



Transformative Teacher Learning in Secondary Education: The Role of Erasmus+ in Shaping Future Practice

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Abstract

This paper explores how Erasmus+ mobility programmes contribute to teacher learning and future educational practice in secondary education. Drawing on mixed-method principles, the study investigates how international mobility experiences support professional development, pedagogical innovation, and intercultural understanding among teachers from Malta and Spain. The paper is based on findings collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews involving teachers who participated in Erasmus+ mobilities. Findings demonstrate that participation in Erasmus+ activities encouraged teachers to reflect critically on their classroom practice, strengthen collaboration with international colleagues, and experiment with more inclusive and student-centred teaching approaches. Participants also reported increased motivation, emotional awareness, communication skills, and confidence in responding to diverse classroom needs. However, workload pressures, limited resources, language barriers, and varying levels of institutional support influenced the sustainability of Erasmus+ outcomes within schools. The paper concludes that teacher learning extends beyond technical skill acquisition and includes changes in professional identity, reflective practice, emotional awareness, and intercultural competence. Internationally connected professional development opportunities therefore remain highly relevant in preparing educators for the challenges of contemporary education.

Keywords: Teacher training and learning, international training, pedagogical innovation, Erasmus+

1. Introduction

The Erasmus+ programme has become one of the most influential educational initiatives within the European Union, supporting collaboration, mobility, and professional learning across educational sectors. The growing complexity of contemporary classrooms has increased the importance of continuous teacher professional development.

Contemporary perspectives on teacher learning emphasise reflective practice, collaboration, emotional awareness, and intercultural understanding rather than simply the acquisition of technical teaching skills [1]. According to Darling-Hammond et al. [2], meaningful teacher development occurs when educators participate actively in collaborative and practice-based learning experiences connected directly to classroom realities.

International mobility experiences also contribute to the development of intercultural competence. Deardorff [3] defines intercultural competence as the ability to communicate effectively across cultural contexts through openness, adaptability, and respect.

This paper focuses on the experiences of secondary school teachers from Malta and Spain who participated in Erasmus+ mobility programmes.

2. Literature Review

Teacher professional development has become a major focus within educational policy and research due to changing classroom realities and increasing expectations placed upon educators. Effective professional learning supports teachers in strengthening pedagogical skills, improving classroom management, and responding more effectively to students' academic and emotional needs. Continuous learning is therefore viewed as essential for educators who wish to remain adaptable and responsive within contemporary educational environments.

Darling-Hammond et al. [2] explain that professional development is most effective when it is collaborative, reflective, sustained over time, and connected directly to classroom practice. Teachers benefit most from opportunities that encourage active participation and practical engagement rather than passive forms of training. Erasmus+ mobility programmes attempt to create these conditions by exposing teachers to different educational settings and encouraging international collaboration.

The Erasmus+ programme supports educational mobility across Europe through training courses, workshops, teaching assignments, and job-shadowing opportunities. Research indicates that participation in Erasmus+ programmes contributes positively to teacher confidence, motivation, and willingness to adopt innovative teaching strategies [3]. Teachers frequently report renewed enthusiasm for teaching and stronger openness toward collaborative and student-centred methodologies after participating in international mobility experiences.

Reflective practice is another important element associated with Erasmus+ participation. Schön [5] argues that professionals improve their effectiveness through reflection on their experiences and actions [4]. Erasmus+ experiences encourage teachers to compare educational systems, question assumptions, and critically evaluate their classroom approaches. Such reflection often leads to pedagogical experimentation, professional growth, and greater awareness of students' learning needs. Intercultural competence also represents a major outcome associated with international mobility. Dearnorff [3] defines intercultural competence as the ability to communicate effectively across cultural contexts through openness, adaptability, and respect. Through interaction with colleagues from different countries, teachers develop stronger communication skills, empathy, and cultural awareness. These competencies are increasingly important within multicultural classrooms across Europe.

Existing studies further suggest that Erasmus+ participation contributes to emotional and interpersonal development. Teachers frequently report becoming more open-minded, reflective, and aware of the emotional dimensions of teaching following international mobility experiences. Exposure to different educational contexts encourages educators to become more sensitive to inclusion, wellbeing, and diversity within their own classrooms.

Another important aspect linked to Erasmus+ participation is professional collaboration. Mobility experiences provide opportunities for teachers to exchange ideas, resources, and teaching strategies with international colleagues. Such collaboration often continues after mobility programmes end through online communication and educational partnerships. These professional relationships support ongoing learning and encourage teachers to remain engaged in professional development activities [6].

Despite these benefits, several challenges continue to affect Erasmus+ participation. Existing research highlights workload pressures, administrative demands, language barriers, and insufficient institutional support as factors that may reduce the long-term sustainability of mobility outcomes [7]. Teachers may struggle to implement innovative practices when schools lack resources or when professional responsibilities limit opportunities for experimentation.

The comparative dimension of Erasmus+ participation is particularly significant when exploring educational contexts such as Malta and Spain. Educational systems differ in organisational structure, policy implementation, school culture, and levels of institutional support. These contextual factors may influence how teachers perceive mobility experiences and apply newly acquired knowledge within their classrooms.

Overall, the literature demonstrates that Erasmus+ programmes can contribute positively to professional development, reflective practice, intercultural competence, and pedagogical innovation. However, the long-term impact of mobility experiences depends significantly on institutional conditions and support structures within schools.

Building on the theoretical perspectives discussed in the literature, the study is guided by the following research questions:

The study is structurally guided by the following two central research questions:

1. **Research Question 1 (RQ1):** *How do secondary school teachers from Malta and Spain perceive the effectiveness of Erasmus+ as a contributor to their professional development?*
2. **Research Question 2 (RQ2):** *What factors facilitate or hinder the contribution of Erasmus+ mobilities to teacher learning experiences?*

3. Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach to investigate how Erasmus+ mobility programmes contribute to teacher learning experiences among secondary school educators in Malta and Spain. Mixed-methods research combines quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a broader and more comprehensive understanding of educational experiences.

Note on Data Source: The empirical data, frameworks, and findings presented in this paper were originally compiled, analysed, and presented as part of a broader master's thesis project exploring international teacher mobilities at the University of Malta (Barbara, 2026) [4].

Quantitative data was collected through online questionnaires distributed to teachers who had participated in Erasmus+ mobilities. The questionnaire included Likert-scale items and open-ended

questions related to professional development, pedagogical innovation, intercultural competence, emotional awareness, and institutional support. The online format allowed participants from both Malta and Spain to respond flexibly and anonymously.

Qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted with selected participants from both countries. The interviews explored teachers' reflections on mobility participation, classroom practice, collaboration, emotional development, and professional growth. Participants were encouraged to discuss both the positive and challenging aspects of their Erasmus+ experiences.

The comparative framework adopted in the study allowed similarities and differences between Maltese and Spanish teachers' experiences to be identified. Thematic analysis was used to analyse qualitative data, while descriptive statistics supported the interpretation of questionnaire responses. Combining both forms of data enabled the study to examine broader trends while also exploring individual experiences in greater depth. Ethical procedures were maintained throughout the research process. Participation was voluntary, confidentiality was protected, and informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection began.

4. Findings and Discussion

The findings revealed that Erasmus+ mobility programmes contributed positively to teachers' professional and personal development. Participants from both Malta and Spain described mobility experiences as valuable opportunities for reflection, collaboration, intercultural learning, and pedagogical innovation.

4.1 Professional Growth and Pedagogical Innovation (Addressing RQ1)

One of the strongest themes emerging from the data related to professional growth. Teachers explained that Erasmus+ experiences exposed them to alternative teaching methodologies and encouraged them to reconsider their classroom practices. In line with Darling-Hammond et al.'s definition of meaningful development, participants reported introducing more collaborative, student-centred, and inclusive approaches after returning from mobility experiences, linking training directly to classroom realities.

Exposure to different educational systems also increased teachers' confidence in experimenting with innovative teaching strategies. Many participants described Erasmus+ experiences as professionally motivating, noting that mobility activities renewed their enthusiasm for teaching and encouraged greater engagement in continuous professional development. Several participants referred to Erasmus+ participation as transformative because it allowed them to step outside routine educational environments and observe alternative approaches to learning, classroom management, and assessment.

Teachers also highlighted how mobility experiences encouraged greater creativity within the classroom. Exposure to digital learning tools, collaborative projects, and innovative methodologies inspired educators to adapt their teaching strategies according to students' interests and learning needs. Some participants explained that they became more willing to experiment with active learning approaches after participating in international training activities. This active experimentation reflects the core tenets of reflective practice outlined by Schön, where professional growth is catalysed by critically evaluating actions and trying new strategies.

4.2 Intercultural Learning and Emotional Awareness (Addressing RQ1)

Intercultural learning emerged as another major outcome associated with Erasmus+ participation. Teachers reported increased awareness of cultural diversity and stronger communication skills following interaction with colleagues from different countries. This growth aligns directly with Deardorff's framework of intercultural competence, which values the development of openness, adaptability, and respect across cultural contexts. Participants explained that intercultural experiences improved empathy, openness, and sensitivity toward students from diverse backgrounds.

Teachers also described becoming more adaptable and reflective within multicultural classroom settings. Exposure to different educational cultures encouraged participants to reconsider assumptions about teaching and learning while becoming more aware of alternative educational perspectives.

Another recurring theme involved emotional awareness and wellbeing. Several participants explained that Erasmus+ experiences encouraged greater reflection on the emotional dimensions of teaching. Teachers reported stronger awareness of student wellbeing, classroom relationships, and the importance of creating supportive learning environments. Some participants described becoming more

patient and emotionally responsive following mobility experiences. Furthermore, interacting with international colleagues and successfully participating in collaborative activities strengthened their sense of professional identity and belonging within a wider European educational community.

4.3 Professional Collaboration and Networking (Addressing RQ1 & RQ2)

Professional collaboration and networking represented additional important outcomes that act as both a product of growth (RQ1) and a facilitating factor for long-term sustainability (RQ2). Teachers valued opportunities to exchange ideas, resources, and teaching strategies with international colleagues. Many participants continued communication with educators they met during mobility activities through online collaboration and educational partnerships.

These professional relationships contributed to ongoing learning beyond the duration of the mobility itself. Teachers explained that collaboration with international colleagues encouraged them to remain engaged in reflective practice and continuous professional development.

However, the comparative dimension of the study also revealed that the success of this collaboration was heavily conditional on context. Teachers working within supportive school environments were far more likely to share mobility experiences with colleagues and implement innovative practices collaboratively, identifying school culture as a primary facilitating factor.

4.4 Challenges and Barriers: Factors Hindering Outcomes (Addressing RQ2)

Despite the positive outcomes associated with Erasmus+ participation, participants identified several structural barriers limiting the long-term impact and sustainability of mobility experiences. Workload pressures and administrative demands represented some of the most common challenges. Teachers often struggled to balance mobility participation and the implementation of new ideas with existing professional responsibilities.

Institutional support significantly influenced how teachers experienced Erasmus+ outcomes. Participants who received encouragement from school leadership were generally more successful in applying innovative practices after mobility participation. In contrast, teachers who experienced limited support reported greater difficulty integrating new methodologies into their schools. This directly confirms the literature warning that missing institutional support structures diminish the long-term viability of international training.

Resource limitations also hindered the execution of mobility outcomes in some schools. Participants explained that insufficient technological infrastructure and limited financial support restricted opportunities to sustain projects inspired by Erasmus+ participation.

Language barriers were also identified as challenges by some teachers, particularly during collaborative activities conducted in English or other foreign languages. Although many participants viewed these experiences as opportunities for improvement, some initially experienced difficulties participating confidently in discussions and collaborative tasks.

Ultimately, while Erasmus+ mobility programmes contribute positively to teacher development, reflective practice, intercultural competence, emotional awareness, and pedagogical innovation, the sustainability of these benefits depends significantly on fixing these institutional barriers within schools.

5. A Proactive Look at the Future

This paper examined how Erasmus+ mobility programmes contribute to the professional learning experiences of secondary school teachers in Malta and Spain. The findings demonstrate that international mobility supports professional growth, reflective practice, intercultural competence, emotional awareness, and pedagogical innovation. Teachers participating in Erasmus+ programmes reported increased motivation, stronger collaboration with international colleagues, and greater openness toward innovative and inclusive teaching approaches. Mobility experiences also contributed to communication skills, confidence, and reflective professional practice.

At the same time, the study highlighted several barriers affecting the sustainability of Erasmus+ outcomes, including workload pressures, limited institutional support, resource constraints, and language difficulties. These findings suggest that the effectiveness of mobility programmes depends not only on participation itself but also on the broader educational environment within schools.

As a conclusion, this study underscores that shaping the future of educational practice requires moving away from stagnant training models. Internationally connected professional development opportunities offer a transformative roadmap for the future, equipping educators with the dynamic intercultural and

emotional competencies needed to navigate the unpredictable landscape of tomorrow's classrooms. To realize a more informed future, stronger institutional support, deliberate structural resources, and continued international collaboration must be prioritized to solidify the long-term impact of Erasmus+ mobility experiences within secondary schools.

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