to project input (-8,95%) (table 5).

Table 5: Results per country at project input – output for the section Participation-Responsibility-Decision Making

	<i>Participation – Responsibility – Decision Making</i>			
	<i>GR</i>	<i>IT</i>	<i>HUN</i>	<i>ROM</i>
<i>PROJECT INPUT 2019</i>	19,5	15	13,25	12,44
<i>PROJECT OUTPUT 2021</i>	18,95	16,13	13	11,13
<i>Percentage of difference</i>	**	+7,53%	**	-8,95%

For the section Inclusion-Cooperation-Mediation, the Italian school performed better at project output than all other schools, whose percentage of difference is statistically insignificant (table 6).

Table 6: Results per country at project input – output for the section Inclusion-Cooperation-Mediation

	<i>Inclusion – Cooperation - Mediation</i>			
	<i>GR</i>	<i>IT</i>	<i>HUN</i>	<i>ROM</i>
<i>PROJECT INPUT 2019</i>	30,5	22	22,75	20,67
<i>PROJECT OUTPUT 2021</i>	29	25,63	23,25	21
<i>Percentage of difference</i>	**	+16,5%	**	**

4. Discussion

Results show that the overall effect of the implementation of an Erasmus program is positive for the sum of the schools participating in it. Average performance of schools in the field of democratic coexistence increased from 70,37 (project input-2019) to 74,60 (project output-2021).

Analysis of the variables for each school show that the Greek school remained stable in the first place, while the Italian and Hungarian schools performed better after their participation in the project. Specifically, the Hungarian school, which had scored last in issues of democracy in 2019 (project input), improved its profile by +10,84% after participation in the project, surpassing the Romanian school. The Italian school remained stable in the second place, with improved percentage however in issues of democracy (+11,3%).

The only school scoring less after its participation in the project is the Romanian school (-11,25%). The current paper did not take into account the effect of the pandemic on pupils, which may have had a negative impact on the Romanian pupils' perception of democracy.

It is noteworthy that the Italian school scored statistically significantly better in the fields of Democracy-Democratic Coexistence (+7,53%) and Inclusion-Cooperation-Mediation (+16,5%). Correspondingly, the Hungarian school scored statistically significantly better in the field Democracy-Democratic Coexistence, where we have the greatest increase per school per field (+45,45%) for the whole project.

5. Conclusion

This paper is an output of the dissemination and follow-up of the Erasmus+ project carried out in the years 2019-2022 among five schools in Europe. Although further research is needed to complement the findings presented herein, the authors pinpoint evidence of a measurable positive effect of the Erasmus+ program on pupils' democratic coexistence in classrooms.

References

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