



Teaching Crossroads

12th IPB Erasmus week

Edited by

Elisabete Silva
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The Erasmus+ Project Experiential Education Competence (EXPEDUCOM)

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Abstract

The European Higher Education Area and the Erasmus Intensive Program, among others, enable the mobility of students and the development of interpersonal skills, such as working in diverse and intercultural teams, the ability to negotiate in different languages, decision-making, problem-solving and a pro-active attitude.

In this context, the Expeducom project, financed under Erasmus+ K2, has the main objective of developing and implementing innovative pedagogical practices related to experiential learning, aimed at children between the ages of 3 and 12.

This partnership allowed students from 7 different countries to work, learn and compare perspectives in a pedagogically diverse environment. The project contains four innovative aspects: citizenship, sustainable development, global warming, technologies and healthy lifestyle. Methodological support was provided to foster the development of this approach among trainers and future teachers. A handbook was also developed with guidelines on experiential teaching-learning, as well as with case studies of experiences developed with children. At the end of the project, a study was also performed to analyze the perspectives of the participating students on the impact of the project on their educational action. The data revealed that the Expeducom project had an impact on students' practices, as well as on the development of transversal competences.

Keywords: *experiential-based learning; preschool; primary school; Erasmus+*

Introduction

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are crucial partners in the implementation of the European Union's strategy in the promotion of economic growth and social development. Globalization, international mobility and demographic changes have unequivocally transformed the course of higher education internationally.

Nowadays, internationalization became a strategic goal of European HEI and almost all institutions and countries create offers for international students and reflect on their interaction with the global academic community.

Considering this, the Erasmus+ is an EU program in the fields of education, training, youth and sports for the period 2014-2020, which seeks to respond to these strategies, fundamental to address socio-economic changes.

The internationalization of the European higher education system contributes to the modernization and quality improvement of HEI, paving the way for the effectiveness of the Bologna Process. The Erasmus+ program includes several actions, involving students, teachers and staff. The Transnational Strategic Partnerships is one of these actions, targeting one or more areas of education, training and youth, and promoting innovation, experience and know-how exchange between the different types of organizations involved in these or other relevant areas.

It is recognized that young people studying or receiving training abroad under the Erasmus + program develop not only specific knowledge related to their field of study but also transversal skills necessary for their later studies, which are valued by the employers.

According to the Erasmus Impact Study: Effects of mobility on the skills and employability of students and the internationalization of higher education institutions (Brandenburg, Berghoff, & Taboadela, 2014), graduates with international experience are more successful in the labor market. The possibility of long-term unemployment is 50% lower than those who did not study or obtain training abroad and, five years after graduation, the unemployment rate is 23%. Also, according to the study, more than 90% of the students reported an improvement in their transversal competences, such as knowledge of other countries, their ability to interact and work with people of different cultures, adaptability, language proficiency and communication skills. In addition, 99% of HEIs observed a substantial improvement in the confidence and adaptability of their students.

In the area of teacher training, the openness to other forms of work, other strategies and other cultural, social or ethnic contexts, influence the participants' professional attitude and lifelong learning.

It is in this context that the Experiential Education Competence (EXPEDUCOM) project was designed, supported by the European Union under the Transnational Strategic Partnerships program. It focuses on the development and implementation of educational practices under the experiential based learning methodology, with children from three to twelve years old.

1. Characterization of the Expeducom Intensive Program

Experience-based learning describes a method of teaching by doing, namely it is the process during which young learners obtain knowledge and skills via personal experience. Individuals are involved in a particular activity which they reflect, analyze and that brings higher level of awareness and/or changes in their behavior. The modern world requires to educate young learners so that they are creative, flexible, and able to analyze and think critically. It is common sense that the most predominant tendency in education is to educate young learners this way, so that they can become independent and democratic citizens.

The EXPEDUCOM project was born from the need to meet the requirements of the modern world via the development and implementation of innovative educational practices related to experience-based pedagogical approach, addressed to young learners aged 3-12.

The project outcomes seek strengthening the professional profile of in-service educators as well as students (future teachers) by developing pedagogical guidelines on experiential education, open educational tools, real life cases, offering training for improvement of professional and communicative skills, improving curricula of pre- school, primary and teacher training institutions.

The project comprised four innovative aspects:

- (i) Experience-based learning has already been implemented in several contexts. However, new changes in the world and life are coming up soon and make it necessary to introduce new topics into curricula of young learners such as world citizenship, sustainable development, global warming, technologies, healthy lifestyle, among other relevant issues for human life. In this project, the experience is considered as the way to involve young learners in the intellectual work and problem solving that could be understood as relevant for their learning. Young learners are seen as researchers who take a reflexive attitude which involves reasoning and deliberating. This means that young learners are able to make questions and to find answers. For that they must be actively engaged in the selection of the material that can help them to think about the implications and the relationship between the material and the solution they are looking for.
- (ii) A relational and holistic approach for learning was also followed, considering that an interdisciplinary integration of the contents is essential, and also because young learners must be understood as a whole, with body, mind, emotions, creativity, history, and social identity. The development of a pedagogy based on experiential and holistic learning considers the young learners' rights and their participative competence. It requires listening, observing, negotiating acting to ensure participation.

- (iii) Large scale dissemination of project results, including parents, Erasmus students;
- (iv) A wide multicultural context.

1.1 Duration and main activities

The project duration was 2 years, beginning on September 1, 2014 and ending on August 31, 2016.

The project activities directly address: teachers, working in kindergarten (2-6) and primary schools (6-12); students of pre-school and primary education; teacher trainers, researchers at universities providing pre-school and/or primary education; parents or anyone interested in education of young learners aged 3-12.

The main project priority is revising and strengthening the professional profile of teachers already working at kindergartens and primary schools and future teachers.

The main activities include:

- (i) a research survey;
- (ii) providing a methodological support for project teachers and teacher trainers (lectures and workshops about experiential education);
- (iii) writing a handbook of pedagogical guidelines on experiential based learning for educators of young learners;
- (iv) Organizing an Intensive Program for students to design cases and test them working with young learners in a kindergarten and primary school.

1.2 Coordinator and partners

Partners were invited considering their competences and the contributions they could bring to the project. The coordinator was Kauno Kolegija/University of Applied Sciences [KK], Lithuania.

The consortium included nine institutions: three non-academic universities from Lithuania, the Netherlands, Latvia, four academic universities from Turkey, Greece, Portugal and Romania (all institutions provide teacher training for pre-school and primary education), a primary school (providing pre-primary and primary education) from Lithuania and a kindergarten (providing pre-school education) from Lithuania. All partners have associated partners' kindergartens and primary schools, functioning together with other educational institutions, social partners, non-profit or profit organization of informal education. Some partner universities have been cooperating in the Erasmus Program and have been working in the project's Intensive Program. Teachers from partner institutions had expertise which was taken into consideration while distributing responsibilities among the Work Packages e.g. Marnix Academie provided didactic support and organized training for teachers, Polytechnic Institute of Bragança hosted a preparatory meeting for students IP, schools and kindergartens disseminated the project results and provided feedback. Moreover, 12 teachers out of 18 had a PhD degree, which guarantees

high quality of research survey and intellectual outputs produced. Geographical variety also brings multicultural value. Eight partners out of nine have experience in international projects.

1.3 The Research Survey

The *International research report on experiential learning approaches* (Alat, Alat, Kamantauskiene, Massari, Miron, Mesquita, Tzakosta, Verheij, & Zirina, 2016), describe a research study, based on a research survey for collecting data, that aims to explore how teachers of young children provide education in their classrooms in the countries participating in the project, namely Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, Portugal, Romania, and Turkey. More specifically, attention was paid to reveal to what degree developmentally appropriate practices were implemented in kindergarten to primary programs.

In the study participated a total of 237 early childhood and primary school teachers from Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, Portugal, Romania, and Turkey. An expanded version of The Instructional Activities Scale with an addition of ten more questions that were developed based on NAEYC's recommendations for developmentally appropriate practices was administered to measure how often developmentally appropriate and inappropriate practices occur in classrooms. Participants were also asked questions about how often they addressed 21st century topics and skills (Alat et al., 2016).

Methodologically, a descriptive analysis of the data was made, showing that it is, reportedly, a common and regular practice for the teachers that participated in the study to offer developmentally appropriate activities including building with blocks, freedom to choose from a variety of learning areas, activities, and projects, experimenting with writing by drawing, copying, and using their own invented spelling, playing with games, puzzles, and construction materials, singing, listening and moving with the music, working with art materials, integration of subjects, inquisitive skills, social skills, plenty of materials to explore and work with, communicating what they have learned, creativity, dialogue among children, given plenty of time, individual interests. Children's work was displayed in the classrooms. Teachers did not have much hesitation on using alternative assessment techniques (Alat et al., 2016).

However, data also showed that some other important elements of developmentally appropriate practices were not as regularly included in teaching even though they are critical in the realization of the main goals of early education. A significant portion of the participants reported missing on those opportunities including hands-on math and science activities, structured gross motor activities, engagement with manipulatives, teaching about people with special needs and adapting materials for children with special needs, parent involvement, providing

experiences to instill care for each other, use of media and technology, and organizing field trips (Alat et al., 2016).

Even though the teachers in the study widely reported that they provided appropriate activities regularly from their answers to the questions about inappropriate practices, it seems that a significant group of teachers also delivered inappropriate activities. There was a significant number of teachers who relied on commercially prepared phonics books. Use of worksheets and flashcards, cut and paste activities, teacher directed whole-class activities, and ability grouping were common practices among the participants. Fortunately, inappropriate disciplinary strategies including separation of children from their friends or putting them in time-out in order to maintain classroom order seemed not to be practice by the majority of the teachers (Alat et al., 2016).

As far as promoting 21st century skills, it appears that teaching about sustainable development, environmental issues, critical thinking, language skills, human rights, care and empathy have become a widespread practice. Care and empathy received the most attention and seemed to be in the majorities' agenda. However, it is unfortunate that in today's ever globalizing world, bearing serious immigration crisis as societies become more and more diverse the participants failed on providing regular experiences to teach children about multiculturalism and intercultural skills. In this globalized economy, with electronic and social media becoming even more widespread and largely accessible, media literacy has become a key skill to be acquired for the generations of the new century. Participants' inattention to cultivating media literacy skills in their students has the potential to interfere with such other important subjects as care and empathy, human rights, and critical thinking.

The findings of this study prove that some major issues in teaching young children still persist in the new millennium. Despite decades of research providing a solid framework for effective pedagogies, there appears to be a broken link between theory and practice. Educational reform does not occur over night. It is essential that both practicing teachers and teacher candidates be given opportunities to gain experience in quality environments where developmentally appropriate practices are endorsed and realized. Teacher educators and administrators should design professional development trainings based on empirical evidence that describes in detail what makes a teacher training program work. Ongoing teacher training, effective mentorship, collaboration between the universities and schools, and easy access to resources could help teachers make the connections between the theory and practice (Alat et al., 2016).

1.4 The Handbook and the Case Studies

The handbook rose from the needs to meet the requirements of the modern world via developing and implementing innovative educational practices related to experience-based pedagogical approach educating young learners aged 3-12. It

constitutes an approach for investigating the theoretical and practical training strategies from the perspective of experiential education. The purpose of the handbook aims to provide theoretical and practical tools useful in early education specialists and primary education by developing practical strategies component, to support the development of educational activities and research to adapt permanently instructive approach to the specific demands of contemporary society. Due to changes at multiple curricular authors develop paradigms for training future teachers and introduce the need for activity planning, implementation and evaluation of training through experiential learning activities, thereby contributing directly to improving interactive teaching strategies. The handbook has three parts, A to C, as follows:

A. Explains the general framework on experiential based learning including the following sections: What is experiential learning? (Concept; Characteristics of experiential based learning; The principles of experiential orientation; Experiential based learning stages; Teacher roles; Children roles; Integration of experiential learning in teaching); Overview of conceptual foundations on the experiential based learning (Instructional models for the experiential learning theory; Dewey's foundations for the experiential based learning; Implications of Vygotsky's ideas on the learning process; Bruner's conceptual contribution to the experiential based learning; The Jean Piaget's perspective; Kolb's experiential learning theory); Citizenship and 21st century education (An overview of 21st century skills education; What kind of citizens are needed in the Netherlands in the 21st century?); Different approaches of experiential education (Reggio Emilia Approach; High Scope Approach; Movement of Modern School, Portugal).

B. Includes the International research report on experiential learning approaches

C. Shows examples of experiential based learning developed in different countries structured as case studies on experiential education in kindergarten and case studies on experiential education in primary school.

The handbook aims to provide the necessary and adequate information regarding experiential learning and teaching and is directed to parents, students and educators of preschool and primary school children. More specifically, the outcomes of the project directly address teachers working in kindergartens and primary schools; students of pre-school and primary education; teacher trainers, researchers at universities providing pre-school and/or primary education; parents or anybody interested in education of children aged 3-12 (Kamantauskiene, 2016).

1.5 The Intensive Program

The intensive program was held in Kaunas, Lithuania from April 3 to April 15, and included activities related to experiential-based learning. Experiential activities were also developed in the scope of natural and social sciences; Literature for Childhood through storytelling and arts; Early English learning through the CLIL

methodology; Project work methodology; The holistic approach and the enabling environments.

A second dimension of the IP relates to the presentation and sharing of case studies, developed in partner countries, in the context of pre-school and primary education. The case studies were presented and discussed in a plenary section. A group reflection was carried out, with the contributions of the teachers and students, that examined the strong aspects and vulnerabilities of the cases studies presented.

The IP also included visits to pre-school and primary schools. Subsequently, transnational groups were formed, in a total of 7 groups. Each group designed a learning experience to be implemented in educational contexts. The teachers supported the projects of the groups. Students have implemented learning experiences. There was also a phase of group sharing and reflection.

The team also had the opportunity to interact with the local culture, participating in study visits to places of interest.

2. Impact of the project on Students

In addition to the students and teachers' satisfaction questionnaires on the project, a Portuguese study was developed, to assess the influence of the Expeducom project on the development of professional skills.

The methodology was based on a quantitative approach, with data collection by online questionnaire and final statistical treatment. The questionnaire, designed to analyze the students' perceptions of the reasons that led them to participate in the project, satisfaction with their participation, the development of transversal and professional competences and the impact of the project in the practices, contained 18 items, structured in 6 dimensions:

- 1) Sociodemographic characterization of the participant;
- 2) Reasons for participation in the Expeducom project;
- 3) Satisfaction with the participation in the project;
- 4) Development of transversal competences;
- 5) Development of specific skills;
- 6) Impact of the project on the professional practices in stage and in the profession.

The questionnaire was distributed to the 27 participating students. The data were analyzed using software R.

The participants were mostly female (93.8%) and the age group from 19 to 22 years old (62.5%), with the remaining 37.5% being between the ages of 23 and 28 years. The majority of the students (81.3%) were attending the bachelor's degree, while the remaining 18.8% were attending a master's degree. All countries were represented.

Students understand that the main reasons that led them to participate in the project was the development of specific skills that help them improve the way they do, immediately followed by the opportunity to develop skills related to mul-

multiculturalism. They also recognize the opportunity to improve the possibility of employability abroad, the development of foreign languages and the development of transversal skills.

Also listed were the development of relational and intellectual skills, specific knowledge and the opportunity to have a curricular internship. The students are, in general, satisfied with the intensive program that integrates Expeducom.

They value the methods used in practical activities, as well as the content and topics of the training units and the structure of the intensive program. They find, however, that the duration was not adequate. Considering the development of professional competences, the students point out that the design of activities that combine content and processes, which promote children's self-discovery and learning, and the creation of stimulating and challenging environments were the most relevant points during their participation.

All students recognized the importance of all the experiences and opportunities to stimulate the learning of the children, making a clear connection with the professional activity.

With regard to transversal competences, students consider that those that were most developed were the possibility of working in an international context, perceiving the culture of other countries, the ability to learn, interpersonal skills, decision making and teamwork. On the other hand, the least valued were the ability to solve problems, the opportunity to interact with experts, the development of critical thinking and the ability to investigate as well as initiative and entrepreneurship. Students identified the impact that the project had on their professional performance, which led them to value the diversity of the children as well as to develop experiential and integrative learning experiences that promoted their participation. They also recognized that there must be positive emotional involvement, and that situations should be created that stimulate reflection and involvement.

3. Conclusions

The internationalization strategy adopted by the European higher education system should continue to support and increase this type of experience, as it introduces learning and valuation factors that would otherwise be inaccessible. We refer to the valorization of multiculturalism and the possibility of working in diversified teams, which contribute to a greater openness and rigor in the learning process of students for active life.

The development of transnational pedagogical projects potentiates the development of different competences. Taking an active role in international working groups encourages a positive view of cultural diversity, teamwork, learning ability, respect for others' opinions and the development of communication skills. With regard to the specific competencies, the participants realised that the project allowed them

to value the diversity of children, to conceive activities that combine processes and contents, as well as contextualized experiential activities.

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