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Empowering Dyslexic Students through Mobility

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In

Learning mobility, social inclusion and non-formal education: Access, processes and outcomes
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This chapter describes and analyses effects experienced by Maltese dyslexic youth participating in a youth exchange with Italian dyslexic youth. The aim was to provide a platform to share school experiences and inform professionals and the public about frustrations experienced due to lack of understanding and insensitivity to dyslexic youth's needs as learners. Through 2014 ERASMUS+ funding, the Maltese dyslexic youth paired up with Italian dyslexic students to work together to raise awareness of challenges and difficulties experienced. The main activities involved developing a document providing advice on what young dyslexic people prefer when learning. They also engaged in dissemination activities by talking about their project and raising awareness. From interviews carried out with the project co-ordinator (Formosa), the group leader (Falzon) and the youth, it emerged that the project enabled these youth to realise that they can achieve goals which before they perceived impossible. They learned how to present issues and raise awareness with different audiences - the general public, professionals, and politicians. They also developed other skills such as dealing with and using media, fund raising, budgeting, obtaining sponsorships, lobbying and talking to policy-makers. This mobility experience helped them develop skills beneficial for their holistic development, as well as for employability, necessary for achieving social inclusion.

About the Authors

Andrei Azzopardi, Sasha Bilocca, Valentina Farrugia, Michael Formosa, Leah GATT, Shaun McAlister and Kurt Mizzi are dyslexic youth following post-secondary education. They embrace their profile of strengths and challenges, are ambassadors and advocates for other dyslexic youth. The group - Dyslexic Teens Dialogue (DTD), (Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/DTDMalta>, website www.dyslexicteensdialogue.com) hold monthly meetings - the Dyslexia Inspiration Youth (DIY). They participated in the Erasmus+ Mobility Project presented in this study.

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Mary Rose Formosa She is a parent co-ordinator of the group – Dyslexic Teens Dialogue and the coordinator of this Erasmus+ youth exchange project. She is secretary of the Malta Dyslexia Association and has been awarded the Social Commitment Award 2014/2015 of the Faculty for Social Wellbeing at the University of Malta. She is currently reading Youth & Community Studies at the University of Malta.

Suzanne Gatt, Associate Professor, is a teacher educator at the Faculty of Education, University of Malta, and ERASMUS coordinator for 10 years. Her research interests include mobility, European Integration in Education, the Bologna Process in Higher Education and Copenhagen Process in VET, and the impact of the mobility experience. She has carried out the Evaluation of the Youth in Action Programme 2007-2013, the Lifelong Learning Programme 2004-2006 and 2007-2009 in Malta, and the decentralised programme ERASMUS+ 2014 for Malta.

Introduction

The European Commission (EC) is committed to supporting youth with fewer opportunities and promoting their inclusion in society (Kovacheva, nd). The Europe 2020 Strategy (EC, 2010) promotes youth mobility through the ERASMUS programme as part of the flagship 'Youth on the Move'. Mobility, however, requires support and investment to become a tool for promoting social inclusion (Kosa 2011). Mobility needs to be open to all youth without barriers (Cairns, 2014). The EC's strategy on achieving greater impact on youth with fewer opportunities (EC, 2014) highlights how all youth can take part on their own terms, recognising the value of differences in norms, beliefs, attitudes and life experiences. Erasmus+ youth projects are ideal tools for inclusion as they address diversity in a positive and respectful way.

This chapter is a team effort and is written by seven youth and three adults. It presents the ERASMUS+ Youth project 'Dyslexic Teens' - a mobility experience by a group of Maltese dyslexic youth. It identifies the skills these youth developed and their impact on further studies, employment opportunities and social inclusion in society.

Theoretical Background

Dyslexia affects both academic learning and emotional wellbeing (Batshaw, 1997). School has clear and demonstrable negative effects on the self-worth, self-concept, self-esteem and self-confidence of students with dyslexia (Chapman, 1998; Humphrey, 2003; Humphrey & Mullins 2002). Students with dyslexia find school a sad experience (Riley & Rustique-Forrester, 2002) due to insensitivity to abilities and needs. Youth need to feel successful, become aware of their unique learning strengths, and consequently learn to apply them effectively while working to overcome challenges in learning (Webb, 1992). Dyslexia, or how dyslexic youth are supported, affects learning, performance, self-worth and quality of life (Humphrey & Mullins, 2002). Informal and non-formal learning methods such as drama (Eaden, 2004) and performance ethnography/auto-ethnography (Brewer, 2000; Chang, 2008; Pelias, 2007) help youth overcome barriers.

Youth with fewer opportunities experience different obstacles to mobility such as disability, health problems, educational difficulties, economic, social and geographical obstacles. Youth Exchanges offer an international mobility experience in the safety of a group (EC, 2014). The short duration of such mobilities makes the involvement of youth with fewer opportunities possible and manageable.

International exchange through mobility experiences has developed beyond being an instrument for internationalisation, becoming a policy objective in its own right (Bouras & Chakpitak 2014). Youth are motivated to have mobility experiences for personal and professional reasons. Self-efficacy, improving language (Hackney *et al* 2012) and skills also play a role (Dwyer & Peters 2004). Mobility experiences increase employability by promoting the development of communication skills; sensitivity to different cultures; flexibility and resilience; ability to adjust to novel situations and to adapt to cultural diversity (Užpalienė & Vaičiūnienė 2012).

Language learning is a main impact of mobility experiences through social relations that youth experience (Dörnyei 2009). Immersion is one way to learn about society and language in a new setting. Youth become more confident in the new language through social relations (Meier & Daniels 2013). Mobility places individuals in new social and physical contexts (Loukas 2007), promoting bonds with peers, coaches and other professionals. Youth interact in specific social circles: international peers; and local groups; as a result of social events and physical facets related to living abroad, even if for short durations.

The 2007-2008 Youth-in-Action Programme implemented in Malta was found to complement non-formal education. Young persons, youth organisations as well as youth workers benefited at a personal or professional level and youth organisations' capacity was also augmented (Gatt & Gatt 2010). It was relevant particularly to youth's socio-emotional development of employment skills.

An inclusive society is one that rises above differences of race, gender, class, looks, generation and geography to ensure equity of opportunity regardless of origin (Atkinson and Marlier, 2010). Social exclusion includes individuals unable to participate in economic, social, political and cultural activities at a normatively acceptable level. Social exclusion is the result of lack of basic necessities for active participation in society - adequate housing, access to education, health care, freedom from discrimination, opportunities for social participation, as well as power or voice to affect governments' policy choices. Labonte *et al* (2011) identify nine domains that capture social inclusion: employment and work; income and economic resources; material resources; education and skills; health; housing; social resources; community resources; and personal safety.

Growing up as a dyslexic youth in today's society is challenging. The daily challenges experienced at school impact future opportunities. Youth mobility can contribute to help these youth develop skills that will help them with further studies and future employment, supporting their inclusion in society.

Background to the Project

The project 'Dyslexic Teens' (<http://www.dyslexicteensdialogue.com>) presents a group of youth (DTD) wanting to promote awareness about dyslexia and to empower, support and encourage fellow dyslexic youth. They also wanted to start a conversation with students, teachers, policy makers, people in authority and the public. They were also interested to learn whether dyslexic youth from other countries experience similar difficulties and barriers.

This Erasmus+ Youth project was unique in that it was part of a four-year process for the Maltese dyslexic youth. The project involved eleven Maltese, eleven Italian youth and four Maltese and six Italian youth leaders. The project coordinator (Formosa) was the mother of the one of the youth. The project involved two one-week mobility experiences in July 2016: Italian youth came to Malta and then Maltese youth went to Italy. The youth shared their experiences as well as discussed how dyslexic youth can be supported in education. The youth also engaged in dissemination activities, ranging from social media (<https://www.facebook.com/DTDMalta/>) to participating in the Annual European Youth Week held in Malta and meeting the Maltese Minister for Education and Employment.

Aims and Objectives of the Study

This study stems from the evaluation of the 2014 ERASMUS+ programme at National level in Malta (Gatt, 2016). This project was identified as an example of a good project. Gatt was intrigued for further in-depth research to identify skills the youth developed and how this promoted their inclusion in society. The research questions were:

- a) What skills and learning did the youth develop as a result of their participation in the ERASMUS+ Youth project?
- b) How has the project, if at all, supported the youth to be better included in society?

Methodology

The research questions and the philosophical and political stance for achieving an inclusive society, where there must be social justice and equity, begged a qualitative research design (Goodley, 2004; Oliver, 1992) to present an auto-ethnographic open-ended, insight to the youth's voices and experiences (Denshire, 2006).

The roles of researchers and research-participants are blended into a team where respect, participation, trust and reciprocity underpin the research. The research tool involved conversations and narratives to reflect, grasp or seize possible meanings. The team was interested in illustrating and suggesting, rather than explaining and evaluating what the youth were saying, as well as evoke surprise. This chapter allows readers to create their own meanings of the youth's experiences through the youth's own voices.

All but Gatt were insider researchers. Insiders have a wealth of knowledge and participants may feel more comfortable and freer to talk openly due to familiarity with researchers (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Falzon (2012) notes that "[i]n as much as this may be criticized for lack of objectivity, insider research also has the potential to increase validity due to the added richness, honesty, fidelity and authenticity of the information acquired" (p, 129). However, one must be aware of biases making their insider position transparent (Hammersley 2000) enabling readers to construct meanings "equally as valid as our own" (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000, p.106).

Given that most of us were actually insider researchers and had a four-year relationship, the team had a session of preparation where we addressed the importance of being true voices of the experience. Our close relationships gave us the freedom to be truthful. Throughout the four years, the youth had sessions on the importance of sharing experience - good or bad - for better quality of life for youth with dyslexia. As such, the methodology may also be regarded as Action Research (Riel, 2010; Stringer, 2013)

Ethical considerations. Official ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Malta. Information sheets and consent forms were used to obtain permissions from the youth and their parents in the case of minors.

Data collection and analysis. One may traditionally refer to interviews and focus groups as the research tools used for this project. Data collection involved audio-recorded conversations with the youth, the project co-ordinator (Formosa) and the professional (Falzon) who started their initial workshops. To reduce bias, it was

considered appropriate that Gatt leads the actual data collection to avoid interference due to possible familiarity (Falzon, 2012). The youth were encouraged to reflect on how the experience helped them be better prepared for further studies and employment. Data collection was carried out on three occasions: with Formosa; with Sasha and Andrei and lastly with Kurt, Leah, Mike, Shaun and Valentina who held these conversations together. The youth did not want to change their names and became co-authors. The adults chose to refer to themselves by their surname, whilst the youth preferred their first name. The voices are presented in themes.

Research Results

This section presents the different skills and competences developed in themes that emerged from the youth's conversations.

Motivation to understand and communicate: The group came up with the project idea during *drama workshops with the Malta Dyslexia Association...[A]fter these summer workshops some of us wanted to continue meeting...we wanted to help others so we came up with ideas (Valentina)*. Calling themselves Dyslexic Teens Dialogue (DTD), their motto was *We want to start a conversation (Shaun) ...we prepared so much for the application and then we were not sure if it would be accepted. (Andrei)*. The youth consider this project part of this conversation experience and a unique opportunity to internationalise: *...if we had to do this with another Maltese youth it would not be the same due to the cultural difference and a different educational system (Sasha)*. They wanted to elicit *advantages and disadvantages ... across the two countries and try to address the disadvantages... the motivation is to help others.(Andrei)*. *Know(ing) what is happening abroad (Kurt)*, they could talk to people *high-up (Kurt)* with more conviction as they realised that *they are not on their own and that there are people in larger countries who are exactly in the same position*. This project encouraged them to reflect *how foreign countries view Dyslexia, not just this little island (Shaun)*.

The youth realised that although the Maltese and Italian education systems are different, they shared similar difficulties including lack of teachers' understanding and knowledge of dyslexia. They came to learn that they go through the same experiences. *Even though they get different help from us, there are a lot of similarities as well (Leah)*. *Surprisingly, in Malta and in Italy we are all in the same boat... teachers not knowing what dyslexia is, in Italy they face the same problem (Andrei)*.

The youth and Formosa stated that the aim of the project was to *outline the main differences, advantages and disadvantages that the educational system in Malta holds against the Italian educational system (Andrei)* with respect to dyslexia and to *bring a message on the difficulties we were going through to try to change the system of examinations (Kurt)*. They wanted to *understand how dyslexia is handled in other countries - to learn how a European country deals with dyslexia (Shaun)*. The aim to help others arose before the Erasmus project when they had *started meeting and I think we boosted the group by this [mobility] experience and perhaps our outcome will make people look at us differently (Shaun)*.

The youth explained that this project involved lobbying and awareness raising. *They wanted the world to hear their voice and...through their booklet (Formosa) help fight for entitled access to examinations. It was their voice for once through a document. It was not anymore a professional asking the parents..., it was – 'I'm dyslexic, please ask me. I can reply for myself, I know what I need and I know how to communicate my needs' (Formosa)*.

Skills learnt. The youth noted that most skills learnt in this project were part of their four-year experience and not just due to this project. However, they acknowledged that this project helped them become more self-confident due to training in public speaking, entrepreneurial opportunities and socialising with different cultures.

Decision-making: *[T]he youth got involved in discussion, group work, group thinking, learning how to listen, learning to communicate, being, accepting other ideas...arrived at the best options through discussion. (Formosa)*. They developed management skills - *we had to come together and come up with an original time table, an original product so that we get the funds and to make a good outline (Andrei)*. The group had to *process ideas and...interests e.g. photography and make a coherent programme*. They learned what they could do, when they needed to refer and that seeking help was actually a strength: *She [Formosa] was also a big motivator and a good guide but ultimately we decided (Kurt)*. Through the different tasks, they learned to decide who could contribute best, becoming autonomous, empowered and more confident. Sasha explained that the challenge of working in an all-boys' preparation team made her autonomous. Andrei explained that it *helped me ... to present myself. We had to present in front of the whole group... now I am not concerned in saying that I am Dyslexic... constantly throwing jokes to each other about dyslexia as if overpowering dyslexia*.

Management skills: The youth learned how to organize themselves into groups, according to their interests; they set out the activities for each of the project days (Formosa). Whereas they had previously worked as a whole group, they were now smaller groups, entailing more organisation, developing their organisation and

time-management skills: *I also organised a treasure hunt - my first time -. I had to go to Valletta, compose the question... I learnt putting your mind to something and finishing it...I had everything ready from October when the event was in July (Andrei).*

Formal and informal communication skills: *Since not all youth spoke English or Italian, [i]n the beginning communication was a challenge but it eventually became easier and we still communicate on Facebook (Valentina). In a context where youth use technology, personal contact still remains unique as their character really came out when we were in Italy with them (Valentina). She knew no Italian but with my and their English we managed to communicate... about four of us could speak in Italian but not that fluent but we could still communicate with using Google on our mobile (Adrei). The leaders helped in translation as the Italians spoke very basic English. Speaking Italian helped Andrei more than years of schooling as now I feel more fluent and now when I see TV I understand it much better and it is easier as I had forgotten all my Italian.*

They were all over Facebook, twitter and social media but ultimately once you are looking for a job you are not communicating over Facebook...Communicating with the public and using different media were valuable communication skills learnt (Formosa). Andrei learned to write formally, deciding what to say and how to say it when seeking sponsorships and information for the treasure hunt. Because they are dyslexic, they hate anything to do with reading and writing...quite a challenge...but they actually sent the emails out for the sponsorships... They also got the idea to open a Facebook Page, a private page between the Maltese and the Italian participants. We put in our photos and a profile picture.

The project included workshops on presentation skills and building self-confidence was a project outcome. They met a lot of people to whom we presented the booklet... One was the Minister of Education ... All this social interaction, and meeting with other people. I think they had experiences that other youth were not exposed to. I think that helped. (Formosa)

Team- and group skills: *Sasha valued her experience in organising an outdoor activity ... we had to work in a small group together, do the planning, research the games, creative thinking and imagination. It helped her to ... be responsible and to find the time to complete the task you promised (Leah). Formosa regarded this an important skill: when you work in a group, you are given tasks ... the responsibility of doing it... it obviously affects others...There were some...more dedicated than others but together it was fine...it came together in the end. Sasha learnt how to manage a group, to understand what others think, that not everyone gives his 100%. As a group leader, she learnt to be sensitive to the outcome and that this outcome may not be what you thought it would be. She learnt to handle her emotions when the group did not like an activity she planned for the programme. They learned how to give tasks instead of ordering.*

Finance management skills: *Although the youth were aware that Formosa was responsible for financial management, they still felt responsible and budgeting was a challenging lesson learnt (Kurt). They started sending e-mails for sponsorships... searched and googled who can help ... had a very tight budget...and had to supplement it ... found a lot of sponsorships...[T]his was an unplanned activity of the project...another learning outcome – how to plan, how to budget (Formosa).*

Active citizenship: *The youth's DTD had been lobbying for four years and consequently regarded themselves active citizens. This project took their experience to an international level as they shared their experiences with youth from another country. They completed the booklet which targeted the students themselves and then we had to go a step further... Our objectives are positive, guidelines to help dyslexic student that can be applicable to all students (Andrei).*

The youth developed advocacy skills: [to] know and to fight for my own rights... not be pitied but to get what I need...[W]hen I have a test at school, I approach my teachers and tell them – I got these arrangements and I need them. I learnt to understand that this is my right (Sasha). Andrei was aware that there is need for further lobbying. Understanding what access and support Italian youth received gave him the confidence to express his own needs and to continue lobbying. They ventured out, contributing for the draft for the future national youth policy. [They} went for the consultation meeting...aware that this event could be an outlet for their voice to be heard...[to] make a difference (Formosa).

The youth's four years of advocacy and self-advocacy was an inspiration to the Italians. They were exactly in the same position: with low self-esteem; did not believe in themselves; no confidence ... The impact was also on the Italian Youth, on the people who accompanied them, half of whom were teachers ...very impressed with the type of work that we are doing in Malta (Formosa).

Responsibility and commitment: *Organising activities for non-Maltese youth brought a degree of responsibility as they planned and executed their activities. This helped me understand responsibility (Sasha).*

They were also accountable and that *responsibility is in everything that you do and is necessary* (Sasha). The youth faced deadlines and task completion: *Each of us had different days to organise. Everyone did something...* (Mike). *The days were planned according to our skills and the activities...for example Kurt was good in photographs, Sasha was in the girl guides* (Leah).

At the beginning, not all embraced the project with the same intensity and this created some friction with respect to commitment and completion of tasks: *. planning was quite a challenge due to people's other commitment and I think we did not really understand the significance of this experience – until you really get into it and become responsible for the task you have been given* (Kurt). *Our main challenges were... to put everyone focused on what you were doing to work together mainly* (Andrei). Every challenge became an opportunity. *Our day was inside, and I had to do photography with two other members of the group and I had to see how I am going to explain and be clear. Planning has a lot of work but then when you are going to do the session that was the big responsibility and then your success* (Kurt). The self-evaluation exercises helped them grow... *accept and admit that you have done something wrong or could have done something better* (Andrei).

Employability and social Inclusion. The project supported social inclusion. The youth developed self-confidence to face job interviews. *In the beginning [in 2011] all of them would not make eye-contact. They were so low in self-esteem, thought that they were not worth anything. They thought of themselves in terms of their examination results and not in terms of other skills that employers are looking for now. So I am very hopeful now that when they go for an interview, [whilst] the CV might not be as brilliant as somebody else's in terms of academic achievements, but they can present themselves better because they've actually met the Minister of Education and ... had meetings with so many important people* (Formosa). *I now feel more prepared to deal with society as first of all I am more confident in myself and in my abilities ... I feel much more included in society now* (Andrei).

The project increased employment prospects and their CV increased chances of employment. *Shaun could use the website for this project if I go on interview. Valentina's future work will involve working with people. It is a good thing to put in my CV that I communicated with foreigners, could tell my weaknesses - dyslexia - during an interview and to the Chef [potential employer], who is also dyslexic.* Kurt learnt to address a large group and, with an aspiration to become architect, *this was really worthwhile.*

Lasting impact. The youth considered the project an unforgettable experience. The greatest impact was the emotional bonding: *The thing I most remember...is the last time I saw them... Everyone was crying and that is what I think was the most impact of the whole programme* (Andrei). The following youth's statements sum up the impact of the experience:

Leah	I have changed. I always felt included in society, but this project made it easier for me.
Valentina	This experience helped me find ways to feel 'more normal'.
Sasha	The process led me to be more confident as before I was not so comfortable with my profile. This process helped me accept and be more comfortable.
Andrei	It was for sure a life-changing memorable experience.
Mike	It was good experience. What more can I say?
Kurt	You see people appreciating your effort and the booklet lists what we want and have done.
Shaun	In this experience, there is something much bigger than culture.

The outcomes of this project were overall positive. The project had an impact on the youth's growth, attitude and view towards dyslexia. The two weeks were the climax of a year's work. It also led to a publication which promotes good practices towards dyslexia.

Discussion

This project characterises an example of youth's experience of alterity (Cicchelli, 2014) as they attempt to understand educational challenges faced by other dyslexic youth in a different country. They critically analysed learning barriers, placing themselves within a European perspective. The exchange presents an element of cosmopolitanism through which the youth became social actors driving their culture of belonging to that of another European culture (Cicchelli, 2013). This exposed the youth to a sense of otherness, even if for a shorter duration than traditional ERASMUS study exchanges (Cicchelli, 2016). They gained the liberating awareness that their

struggles with misunderstandings of their profile were not unique to their culture. This international perspective promoted a feeling of inclusion within a European perspective.

Mastering soft skills in addition to academic skills is crucial for youth development and eventual career success (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Sissons & Jones, 2012). The challenges tackled at the planning, implementation and evaluation stage of the project have supported the development of various soft skills considered important in new recruits by employers (UKCES, 2014). Managing time and people, planning and organising activities, working as a team, communicating through different modes and letting team members know what work needs to be done are all essential for both daily life as well as successful employment (Ulinski & O'Callagan 2002). These skills, coupled with the importance of keeping commitments, being responsible and aware that doing one's part affects other group members' work and the project completion, increases readiness to employability (NCWD, 2012). The youth also improved their self-confidence, resulting in better self-concept (Lippman *et al* 2015).

The project motivated the youth to continue lobbying. They were motivated to do something about their situation, to achieve tangible outcomes as part of the project outputs. The youth engaged in active citizenship activities such as advocacy, self-advocacy, lobbying, responsibility and commitment. These effective transformations for socially-excluded youth can be achieved through promoting the self-organisation of marginalised groups who participate in direct forms of political action to promote positive change (Goldring & Guidoum, 2011). This was evident through their ability to reach different political and education stakeholders. The ERASMUS+ project thus helped them grow towards becoming better active European citizens.

It is to be acknowledged that whilst the project contributed to these youth's development, it is not the sole contributor to the youth's social inclusion. The mobility experience helped promote and increase self-worth, helped develop a range of soft skills, and provided a sense of success in achieving the project outcomes. However, the road to social inclusion for emarginated youth needs time and continuous support. Youth mobility projects can support youth, but are not enough to achieve social inclusion through this single initiative. Mobility is but one dimension through which disadvantaged youth can be supported towards social inclusion.

Conclusion

The EC continues to support ERASMUS+ mobility programmes. This study presented how mobility can be one tool promoting social inclusion of youth with fewer opportunities. Youth exchanges present opportunities to experience success in achieving targets set, help develop crucial skills in the process, as well as celebrate active citizenship. While such initiatives are not the complete solution to the challenge of social exclusion experienced across Europe, they are surely one means through which youth can be supported in their preparation for a prosperous life as European citizens.

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