European Mobility Programs and Skills Development

Giorgos Panagiotopoulos

ABSTRACT

This specific study follows the quantitative methodology approach and seeks to investigate primary education teachers’ perceptions of the skills developed through participation in European mobility programs. It examines whether there is a correlation between the perceptions of the following professional characteristics: knowledge of a foreign language, knowledge of information and communications technology (ICT), and participation in training programs for mobility. The research was conducted in the prefecture of Achaia in May 2023. The convenient sampling technique was applied, and 360 teachers finally completed the electronic questionnaire. Regarding data analysis, descriptive and inductive statistics were applied with the application of IBM SPSS v28 software. The internal consistency reliability for skills development from the European mobility programs is very satisfactory (Cronbach’s Alpha = 0.904 > 0.70). Based on the findings of this study, it is shown that teachers recognize, to a very high extent, that they develop precious skills while participating in European mobility programs. Finally, their perceptions are reinforced by specific vocational traits.

Keywords: Development, European mobility programs, skills, training.

1. Introduction

The recent European Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030) establishes lifelong learning through staff mobility as a priority since it is related to personal development and employability, fosters respect for diversity and encourage linguistic pluralism and awareness (European Union, 2021; Jacobone & Moro, 2015).

Teachers’ mobility is regarded as the hallmark of the European education area (European Union, 2014, 2018), as the benefits of carrying out international mobility activities are well known and have been researched from their early stages as a tool for cooperation, quality and equity. In addition, as part of the new Erasmus+ program, European Teachers’ Academies have been established to offer teachers support at the beginning of their careers and strengthen their professional development. They also encourage deep transnational cooperation between teacher institutions, create communities of practice on teacher education, and offer teachers’ courses and modules on Europe's priorities, such as learning in the digital world, sustainability, and inclusion.

The European programs applied to school education, concerning the Greek context, are KA1 Learning Mobility of Individuals, KA2 Key Action 2, Comenius and eTwinning. Action KA1, “Learning mobility of school education staff”, provides teachers of school units, public and private, with the opportunity to gain learning experience in another country. Participating in these activities allows them to improve their knowledge, skills and abilities, come into contact with new cultures and civilizations and develop a sense of European identity. At the same time, they acquire more opportunities and incentives about the needs of their school units.

KA2/Key Action 2 includes projects managed by national units and the Education Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency. This Key Action strengthens strategic partnerships in education, training and youth, knowledge alliances, sectoral skills alliances and capacity building in the youth sector. It
brings important short-term and long-term results for the participating bodies, the policy systems, and the people participating directly or indirectly. Finally, strategic partnerships are a decentralized activity involving collaborative plans that allow participating organizations to jointly address important issues, develop partnerships and share innovative practices.

Following, the Comenius sectoral program aims to improve the quality of school education and strengthen its European dimension, in particular by encouraging transnational cooperation between educational institutions of school and preschool education by subsidizing school partnerships and actions of transnational mobility of students and educational staff, as well as in-service teacher training activities.

Finally, The European initiative “eTwinning” aims to promote new and innovative ways of using information and communication technology in European schools through school twinning and online collaboration (Galvin et al., 2006).

In this vein, many research studies have been conducted to investigate the impact of mobility programs. Specifically, Carlson and Widaman (1988) argue that mobility contributes to an individual's capability to acquire global-mindedness, grow intellectually and develop personally; Jacobone and Moro (2015) also state that mobility programs increase not only human capital in individuals but also their cosmopolitan orientation, their employability, and offer opportunities to broaden their experience.

In alignment with the aspects mentioned above, this research study comes to investigate primary education teachers’ perceptions regarding the skills developed through participation in European Mobility Programs and whether there is a correlation between their perceptions with the following professional characteristics: knowledge of a foreign language, knowledge of ICT; participation in training programs for mobility. Investigating ways in which skills could be developed in the contemporary context is of major importance since skills are inextricably linked to human survival and the human ability to develop, adapt and prosper (European Commission, 2016; Kil et al., 2012; Panagiotopoulos et al., 2023a).

2. Methodology

The present study seeks to shed light on teachers’ perceptions of European mobility skills and training by following the quantitative methodology approach, which entails more than just numerical data since the researcher states the questions to be examined and specifies the procedures used throughout the study. A large enough sample of participants is also identified to provide statistically meaningful data (Bryman, 2016; Gay et al., 2012). For the needs of the study, an electronic questionnaire with 10 close-ended questions was chosen. In contrast, there was a session on demographic and vocational data, including questions regarding gender, age, additional studies, certified knowledge in information and communications technology, certified knowledge in a foreign language, and training in European mobility programs. The construction of the questionnaire was based on a relative literature review. It is also worth mentioning that the questionnaire was piloted to identify any ambiguities, errors and misinterpretations. Participants were asked to answer on a five-point Likert scale from 1 to 5 (1 = not at all, 2 = a little, 3 = enough, 4 = a lot, 5 = too much).

The research was conducted in the prefecture of Achaia in May 2023. The specific region was selected since it was easier for the researcher to have access to and ensure that a sufficient number of questionnaires would be completed. Thus, the accessible population of the study consisted of 1,300 primary education teachers working in the 93 public schools of the region during the 2022–2023 academic year. The convenient sampling technique was applied, and 360 teachers finally completed the questionnaire and expressed their perceptions (the response rate was 27.60%).

Regarding their demographics, 66.9% are female, and 33.1% are male; 40.6% belong to the age category of 51–60 years; 33.1% to the category of 41–50 years; 16.4% to the category of 31–40; 7.8% to the category up to 30 years and 2.2% to the age category of 61 and over. The majority (65.3%) have a master’s degree; 88.9% have certified knowledge of a foreign language, and 94.4% have certified ICT knowledge. Regarding their participation in training programs, almost 55% have never participated in relevant training programs.

Ethical considerations played an important role as well. Specifically, the two overriding rules were that the participants would not be harmed, they would be provided with a cover letter to alert them about the research topic and incentives, and they would be informed of the requested actions on their part. In addition, complete anonymity and confidentiality were totally assured (Robson, 2007; Shuttles & Bennett, 2008).

Descriptive and inductive statistics were applied using IBM SPSS v28 software for data analysis. Percentages, frequencies of the mean value and standard deviation were calculated. The normality test of the variables for the perceptions of skill development from the European programs was done.
with Kolmogorov-Smirnov. The results showed a normal distribution of the variables (p > 0.05). The parametric t-test was used to investigate correlations. The internal consistency reliability for skill development from the European Mobility Programs is very satisfactory (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.904 > 0.70).

3. Results

Regarding skills development, the average value of the responses ranges from 3.24 (Quite), “Do you feel through your participation in the program that leadership and management skills emerge?” to 4.38 (Very), “By participating in the program, do you understand other cultures to a greater extent?” (see Table I). Overall, they strongly agree (M = 3.99) that participation in European mobility programs contributes positively to skills development.

3.1. Correlation between Skill Development and Certified Knowledge of a Foreign Language

In order to find out if there is a statistically significant difference in skills development and knowledge of a foreign language, the data were analyzed by using an independent samples t-test (Table II). Based on the Levene's Test, the average values for the respondents differ from each other (p = 0.011). Therefore, there is a statistically significant correlation.

Those who have certified knowledge of a foreign language show a greater degree of agreement (M = 4.03) than those who have no knowledge of a foreign language (M = 3.73 regarding skills development (Table III)).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE I: DISTRIBUTION OF PERCENTAGES, MEAN VALUE, STANDARD DEVIATION FOR SKILL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH PARTICIPATION IN EUROPEAN PROGRAMS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Do you gain a greater understanding of other cultures by participating in the program?</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Have you gained important knowledge and experience in developing student skills and solving behavioral problems?</td>
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<td>3. Have you acquired new teaching methods and innovations?</td>
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<td>4. Does it enable you to improve your foreign language skills?</td>
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<td>5. Are you informed at a theoretical and practical level about teaching strategies and educational techniques for students with differentiated learning needs?</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Do you think that participating in the mobility program enriches your analytical skills (data analysis for the successful implementation of the teaching work)?</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Does the program help in better organization and planning of the lesson and, in general, in the management of the educational work?</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Do you feel that leadership and management skills are emerging through your participation in the program?</td>
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<td>9. Are you given the opportunity to gain team spirit?</td>
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<td>10. After your participation, do you feel that your self-confidence is boosted?</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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Note: 1 = not at all, 2 = a little, 3 = enough, 4 = a lot, 5 = too much.

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<tr>
<th>TABLE II: T-TEST RESULTS FOR CORRELATION BETWEEN SKILL DEVELOPMENT AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Levene’s test for equality of variances</td>
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<td>Skill development in European mobility programs</td>
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<td>Equal variances assumed</td>
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<td>Equal variances not assumed</td>
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<th>TABLE III: DESCRIPTIVE MEASURES OF EUROPEAN PROGRAMS AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE KNOWLEDGE</th>
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<tr>
<td>Certified knowledge of foreign language</td>
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<tr>
<td>Skills development in European programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
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</tbody>
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3.2. Correlation of Skill Development and Certified ICT Knowledge

In order to determine if there is a statistically significant difference in skills development with ICT knowledge, the data were analyzed by using an independent samples t-test (Table IV). Based on the Levene’s Test, the average values for the respondents differ from each other (p < 0.001). Therefore, there is a statistically significant correlation between perceptions of skills development and certified ICT Knowledge.

Those who have certified ICT knowledge present a higher degree of agreement (M = 4.03) than those who have no computer knowledge (M = 3.38 for skills development in European Programs, see Table V).

3.3. Correlation between Skills Development in European Programs and Participation in Training for European Mobility Programs

In order to find out if there is a statistically significant difference in respondents’ perceptions of skills development in European programs with participation in training for European mobility programs, the analysis of the data was done using an independent samples t-test (Table VI). Based on the Levene’s Test, the average values for the respondents differ from each other (p < 0.001). Therefore, there is a statistically significant correlation between teachers’ perceptions and participation in training for a European mobility program.

Finally, those who have participated in a training program for European mobility show a higher mean (M = 4.17) than those who have not participated in a corresponding training program (M = 3.85). Therefore, those who have participated in training present a greater degree of positive attitude in their perceptions of skills development in European Programs (Table VII).
Taylor stated that:

“Whatever they teach, teachers should be educated in a way calculated to raise the level of their awareness of what is happening to mankind in the world’s contemporary circumstance. This means that those who are becoming teachers should have a chance to crossover, through their studies and their personal experience, to a culture different from the one in which they have been born and raised.” (Taylor, 1969, as cited in Parmigiani et al., 2023, p. 606)

Based on the findings of this study, it is shown that teachers recognize to a very high extent that they develop precious skills while participating in European mobility programs, a very positive element, especially, should we take into consideration that in a context of rapid economic, social, cultural, technological and demographic changes, more and more people are nowadays under-skilled or low-skilled, even in the developed countries (European Commission, 2018; Karanikola & Panagiotopoulos, 2018; Panagiotopoulos & Karanikola, 2017; Panagiotopoulos et al., 2023b). Indicatively, they understand other cultures, acquire important knowledge and experiences, learn new teaching methods, improve the use of a foreign language, become more informed about teaching strategies and educational techniques for differentiated learning needs, enrich their analytical skills, organize lesson planning and educational work management; acquire team spirit; their self-esteem and self-confidence are strengthened.

These findings are also supported and justified by the international discourse, according to which transnational mobility motivates teachers to gain new experiences and engage in continuous professional development. It also enables them to exchange views on their national evaluation practices, pedagogical methods and tools, autonomy and working conditions (European Commission, 2012; European Parliament, 2008; Jones et al., 2013; Mahmoudi & Özkan, 2015). Similarly, Maiworm et al. (2010) recommend the dimension of self-reflection in the teaching process as a result of mobility, whereas Aamaas et al. (2019) add that teachers reflect not only in terms of exposure to new pedagogical methods but also through encountering a different culture. In this vein, European programs help teachers to achieve professional development, language skills improvement (Mahmoudi & Özkan, 2015), and finally, to cross the boundaries of the classroom and involve both students and themselves in intercultural collaboration and learning (O’Dowd, 2017). After all, professionalism is associated with mastering appropriate and right skills (Gibert et al., 2017; Panagiotopoulos et al., 2019), which constitute a necessary and important quality for future teachers, contribute to the development of personality and improve flexibility in the work environment (Palaiologou & Karanikola, 2023; Sanna et al., 2021; Sekhar, 2019).

Regarding the second research question, it is demonstrated that participants’ professional characteristics, such as knowledge of a foreign language, computer knowledge and their training in European mobility programs, reinforce and strengthen their perceptions of the positive impact of participating in European Programs on skill development. In light of this, many studies have shown the correlation of appropriate training programs with teacher retention, job satisfaction and self-efficacy. As further benefits, training enhances teachers’ pedagogical content knowledge and promotes their lifelong learning (Klieba et al., 2020; Salcedo-López & Cuevas-López, 2021).

Concluding, this specific study, by following a descriptive approach, focuses mostly on the participants’ perceptions regarding skills development through mobility programs. However, these findings cannot be generalized to the whole population. Thus, some more relevant studies, both qualitative and quantitative, could be conducted towards this direction. Finally, we should also reflect on some issues related to training and education: finding a common understanding of the topic, investigating learners’ needs, devising a training structure, defining the appropriate training agents and the processes followed while planning training interventions, using active techniques and adult education principles (Karanikola & Panagiotopoulos, 2023; Wyant et al., 2018).

Acknowledgment

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that he does not have any conflict of interest.
REFERENCES


