

Early Change Project: Promoting the professional development of early childhood educators

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Final internal evaluation report of the project

The Final Evaluation Report of the project “Early Change” was based on the proposal submitted to EACEA (Detailed Description of the Project) and contains the evaluation of the Training phase II of the project and an overview of the project’s application, effectiveness and value. Additionally, the impact and perspectives of the project for sustainable development are included in the report.

For the Final Evaluation Report the data were collected from two sources: a) all the participating partners of the project provided their comments about the implementation of the activities (Training phase II) and the effectiveness of the project, based on their actual participation and supervision of the activities throughout the project’s lifecycle, and b) randomly selected early educators who participated in the training phases were interviewed and commented about the impact of the project on their professional development as practitioners, which was one of the main goals of the project. More specifically:

- a) The partners of the project commented about the project goal’s completion, the impact on the educators’ professional development, the general effectiveness and value of the project, and the sustainability of the project’s outcomes beyond its lifecycle. Their comments were examined and the conclusions are presented in details in the current evaluation report.

b) Twenty-four early educators out of 122 were randomly selected and interviewed. A semi-structured format was adopted providing depth through question probes. The semi-structured interview achieves depth by providing the opportunity on the part of the interviewer to probe and expand the respondent's responses (Grammatikopoulos, Hassandra, Koustelios, & Theodorakis, 2005). Each interview was recorded and then transcribed verbatim and was analyzed with qualitative thematic context analysis (Silverman, 2001; Gregoriadis, Grammatikopoulos, & Zachopoulou, 2013).

The staff responsible for the analysis of the collected data were the evaluation expert (Assistant Professor in Educational Evaluation) of the project staff in P3 (University of Crete), and an external expert (Professor in Educational Research & Evaluation). It was their decision to develop the final evaluation based on a SWOT method design instead of adopting a more conventional technical report structure. The SWOT method is a powerful tool in revealing an overall view of a procedure/project under evaluation. By evaluating the internal and external environment, the SWOT method not only provides an assessment of the project goals' attainment but also reports about its worth and merit, the project's sustainability, and further opportunities. The design of the method was based on the analysis of the internal (Strengths & Weakness) and external environment (Opportunities & Threats).

SWOT analysis for the evaluation of the project

Strengths of the project

One of the stronger parts of the project was the on time completion of its tasks. Everything (work-packages, deliverables, training phases, meetings etc.) was delivered as it was scheduled. Trivial deviations did occur, yet the overall impression was that of a smooth and efficient execution of the program plan. All the participants in the project reported that everything was delivered on time and effectively. This conclusion is further supported by the fact that the project coordinator provided all the activities and deliverables of the project on time. The effective management of the project can also be confirmed by the fact that all planned activities were successfully delivered with reduced expenses (financial part of the final confidential report). Evidence for the successful management of the project was also revealed by the fact that the overall coordination of nineteen (19) partners in a short period (the project duration was only 30 months) was carried out without any deviations in project's results, work-packages implementation, or deliverables.

The most important aspect of "program evaluation" is the effective implementation (Chen, 2005). If implementation fails then the whole program fails, thus the first step towards a successfully delivered project is based on the successful implementation of its activities. Of course successful implementation per se cannot ensure the project's efficiency. Nevertheless, when all scheduled activities of a project are delivered effectively on time there is a strong indication of a successful project.

A second step towards the evaluation of a project is the control of its goals' achievement. The first basic aim of the project was the enhancement of the professional development of the early educators involved in the project. In the middle evaluation report, the impact of the training

phase I in the professional development of the participated early educators (Report of the Middle Evaluation in the website of the project) has already been highlighted.

The analysis of the interviews of the early educators revealed an enthusiastic disposition/attitude about the gains of their participation in the project. They reported that the training phases I & II broadened the perspectives of their every daily practice and provided them with a more in depth knowledge about their practices by developing their self-assessment skills. They reported that the evaluation skills that they have acquired as trained assessors enhanced their self-confidence and efficacy. Moreover, the use of the web platform, and the website used during the training enhanced their e-literacy skills and provided them with opportunities to interact with their colleagues of different countries. Some examples of the early educators' responses are presented in the following lines.

"The experience of the training phase II was unique. It was very important to have the opportunity to observe different classrooms and to know exactly where to pay attention. The training in using the Environmental Scales opened new ways of approaching our profession. Definitely, I feel more confident in my classroom now."

"I enjoyed very much the times we interacted with other colleagues via the web platform. It was interesting to discuss and exchange practices, common concerns, teaching styles. It was one of the most interesting activities of the project. I wish I could do this more often with colleagues not only from the partner countries, but also from every European country."

"I believe that by involving in the project's activities, I developed new skills of how I see now my classroom. By getting trained in using the Environmental Scales provided me with a lot of useful details about the early childhood education environment. Now, I know exactly what I have to do in order to correspond better to my students' needs in a variety of activities."

"It was a unique opportunity for me to participate. The benefits were multiple: the opportunity to interact with other colleagues via the web platform, the valuable knowledge I got during the training phases, the support of the university and administrative staff of the municipality... There were all very well organized and implemented."

"I didn't expect my participation to have such an impact on my skills, or the way of how I see the things in the classroom. I thought that was just another international project with some exchange and interaction opportunities as usual. Well, the facts changed totally my mind. I gained a lot of valuable things and developed a variety of skills. I feel more confident now in evaluating the environment of an early childhood classroom, I am more confident in my classroom because I feel that I now know exactly the aspects of the schedule where I have to put more effort. In general, I feel I became a better educator after the project."

In conclusion, it has to be pointed out that there was a strong commitment among the staff members, which led to the successful fulfillment of the project's goals. Examples of this commitment can be seen for example in occasions (in Greece & Cyprus) where the rapidly changing financial laws and bureaucracy made unable for some staff costs to be paid. The project staff of these members agreed to keep on participating and concluding their tasks without taking the specific staff costs. A similar situation also happened in Portugal, where the partner P07 (Polytechnic of Porto) could not use the equipment costs. Despite the financial situation, the partner's staff members decided to get by own means and resources the equipment for the project.

The universities, educational district, and municipalities' partners confirmed the above mentioned conclusions. They reported that the project's goals were met without deviations and that the project's strongest part was that of achieving its goals faultlessly. The municipality and educational district partners indicated how eager the educators were in participating in more projects like the current one, and in further developing the acquired skills. The academic staff from each country that was supervising the educators' participation in the project described the benefits of the educators' involvement in ICTs' based procedures for training and communication. They also stressed the usefulness of the good practices that were reported and how valuable will be the e-book containing all these "good practices" from six European countries. The educators would be able to share all these staff and exchange knowledge and practices across different educational settings. Finally, the comparison of the early childhood environment quality among the six participating countries revealed very interesting results (they were presented in the LINQ/EIF conference in Crete, in May 2014). Such comparisons could provide a fertile ground for the commencement of a discussion about the adequate level of the early childhood education quality across Europe (Grammatikopoulos et al., 2014). The most interesting result of this comparison study was that all participating countries' early education exceeded in classroom

interactions (student-teacher relationships). This is very important for the European early childhood education quality, as student-teacher interactions are considered a critical mechanism through which children develop (Pianta et al., 2007), and they have been positively related with children's academic gains (Curby, Rimm-Kaufman, & Ponitz, 2009). For more details regarding the comparison study, please see in Grammatikopoulos et al (2014).

The sustainable development of the project's outcomes was also a topic in the partners' reports. They indicated the multiple possibilities the project's outcomes offer for integrating them in various settings. For example, the training material that was produced during the project's lifecycle can be easily adopted and further used by any partner in order to involve more educators. Additional sustainability was supported by the development of a Training Video, specifically for the training in the environmental scales that was distributed to the partners. This Training Video enhances the training seminar by providing the trainers with additional material to face effectively specific practical limitations like the lack of time for site visits during the trainings or the control of interrater reliability. All the materials produced are available in many different languages (English, Greek, Portuguese, Danish, Romanian, & Finnish) and can be used, not only by the participating countries but also from every interested stakeholder. Moreover, the dissemination activities of the project, in which extended attention was given, helped in increasing the impact of the project. In Greece for example, the board of the biggest union of preschool pedagogues (PASYVN, with over 5000 members) approached after the project's participation in their conference where several project's aspects were presented, the coordinator and asked for a cooperation in providing opportunities for professional development to their members. Also in Denmark and Finland, the municipality partners P19 (Guldborgsund), P11 (Jyvaskyla), P12 (Kajaani) continue to expand the project's activities by involving more educators after the project duration. So far, there are also more contacts with several stakeholders in all country partners that are very interested in exploiting the project's notion of this alternative approach for the professional development of

early educators. Conclusively, the dissemination activities of the project showed and are expected to keep showing new ways of expanding the impact of the project beyond its lifecycle. All the partners are committed to this perspective and thus, it can be argued that the sustainability opportunities are very positive.

Weaknesses of the project

The educators indicated that one of the weaknesses of the project was the heavy workload. They reported that they felt that the provided time period for the completion of the tasks was sometimes not enough. Some examples of their claims are presented in the following lines:

“I faced sometimes pressuring deadlines. I didn’t overlook anything or miss a deadline, but I feel I could have enjoyed it better if we had more time”

“The training phase II was very demanding. I was sometimes stressed by the deadlines. I think we needed more time...”

The country partners also pointed out that maybe the project’s duration would be ideal if it was 36 months instead of 30. Thus, in future submissions it has to be taken into consideration that a more adequate and extended time planning is necessary.

Another weakness of the project was the early educators’ lack of time in participating in extended professional development activities. For example, it would be ideal if the project could plan a five-day initial training with reliability tests and more site visits, and more sites to evaluate after the training phase I. The early educators could not leave many days from their jobs and thus this rigorous methodological plan could not be fully implemented in our situation. The project attempted to overcome this problem through the use of ICTs (website, web platform, videos etc.), but the point is that having more time spent on training phases could support even better the educators’ professional development. This problem was partially resolved for future attempts by the production of the Training Video, which can be used reducing the reliability test time and replacing some site visits.

Finally, it was also reported that some countries (Greece, Cyprus, Portugal) faced several problems in consuming the available budget they have in their disposal. These deviations happened due to rapidly changing financial and administration laws that are attributed to the critical financial crisis that these countries have. For example in Greece, the partner P04 (Educational district of east Thessaloniki) due to a law cannot receive any more staff costs. Thus, the Educational district of east Thessaloniki as a partner of the project is not allowed to receive staff costs for the educators who are under its authority and participated to the project.

In the Progress Report evaluation it was indicated that there was no provision of the Minutes of the meetings, something that could affect the efficient management of the project. This happened because meetings' minutes were not included as deliverables in the submitted application. That per se does not mean that during the meetings the important and valuable information about the topics of the meetings' agenda were not kept. All partners after the meetings were informed in details about their future tasks and obligations and how they will achieve them. Strong evidence about this was the smooth execution of all work-packages, the perfect coordination of the tasks among the nineteen partners of the project, and the successful implementation of the work-packages and provision of the deliverables.

Opportunities of the project

A major outcome of the project – and an important future opportunity – was that it introduces a proposal for a common approach to early educators' professional development in a European level, despite the differences in each country's educational system. The adoption of universally accepted and worldwide used instruments and practices, and a common conception of the early childhood education quality could serve as fertile ground where the seed of a unified/common approach to professional development could grow.

Another opportunity was the provision to various stakeholders (ministries, educational districts, municipality's managers etc.) of a training package that can be easily adopted and

implemented in their training activities for their educational personnel. The educational material has been developed and provided in many European languages (English, Portuguese, Romanian, Finnish, Danish, & Greek), and the partners of the project are equipped with the adequate expertise. The partners are also committed to provide constant help in their countries to any stakeholder who might desire to be involved. Moreover, another very important group of stakeholders, namely the educators can benefit by their self-evaluation skills development or/and enhancement. These educators can also serve as assessors of early childhood education quality in their educational district or municipality.

The development of this common approach to early educators' professional development facilitates the cross-national cooperation across European countries, educational systems in the demanding and vital settings of early childhood education. Based on the developed material and ICTs of the project it is very easy to engage more countries and educators in the proposed training activities.

Threats of the project

One of the major threats is the lack of the adequate financial support in a country level for continuing cooperation among European countries towards the proposed approach in early educators' professional development. Public education in southern Europe has been suffering severe cuts during the financial crisis (Greece, Cyprus, Portugal). Many educational authorities shift or even postpone a lot of their activities in order to deal with limited financial sources. The professional development of educators seems to be the least of their problems now. Thus, it is difficult to find any other financial support – except from the European Committee – in many countries across Europe, especially these that suffered the most by the financial crisis.

Another threat is the differentiation and fragmentation of the educational systems regarding early childhood education across Europe. Moreover, the frequently changing laws and

bureaucracy are major opponents of the adoption of innovations such as the project's proposed procedures. The overall SWOT analysis results are briefly presented in Table 1.

Table 1. SWOT method for the evaluation of the project "Early Change"

| Strengths | Weaknesses |
|--|---|
| Project's implementation | Busy schedule that some partners were hard to follow in time |
| Project & Financial management | Lack of time and financial support to implement more rigorous scientific and methodological procedure in training phases |
| Educators' and University partners' attitudes about the project impact Educators' involvement in ICTs | There were some problems in consuming budgeted expenses due to some confused laws applied in Cyprus, Portugal, and Greece |
| Sustainability opportunities | |
| Dissemination & Stakeholders' appreciation | |
| Opportunities | Threats |
| Innovative and common way to enhance the professional development of early educators in Europe | Additional financial support for continuing cooperation at a cross-national level for the integration of the proposed approach in early educators' professional development Financial crisis, especially in the southern European countries limits the funding of developing and adopting innovative procedures etc. |
| Stakeholders are provided with a training package that can be easily adopted in their scheduled training activities for their personnel Early educators' self-evaluation skills development & enhancement | Bureaucracy in several European countries hinders the adoption of innovations such as the proposed procedures |
| Development of cross-national cooperation across European countries It is realistic to engage more countries and educators in the proposed professional development procedures | |

Conclusions

As it is described in details in the current evaluation report, the overall estimation of the project's worth and merit is substantial. The "Early Change" project achieved its goals, by implementing successfully all of the scheduled work packages, delivering on time all of the reported deliverables, without exceeding the estimated budget (on the contrary, it spent less than initially expected). Nineteen partners from six European countries worked together for a period of 30 months and succeeded to achieve important goals. The successfully implemented project's activities were not the only strong part of this project. The cooperation among different European countries was also a substantial achievement. Thus, the synergies that have been developed throughout the project's lifecycle and the high level of commitment among the partners confirmed one more time the Gestalt's theory concept that the whole is more than the simple sum of its parts.

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