



## FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS. QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

### Introduction

6th Gymnasio of Heraklion is in its second year of participating as partner school in the European programme Erasmus + KA2 entitled "Unesco Heritage 2014-21016". The project involves secondary education schools from 6 other countries (Colegiul national "Liviu Rebreanu", Bistrita ,Romania (coordinator). Agrupamento de Escolas Dr. Mario Sacramento, Aveiro ,Portugal. Hasan Sadoglu Mesleki ve Teknik Anadolu Lisesi, Istanbul, Turkey. Turisticko Ugostiteljska skola, Split Croatia. Istituto Istruzione superiore Castelnuovo Ne Monti, Italy. Zakladni skola Ostrava, Nadrazni 117, Ostrava, Czech Republic). On September 2015, our school hosted the fifth transnational learning activities in the framework of the project. After the learning activities and in accordance to the activities described in the project application, we conducted qualitative research using structured interviews of two different focus groups consisting of participants in the project (students and teachers accordingly). The analysis of the first focus group interview is presented in this paper in order to shed some light on the attitudes and behaviors of the participants that could determine the viability of the project and its further development.

**The sample:** The teachers' focus group consists of six women. Of these four are aged 45-50, one is 55 years old and one 35. The years of service depends on the ages of the participants with the 55 year old teacher having the most work experience and the 35 year old having the fewest. The disciplines of the teachers vary: from teaching music, literature and social sciences to science, mathematics and biology. Conducting the interview was the coordinator of the project for our school, Maria Fili (English teacher), monitoring the interview and recording of the subject matters was Anna Sfakianaki and Eletheria Tzortzaki (philologists).

### Analysis of the answers given:

#### Part 1. Teacher Interviews

All teachers felt that the program was an opportunity and a challenge for them even if they had no relevant previous experience:

*"As I did not have previous experience on European Programmes, I welcomed the opportunity to acquire one», «I felt challenged» "I was attracted to the idea".*

The reservations some of the teachers felt did not relate to the expected benefits of the project but to their self-awareness and feeling of inadequacy given the demands of the project and their possibly insufficient command of the English language:



*"I did not know at the beginning if I could cope with the requirements of the Programme, which caused me concern"*

*"My greatest concern was my lack of competence in the foreign language".*

Their initial expectations include the potential benefits of new cognitive experiences regarding lifelong learning, new teaching strategies, intrinsic motivation, and different education systems. The cognitive exchanges, according to the expectations of the teachers, relate to the academic environment of learning communities, informal learning, constructivist structures, self-motivated learning. The words of the teachers is characteristic:

*I like to "exchange experiences and practices with other teachers"*

*"I wanted to meet educators from other countries, come to contact with them, see how other European schools operate, compare and contrast their education systems and of course study"*

*"I knew from the start that our school should participate in such a project first because it was a great opportunity to get to know different education systems and methods"*

*"The learning experiences in this program made me confirm once again the value of continuous search for knowledge".*

A key issue stated or understood in all the responses is the contact with different cultures and civilizations. Moreover, this is the main purpose of the "Unesco Heritage" project and it is promoted and strengthened through the various activities and tasks in every learning activity. Specifically, the main goal of the project is to sensitize our students on the recognition and preservation of world cultural heritage. Our project aims to raise awareness of the tangible and intangible cultural heritage that unites us all, the need to learn from the past and build our future together in a single multicultural European context. As teachers, we wish to teach our students how to learn from the past and recognize the importance of its appreciation, conservation and maintenance. We are all part of a whole, we must cherish what unites us. The responses of the participants highlight all of the above:

*"Definitely the need for new experiences and the desire to learn more about the culture and heritages of other countries"*

*"I wanted to come to close contact with the culture of the countries involved"*

*"I would obtain deeper knowledge of our heritage and the heritages of the countries involved in the project. I was also attracted to the idea of teaching the students how to learn from the past".*



*"... See how other European schools operate, compare and contrast their education systems and of course study the culture and heritage of other countries".*

The teachers believe, moreover, that the acquaintance with the culture of other European peoples has affected their way of thinking, their behavior and their teaching strategies and approaches regarding the history and culture of other countries:

*"I can only think of positive influences. I was reminded of the singularity of each country which is portrayed in their culture and heritage and I was motivated to acknowledge and appreciate it more. I also became more sensitive in matters concerning our own heritage ".*

*"I am saying this because I had thought that having classmates in our school from different countries would have made them more accustomed of and better prepared to socialize with foreign students. But they were still quite reserved, even a bit negative. It made me think that we are not working enough on making them more open to diversity and appreciate and respect the singularity of other cultures. I realized that teachers need to work harder on shaking off nationalistic prejudices and stereotypes ".*

This issue leads to a form of self-criticism and the disposition for self-blame but also the intrinsic need to be the role model for their students:

*"I also realized that it is the job of educators to help the students shape better attitudes towards different cultures. Participating in projects like this is certainly a good way to do that »,« however the first thing that comes to my mind is the concern that we are not, or had not been, doing enough to make our students more open minded and receptive to different cultures ".*

When discussing changes in attitudes, emotions and beliefs, educators mention their own tolerance and receptiveness as well as their efforts *"to make students open minded, tolerant and receptive to different cultures"*, and elsewhere:

*"By becoming actively involved I became more communicative and extrovert.", "I developed confidence". " I became more extrovert".*

When discussing most appreciated moments, teachers report that they were made happier persons, happy and excited during leisure time: *"I found myself chatting with colleagues from six different countries", "I appreciated the chance to broaden my horizons and further develop my critical thinking ".*

Professional benefits are sufficiently recognized:

*"There was diversity in cognitive and socio-cultural approach to the same theme (heritage) of the partners, which strengthened my personal searches in order to become more efficient in my work.*



*I appreciated the site visits and the multinational collaborative activities "*

Two teachers also stress the value of art in search of knowledge.

*«I strongly believe that involving art, in all its forms (singing, dancing, painting), in the learning process leads to experiential learning and to more effective learning acquisition. Learning opportunities become certainly more pleasant and substantially more constructive ».*

Regarding the development of new skills and knowledge the participants' responses move around three axes: the first relates to improving the use of English as a working language

*"I would say communication skills, English language skills, It strengthened my linguistic ability in English, Although I do not know the English language well, I was motivated to try and achieve effective communication with colleagues from other countries which gave me confidence and great pleasure , I used the European language in real working conditions "*

The second has to do with the development of communication skills, acquaintance with others: *"ability to make new friends, effective communication with colleagues from other countries", "I felt that all people in the world can communicate"*

The third axis is related to knowledge of cultural monuments of the participating countries: *"growing appreciation of the cultural heritage of every people", "I also became more informed about other cultures and heritages and even improved my knowledge about our own heritage since I found myself restudying it "*

Talking about difficulties, unpleasant or unwanted aspects the views expressed focus on the excessive and often daunting workload required by all participants from the initial application to implementation and final reporting. Teachers interviewed described it *"very demanding in terms of the deliverables"* referring to *"bureaucracy and paperwork"* and to the lack of *"flexibility in budget management"*. It was also deemed discouraging that *"the work and efforts of the management team in not recognized and sometimes not appreciated"*. Finally, according to a teacher, there is always *"insecurities of the parents regarding their children's stay in a foreign family"*, which need *"good will and adequate information"*.

When discussing the possible changes or regrets concerning the project, all participants declared their positive attitude towards the program: *"It has been a wonderful experience", "The program is going smoothly and it is very interesting"*. Both their statements and the expression on their faces are very telling of their obvious satisfaction. However, in order to better reach the program's objectives, the participants report their thoughts on some improvements: *" I would change the bureaucracy, the formalism, the rigidity of the budget management. Also, I would change the tone of the questionnaires making them simpler and clearer", "to better prepare students who will be traveling or hosted to know*



*what the needs of the program are and how they should behave as guests. Please note of course that I accompanied the first mobility".* This formulation relates to the finding that students participating in mobilities must, from the beginning, have a clear picture of the project's objectives and of the appropriate contact expected of them during mobilities. This concern arose from the inordinate reserve the students participating in first mobility showed both while participating in the learning activities and when socializing other students and their hosts. It was acknowledged however that this led to better preparation of the students participating in the next mobilities. Again reference was made to *"the bureaucracy and budget management issues"*, and the questions of the questionnaires that needed simplification to attract participants

The question that was answered with greater zest by the participants is the one related to the definition of the concept and practice of innovation. Common signs of definitions involve *"experiential learning with new and innovative ideas in an atmosphere of love, joy"*, *"and the combination of past experiences and visions of the future"*, *"acquisition of knowledge, original teaching, original ideas, attractive tasks and activity "*. How easy can this be and who ultimately guarantees its success? The conditions and limitations in the promotion of innovation that the teachers mention are very important for its success. These restrictions are related to possible deficiencies of the educator and inability to implement innovative methods:

*"I must highlight the need for proper training, research and investigation on the part of the teacher before attempting to implement innovative methods in teaching because without deep knowledge and understanding of the methods that he / she follows, one can make mistakes, students may become discouraged and such a negative experience may become a bad precedent that will lead back to outdated traditional methods. Innovation needs to be initiated by a daring teacher who is constantly seeking knowledge and is critical and selective of the methodologies available. The Direction of the school can and must provide support and encouragement. It takes perseverance and support to pursue the vision of innovation "*.

*"Innovation involves lifelong learning, disposition in finding ways to improve your performance as an educator, overcoming your fears and possible stereotypes and then test innovative methods in the classroom"*

The introduction of optional courses that will lead to consolidation of the common European identity was found to be a good idea:

*"It would be a very good idea" as "It is important to create a common conscience and common understanding that all European citizens belong to the same community and share the same common history within the broader European civilization"*.

There is recognition of the need to identify the features of our common European identity, promote collectivity, respect for diversity, solidarity, justice, forming a European "we" .We have common features and common attitudes.



A common optional course could *«combat stereotypes and misconceptions and replace them with a cultural blending while preserving national identity»*. In such a situation common features, common attitudes, and common history could emerge .

It was quite interesting to follow the stream of thought of a teacher who expressed reserve about the common European identity by questioning the current face of Europe that needs to reestablish compassion, solidarity, and respect for people, especially in humanitarian crises like the current refugee situation from Syria:

*“There seems to be no solidarity to people with problems. Like the refugees from Syria. Europe needs to recover its humanity and solidarity, it needs to truly respect people not simply tolerate diversity”*. The *“imposition of neoliberalism on the economy and ongoing supervision»* was found to be an important barrier.

But the bottom line is that there is a need for systematic teaching of European History (not just the French Revolution) with a new methodology approach. *“Students must seek and find knowledge (exploratory learning) through creative activities, teamwork with the teacher in the role of mentor / facilitator. The in-situ visits, tours, visits, travelling to other countries may prove crucial ”*.

Continuing with teaching methodology, Erasmus+ projects implemented at schools were found to give the students an opportunity to work together and interact in a multicultural context. Working in the context of a European project, helps students *“develop the principles of cooperation and intercultural understanding, improve their cognitive skills and generally have multiple benefits for the formation of their personality. By promoting learning through these programmes, we lay the foundations for shaping the profile of tomorrow's citizens of Europe ”*, *“I am convinced that learning is effectively promoted through these programmes. Students are not trapped in the narrow context of the classroom, they receive knowledge, enhance their experiences, develop competences, acquire social behavior skills, and broaden their horizons ”*.

One of the teachers expressed her objection to the feasibility of engaging the entire school in these innovative teaching approaches: *“My reserve is only that in my opinion promoting learning at school through such programs cannot possibly involve the whole school”* and she is concerned that *“Only as an indirect beneficiary could the school as a whole benefit and I am not certain whether this would be sufficient”*, however a way around that was mentioned: *“the teacher directly involved can disseminate the benefits of the program to his other students”*, *“the teacher benefiting as a person, all his/her students benefit from his/her renewed teaching”*.

When asked about the vulnerabilities of the Greek education system, there is reference to : *“bureaucracy and paperwork”*, *“many teaching subjects”*, *“extracurricular activities”*, *“the students need to keep up with their private lesson and they have hardly any free time ”*. All this loaded timetable discourages students from working on projects that include activities in the field, collaborative, informal learning.



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And the clear position of another teacher is indicative of the value of such a program contrasted to the vulnerabilities of the education system it is implemented within: *"A European programme needs to focus on the student and the teacher as humans and exhaust its means to project ideas and values that will shape integrated personalities. Anything that deviates from that should be restricted"*.

Upon concluding the interview, all participants responded enthusiastically to the question relating to the evaluation of experience derived from the project, considering it *"unique", "exciting", "unforgettable", "Magical", "Great"*

### **B. Students' interview**

The interview of the student focus group was a week after the interview with the teachers and revealed very interesting things about the programme and its implementation. To begin with, 6 out of 8 students mention that they had no concerns about the implementation of the objectives of the programme and declare that their first concern, desire / expectation was to make new friends: *"we just wanted to meet more people", we wanted to meet children of different ages from different countries", "make friends"*. However there was some concern about the hosting families that seems to have been managed effectively by the implementation team by talking to them and providing reassuring information. Simultaneously, the words of a student reveal their expectation for good organization of the project and the willingness of everyone to have a good time: *"My expectation was to be part of something well organized, visit many places, have a good time and be a good host"*.

The changes in the lives of students through the Project, according to their own statements, was only positive. We could view these changes in two main themes: improving their skill in the English language and the development of their personalities in the field of sociability and understanding of other cultures and of the other students participating in the program. The statements below are indicative:

*"I became more confident in my use of the English language and I believe I am now even more prepared to initiate conversation with foreigners", "Practicing my English language was very important and I also feel I have become more sociable with children of my age and older". "I also feel I have become more sociable with children of my age and older", "this project was very helpful for children who are not very outgoing and sociable. They grew more accustomed to socializing with strangers", "The experience has made me more sociable and more acquainted with the way of life of people close to my age from different countries"*.

Going back to the statements of the teachers on changes the project has brought into their lives (positive or negative influences), we find the convergence of the views of students and teachers on the development of sociality and improvement in the use of the foreign language.

Among the most appreciated actions, proposals and moments regarding their personal life as well as their professional orientation and development, the students mentioned *"teambuilding and fun", "Socializing with people of my age"*



*from different countries are the moments that I cherish the most". We therefore return to the issue of development of sociability and multicultural contact.*

Other elements that emerge in parallel are the interest in multicultural exchanges related to traditional cuisine ("*tasting their traditional food*"), the connection between "*history and culture of the country*", but also "*traditional dances workshop*". Their reference to arts reminds similar statements by the teachers. Finally, the Greek students focus on a topic that is very important to them, the promotion of the Minoan civilization, mostly of the palace of Knossos which they were happy to include in the activities. They emphasized their appreciation of their own reviewing of the monument: "*I had not visited Knossos Palace for a long time and being there again helped me recall its history and renew my appreciation of the Minoan civilization*".

Regarding capabilities, abilities and knowledge the students have developed and improved during their learning experiences in this project, the students focus on improving the use of the English language, something that has already been highlighted by the teachers combined with the development of sociability and exchange of cultural messages:

*"The first thing that comes to my mind is the ability to use English in real life conditions. I also think I became more sociable ", "first of all I improved my use of the English language while cooperating with other children or preparing the presentations. The real life use of the language was very helpful, since I believe that you learn more when you use the language in real conversations rather than in the classroom. I picked up some expressions and proverbs other people use that come from their traditions and culture. It was very interesting".*

In terms of cultural interaction, getting to know other cultures, always in the context of our common European culture, approaching students of European countries and recognizing their cultural differences ("*I discovered differences and similarities between our habits, our way of life and way of thinking "*) is at the center of their responses.

Students say they have not experienced particular difficulties except for the differences in the level of command of the use of English and the age difference, which was overtaken by the mutual desire to communicate and make new friends. Let us not forget that the desire to make new friends was a driving force for the project as was evidenced by their first words:

*"When I was hosting I was lucky to have a guest who spoke English very well and we would talk for hours". "Differences in fluency was indeed a problem but it was not unpleasant or difficult to overcome. We found a way to communicate and we helped each other. In the end I got very close with my host and we were very emotional when it was time to say goodbye ".*





Hosting other students caused some although solutions were easy to find:

*"As we were already familiar with one another and we had been communicating by e-mail all summer, we had a great time learning from each other. We even taught each other words from our languages. I am only sorry that it made us lose so much time in the beginning".*

The management of free time has been a challenge for the students of the project that made them become more responsible:

*"Coordinating our free time activities was also a challenge since there were so many different people with different needs and preferences. The age difference was also made more apparent during that time. It worked fine though with some effort".*

Talking about changes, in case of recurrence of the project Greek students would be very happy to repeat the experience (*"I would not change a thing", "I would definitely want to repeat the experience. Who would not? It was incredible. Children from 7 different countries coexisting, collaborating, having fun together! It was like a dream. It was magical"*).

Some reference is made to the awkwardness of the first moment of acquaintance of the multinational group and adding more group activities is suggested: *"I believe the mobilities should all start with team building activities that are fun and help you get to know each other", "I would add more team building, fun activities so that we are able to make the best of every single moment"*.

Innovation in education is perceived by the students as indirect teaching, as *"learning by experience", "transition from theory to practice", "a school project gives to students from different countries the priceless opportunity to work a subject with workshops and presentations and then come in physical contact with it"* and give two examples on the Phaistos Disc and the “Zorba” the well-known novel by the writer Nikos Kazantzakis:

*"The students were able to see the actual Phaistos Disk and then hear about it and then visit the place it was found. I believe that was innovation in practice. But I agree that it is not easy to do that with every subject"*.

*"My host for example had read the book "Zorba the Greek" by Nikos Kazantzakis before she came to Crete and when she was there she was able to see an exhibition about him and visit his grave"*.

On integrating an optional course about the consolidation of the European identity alongside national identity, all students show a positive attitude considering it quite useful for our time:



*"Yes I believe such a course would be very useful. Even necessary, because we Greeks need to enhance our European Identity. I believe that the students and teachers who have participated in European projects are well prepared and ready for it ",*

*"After the experience of a successful European project, I believe that a course that emphasizes European Identity would be very useful for the students of a whole school ".*

These statements clearly show the change in students' perceptions and their approaching a more Eurocentric vision of their own conduct. They believe, moreover, that their personal development will help, improve their self-image: *"I do believe such a course would be very useful to students of my age because it is about self-development and self-image and this is important to teenagers ".*

They point out that the circle of European courses should be optional in some degree and that sometimes we have little desire to learn about others: *"We lack the innate tendency to learn about other people and their culture".* They add, however, a prerequisite in order for students to benefit from a perspective European course: *"It requires maturity and attentiveness", "We keep talking about the maturity of the students and that some might lack the seriousness and predisposition".* The final aim is to create incentives for active involvement and acceptance of European identity: *"on the other hand would not such a course motivate students and involve more people in appreciating their European identity? And is not it an opportunity to develop that disposition ".*

On the debate whether the innovative methods of teaching-learning activities used in the program could provide teaching practices useable in everyday experience, the students say:

*"On the other hand would not such a course motivate students and involve more people in appreciating their European identity? And is it not an opportunity to develop that disposition".*

They consider this way of learning, efficient and pleasant: *"There were of course things we had to research in order to prepare a presentation, but that too had a purpose. I like learning like that. It is how it should always be", "students would learn easier, and faster ", " you can never get tired of ", " It is not only knowledge, it is character building and skills acquisition which are very important for (our) future ".*

We could debate on how well versed our students are towards the innovative approaches of the European program Erasmus + and how far all this is from the daily life of Greek schools. The weakness, deficiency of the teachers themselves in supporting modern teaching methods that are beyond the direct instruction, was debated at the teachers' interview as well. Additionally, the economic difficulties the country is facing, the focus of the educational process in consecutive assessment procedures and ranking contests, weakens innovation in education:



*"Than the economic difficulties our country is facing, I get the feeling that we also lack gravity in developing effective and long lasting educational policies", Our education system is exam based and students (and parents) are accustomed to pursuing high grades from a very early stage. I think we are all aware of that and it is still the way things work "*

Concluding the section on the analysis of the responses of the students, we keep their enthusiastic declarations and characterizations of the project: *"Magical, unforgettable, unrepeatabe experience", "Unforgettable, unique experience", "Incredible, unrepeatabe and beautiful, perfect"*. Similar characterizations were also attributed to the project by the participating teachers.

### **Conclusions:**

The interview taken of the six teachers participating in the program, showed that all of them foster very positive feelings about the project and its impact which focuses on the cultivation of the English language, the development of communication skills, learning about the European heritage and culture. The common European culture, shaped with the contribution of Greek culture, emerges through educational activities in the form of projects that are implemented in groups (learning communities) in a learning environment that differs from direct instruction methodology. The learning climate is such that it leads to personal involvement and pursuit of knowledge and encourages learners to take responsibility of and manage their own learning. Technology helps in the search for and sharing of knowledge and serves as a learning tool.

All educators agree that the restriction of the bureaucracy of the program will give it greater flexibility and more appeal. On the other hand, the students show enthusiasm for new acquaintances, enhance their sociability, their communication skills with new friends. They seem attracted to this approach of knowledge acquisition (in groups, research, teaching in the field, etc.) and would have liked it to become a standard teaching-learning practice

A similar desire was expressed by the teachers of the programme provided that it is correctly implemented with the educator having mastered the relevant teaching approaches. Students refer to the culture of other European countries a lot .The most common declaration however has to do with meeting new friends. Teachers' most frequent reference is cultural interaction through knowledge and understanding of different cultures that leads to the understanding that all European countries have common cultural elements and themes that unite them in a common historical and cultural route. The recognition of common ancestral symbols, the protection and expansion of the European cultural identity, the bequeathing to future generations of a European cultural DNA are all realizable goals through the implementation of European programmes such as Erasmus +.