How do Teachers Benefit from Mobility Experience?

Implications for Initial Teacher Education

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This paper discusses the outcomes of research carried out between 2016–2018 at Polish schools that send their teachers overseas for training. The overall objective of the research was to determine whether this kind of international experience might contribute only to one's own career development or to a wider impact on the entire teaching staff of those schools. The research was conducted with the use of mixed methods and covered a wide spectrum of competences, including language and ICT proficiency, knowledge of new teaching methods as well as communication, teamwork and leadership skills. The study revealed that individual experience gained abroad may also contribute to the professional development of other teachers in the sending school. Such an impact, however, requires a variety of other factors, including the support of management and the positive attitude of the entire school community. The research outcomes suggest that similar measures might also be worth undertaking to support teacher candidates in their initial professional preparation.

—— **Keywords:**

institutional development of schools

international mobility

teaching skills

teachers' competences

quality of teaching

Introduction

When focusing on what international experience brings to European schools, it is worth investigating its impact on teachers. In recent years, the teaching staff of many European education institutions has actively taken advantage of training abroad, aiming to acquire new knowledge and professional skills. In 2014, the European Union acknowledged the importance of international experience in educators' acquisition of new professional knowledge and practical skills by launching the Erasmus+ programme (EC, 2013), which offered international training opportunities to teachers across Europe. Since this kind of training has gained more popularity, it is of paramount importance to assess its long-term impact not only on the educational and career paths of individual teachers but also on the overall development of sending schools. Facing social changes and economic transformation, Poland can serve as an illustrative case study to investigate the longitudinal impact of mobility on increasing schools' international dimension. With little opportunity to send their education staff abroad based on their own capacities, Polish schools are eager to take advantage of the EU's financial support for staff mobilities (Kolanowska, 2018).

In this paper, I discuss the outcomes of research activities carried out in Polish schools that send their teachers overseas for training. This study was focused on the longitudinal impact of mobility, and data was collected with the use of mixed methods after the mobility's completion. The study was conducted in two stages. The first stage was an online survey with teachers and interview with school community members. Then the individual and group interviews were implemented with randomly selected teachers and school heads. In 2018, the same schools took part in the second stage. This was an occasion to verify the extent to which the previously achieved results turned out to be sustainable. The same methods were employed, aiming to harvest feedback from the same individuals. The research aims were focused on various competences, including language skills and computer literacy, knowledge of new teaching methods as well as communication, teamwork, leadership and soft skills. In addition, this paper aims at determining whether this form of training contributes only to one's own career development or to a wider impact on the entire teaching teams of the sending schools.

Impact on Teaching Skills

The most commonly reported benefit of mobility experiences was the enhancement of teachers' language skills (over 90% of positive claims among the survey respondents). It was often raised that the significant improvement of teachers' foreign language skills (which was, primarily, English) also contributed to the overcoming of language barriers, gaining self-confidence in dealing with foreign partners, and encouraging other teachers and students to focus more on the language learning. The qualitative methods brought more data on changes in the perception of language learning that turned out to facilitate the teaching processes. The teachers claimed that having a strong command of the English language gives access to new teaching methods and new teaching materials. According to teachers, the significant changes in curricula and new education methods mostly concerned the introduction of elements of the CLIL method in teaching non-language subjects. Such a change also results from an understanding of the functionality of language (and its primacy over hyper-correctness in communication with foreigners).

Figure 1. Mobility impact on individual skills (summary of both survey stages),
N₂₀₁₆ = 350, N₂₀₁₈ = 156

Secondly, many examples of newly acquired teaching methods and tools also stemmed from ICT skills. The teachers often recognised the idea of applying ICT as crucial, especially during the implementation of curricula for higher grades in primary and lower secondary schools. The necessity to acquire new knowledge related to operating and using modern equipment and software also stemmed from general changes in the perception and use of modern technologies by new pupils coming to school. Thanks to the project, many participants eventually learnt how to use those tools. Furthermore, new skills allowed teachers to improve their performance of tasks other than teaching (e.g. keeping records, assessment and collection of teaching materials).

Table 1. Teachers' perceptions of the role of individual impact on their further work (summary of semantic unit analysis from both initial and follow-up study phases)

	INITIAL PHASE (2016)	FOLLOW-UP PHASE (2018)
IMPROVED COMMAND OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES	"It turned out that our language teachers, after completing school here in Poland, have never been abroad".	"As it was said: 'One can do better without a passport than without knowledge of the foreign language'... So, our teachers motivate each other, and some of them decided to attend language courses".
	"Our teachers pay more attention to the grammar and not to communication. Those pupils have no such complex. They speak ungrammatically but they use foreign languages, and that is due to the fact that they have opportunities to hold such conversations".	"In my school, some teachers decided to continue the learning of English as well. And some of them have already passed their language exams to confirm their new skills".
	"That is a great experience for a teacher who is not an English language specialist. This is very helpful in relation to your skills, but also in overcoming your fear".	"We had two teachers from Portugal visiting our school as they were willing to work with us, in terms of the exchange of students and good practices. We picked some classes at random to show them what the classes look like in our school and we suddenly entered the chemistry lesson. The teacher started to chat with them although she was neither prepared nor even warned about their visit. If such a thing happened a few years ago, it would have caused only shock and awe from her side".

THE USE OF ICT SKILLS	"My knowledge was low and now it has improved. I was afraid to touch something I was supposed to, ruining the thing as a result, and the equipment was expensive... Thanks to the project I am no longer afraid of looking for and applying new solutions".	"We create virtual classes and download learning apps. We use simple things that are obvious to us today. [...] The innovations of that time have become quite usual".
	"My colleague is not a big fan of computers and modern technologies. After the course she allows her pupils to use these devices during classes. From the viewpoint of her pupils, this is a total change".	"It is 2018 now, I just realised that when I thought about what has changed over the past four years in our school. We have four interactive boards in eight classrooms, which is an outstanding result in a village school. In each class, there is a notebook [...]. I did not know that our goals from 2014 would be fulfilled in the next four years".
CHANGES IN MENTALITY	"This is really about a change in mentality ... paying no attention to grades as it is not the grades that shape people in the future".	"Perhaps such a model of a modern teacher will come when the generation that is afraid of a foreign language and international contacts will leave. This old generation is very introverted, brought up behind the iron curtain".
	"We are learning how to be tolerant and curious. Because we learn one thing and then we want to learn another one. We are bitten by the curiosity bug; in other words, with outgoing mobilities we broaden our horizons".	"This older staff would prefer to have an English-speaking teacher to support them. But the younger generation enters this field very bravely, with no language barrier. They are already experienced in using the English-language Internet and they are not limited by any technological barrier. [...] I dream of the day when we will finally overcome such resistance..."
	"In Poland we focus on grades. It came as a big shock to us in England when the teacher tested knowledge of times tables. Nobody was cheating. The teacher was reading out the calculations and the correct answers. The kids marked a plus or a minus on their sheets".	"Now, when our staff had professionally grown abroad, they started to share their stories during classes. So, pupils do not perceive them as those 'beaks with chalks' closed in the school walls, but as people with their own ambitions and broad horizons".

Lastly, the study also revealed that teachers' international learning experiences contributed to changes in individual professional attitudes, particularly where international experience gained led to greater openness in the school to learn more about other cultures and their contexts of education. During the first research phase, it was often declared that the opportunity to experience entirely different approaches to teaching, in different cultural and systemic contexts

of education, allowed mobile teachers to change their own perceptions of the Polish schools. Many participants claimed that their mobility had a major impact on the overall change in their professional attitudes and habits related to the current performance of daily teaching duties. Often, it turned out that those behavioural changes concerned also described their own approaches to the duties they performed, and one of the significant benefits realised by the mobilities was an increased motivation to continue to work with students. What is more, the emergence of leaders among teachers often determines the sustainability of institutional outcomes of mobilities. This means that the acquisition of soft skills by the teachers is necessary for the schools' growth. Such attitudes must appear through the initiative of the teachers themselves, while the school directors' role should be to inspire them to act. Finally, the modernisation of the school requires teachers' mutual trust, and it is claimed that this is impossible without them taking a step outside of their comfort zone.

Impact on Teaching Staff

Numerous examples of changes that occurred after the mobilities' completion were raised by the research participants. Many of them concerned the efforts to increase internal co-operation between teachers. For the schools, the opportunity to consolidate their teams also became an important benefit of mobilities. Since the Polish schools do not have much capacity to organise team-building events, it often turned out that the stay abroad was the very first occasion for school colleagues to get to know each other better.

Figure 2. Mobilities' institutional impact (summary of both survey stages),
 $N_{2016} = 350, N_{2018} = 156$

The teachers also claimed that one of the most significant benefits stemming from their mobility is the school's internationalisation. Thanks to foreign experience, the school can develop, acquire new contacts and, therefore, it can establish brand new partnerships with other educational institutions across Europe. It also increases international awareness among other school employees, learners, their parents and organisations co-operating with the school. Some members of the teaching staff also confirmed that they feel that they are now working in a more international institution. They admitted that they also now have a greater awareness of what is happening outside Poland in terms of modernising education. Therefore, the undertaken mobility was, most of all, considered as a tool to draw from European best practices, from new systemic solutions, as well as from the newest educational trends.

Table 2. Teachers' perceptions of mobilities' institutional impact in their schools
(summary of semantic unit analysis from both initial and follow-up study phases)

	INITIAL PHASE (2016)	FOLLOW-UP PHASE (2018)
TEAM- -BUILDING AND INTEGRATION OF TEACHING STAFF	"I was selected for this mobility during an additional recruitment process. And now I see that those who were there with me are the same people with whom I organize open days and new projects and on whom I am sure I can rely".	"First, you have to integrate this group of teachers before going abroad [...] and then it is great during your mobility when, for a week, the staff are together in different situations, not only during classes and training. Teachers are often unable to talk to each other in everyday working conditions".
	"Those who did not take part in these projects are usually curious; they ask questions and have the urge and energy to get involved in new project activities".	"I also wanted to pay attention to the consolidation of the team that participates in the project. Such integration has a lot of good values and can be a starting point for any further activities. During everyday work at schools, there is no way to co-operate with the same group of people for the whole week, only to draw valuable conclusions".
INCREASING THE INTER- NATIONAL DIMENSION OF TEACHING AND LEARNING	"I think that the entirety of Europe is currently following such trends in education. Those trends are about a subjective approach to learners and to their autonomy".	"We are Europeans. We are open to innovation, we are aware of needs, of changes, of the higher competences and higher self-esteem – all this is happening thanks to the trips".
	"An English-language theatre has been set up in our school. This is not only about the fact that it is in English. It also encourages pupils to take part in international activities".	"We are in touch with the organisation with which we implemented the project. Thanks to the mobility experience, we established closer contacts with the hosts".

What is more, the schools' internationalisation not only often became a factor that positively distinguished schools in the local educational market but was often considered a strong value-enhancing factor for the teachers themselves. In other words, being a staff member of a "school that acts internationally" raised teachers' self-esteem, regardless of whether they took part in a mobility themselves. It is noteworthy that, in many cases, the very first mobility experiences among the staff subsequently served as the patterns for follow-up activities. Furthermore, the participants claimed that, as a result of their

foreign experience, they learnt how to enhance further international co-operation between the schools.

Discussion

The core objective of this research was to discover whether (and if so, in what ways) individual mobilities abroad might contribute to the overall development of the sending schools and to what extent the mobility outcomes became sustainable. I used mixed methods: web surveys, interviews and observations. The results of the study lead me to believe that an international mobility might be an attractive form of in-service teacher training. Beyond the improvement of communication skills in a foreign language, the research participants mentioned new ICT skills as a significant benefit of this kind of training. The study also revealed that the international experience of teachers often has a significant institutional impact on the Polish schools. The teachers confirmed that they applied new teaching methods in their work and shared their newly acquired knowledge and experience with other teachers and staff in the sending institutions. They mostly confirmed that such a knowledge-sharing process often goes beyond the sending school as it was often claimed that teachers share their experience with other institutions. There are, however, some quite critical aspects that should be discussed as limitations of this research. Firstly, the findings do not represent the majority of Polish schools, but only those that are keen on gaining international experience. Secondly, these findings might also be affected by self-reported data bias (i.e. selective memory and participants' overestimations of their mobility's impact on a given school). Finally, to verify whether this positive attitude will contribute to real changes among the school staff, the time aspect needs to be taken into consideration. This stems from the importance of the longitudinal approach towards project impact, as time is a key factor for the sustainability of any kind of international training outcome.

What can also be drawn from this study is the potential for expanding its results beyond the field of in-service teacher training. The research outcomes suggest that foreign professional experience might also contribute to the preparation of young teachers for their future profession. The feedback harvested from mobility participants stands for the fact that this kind of experience is considered an effective form of raising professional capacities not only for those

staff members who have reached the top of their career ladder, but also for those with very little professional experience or no working experience at all. When asked about their motivation to go overseas for training, most of the teachers pointed to the lack of a comparable offer within the national professional development framework. Despite a relatively large number of courses being offered by domestic training institutions, drawing experience from abroad still remains more valuable and attractive for them. It can be considered that this is mostly due to the specifics of the competences and skills that are gained transnationally. In particular, the headmasters of schools claimed that international mobility experiences help to boost the competences that teachers are less likely to gain during similar training activities carried out at national teacher training centres. This particularly applies not only to the ability to use new technologies and foreign language skills but also to soft skills and social competences. In their opinion, there is a huge difficulty with finding suitable job candidates with these skills in the current labour market. Such a deficit of qualities particularly concerns young people who are just about to enter their career paths.

What is more, many participants (regardless of their age and work experience) claimed that participation in their schools' international projects was their first opportunity to stay abroad for a longer period of time. Moreover, for some of them, the destination country of their mobility was, in fact, the first foreign country they had ever visited in their lifetime. This even applied to graduates of philological faculties who worked as foreign language teachers. The study outcomes may lead to the conclusion that – despite the increasing internationalisation of higher education – many young teachers who start their work at schools do not have any experience of gaining practical skills abroad. Their foreign experiences remain limited to scholarships or student exchanges rather than to having any kind of practical training in another country. It seems, therefore, legitimate to postulate the introduction of a professional training period for students of pedagogical faculties in parallel to their study programmes or to other transnational learning periods. Acquiring such experiences at this stage of their education would allow them to be better prepared for their future profession by broadening their horizons, increasing their openness to changes and, finally, by better understanding international contexts of teaching and education in general.

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Home