
EDUCATIONAL EVOLUTIONARY TRANSFORMATION: THE EUROPEAN PROJECTS TEAM AT THE REGIONAL DIRECTORATE FOR PRIMARY & SECONDARY EDUCATION IN WESTERN GREECE

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Introduction

Currently, the European projects serve as a medium for educational change and innovation in the Greek schools. Since educational change is a highly complex process, the procedure of involvement in European projects is an example of educational innovation itself, which has been accepted with enthusiasm by a great number of Greek teachers. This is evident in the voluntary way the Greek teachers embraced the European projects which was later supported by the Greek Ministry of Education. The Regional Directorate of Primary and Secondary Education in Western Greece (PDEDE) is an education organization under the umbrella of the Greek Ministry of Education, Life-Long Learning and Religion. The new evolutionary and transformational educational strategy adopted by the PDEDE completed the establishment of a European Projects Team within the Directorate (EU-PDEDE). EU-PDEDE's objectives are to support Lifelong Learning in Primary and Secondary Education and develop new skills and practices meeting real needs of teachers and schools.

Factors for evolutionary transformation in the Greek education

Greek teachers were voluntarily involved in European projects, although there was absolute absence of support on behalf of the government when the projects were first introduced in the Greek schools. However, the high mobility of teachers and students and thus their success led to their institutionalization (Demertzi 2009). The last decade, the Greek teachers have deliberately been prepared towards their participation in projects on a voluntary basis. This is because they have been convinced about the importance and necessity of their underpinned educational principles and the importance attached to both formal and informal learning that occurs in such projects. Such wide European projects acceptance from the Greek teachers gradually led towards change of perceptions within the Greek school (Bagakis 2000, 2003, Demertzi 2001, 2007, Govas & Demertzi 2001).

In regard to the process of introducing change and innovation in the Greek school, the European projects initiative is possibly the only initiative that was launched by the teachers themselves and relied entirely on teachers' voluntary involvement (bottom-up process). In addition, the projects provided an environment open to experimentation (Demertzi 2007) where teachers were willing to take the risk for new and creative solutions and safely introduce alternative ways of learning. Since educational change is directly related to the professional development of teachers, such involvement introduced the concept of cooperation between the Greek teachers. This helped to overcome, to some extent, the introvert character of the Greek school and opened space for discussion on good practices. On the top of this, European projects provided teachers with new methodological approaches in order to familiarize them with new methods and techniques such as teamwork and collaborative learning, the project method and techniques of experiential learning. Finally, the European projects in school education is probably the only example of peer-to-peer learning and training via the presentation and exchange of good practices as well as teachers' voluntary participation in experiential courses and in-service training (Bagakis, Demertzi et al. 2005).

The most important change that affected the Greek education through the European projects is the change of teachers' perspective and attitude about the official learning process and environment (Demertzi, Skia, et al. 2002). The European projects offered innovative experiences and practices outside the textbook and the classroom; moreover, they provided initial evidence of the fact that students learn best by working in teams rather than passively observing on their own. Furthermore, the newly introduced forms of self-evaluation (e.g. discussion, questionnaire, logbook, self-evaluation, presentation of the project, etc.) facilitated and supported

communication frameworks between teachers and learners. According to some authors, participation in the European projects is still perhaps the only place in the Greek school where redefinition of the role of education takes place (Cros 2002, Demertzi 2009).

Consequently, the European projects provide the framework for piloting innovation (Skia, Bagakis & Demertzi 2001). Findings from a series of related studies reveal interesting information on the management of educational change, such as the difficulty of the teacher to get rid of his/her traditional role or the time a new approach needs to become an action (Bagakis, Demertzi & Stamatis 2007). Therefore, there is a need to support the effort on the process and identify ways of educational change and innovating that do not offer ready solutions but to encourage personal involvement and implementation.

As a result, educational real change comes when the Greek teachers are involved, internally motivated by personal choice and they become active mediators and "the principal architects of change" (MacBeath 2005). It is therefore necessary to establish an environment that provides opportunities in order to engage the teachers in a process of mutual learning and interaction (Hangreaves 1995). Thus, such educational change is directly related to the Greek teachers' professional development starting from the current educational practices (MacBeath 2005), raising issues of teachers' training within such projects, attending seminars or training programs and other forms of in-school training, such as peer support, which is considered to be a highly effective approach to personal development and a dynamic strategy for change and improvement (Fullan 1982, 1993, 2001, MacBeath 2005a).

Innovation for Change at the Regional Directorate for Primary & Secondary Education in Western Greece

In this framework, the Regional Directorate of Primary and Secondary Education in Western Greece (PDEDE) is an educational organization under the umbrella of the Greek Ministry of Education, Life-Long Learning and Religion. It is in charge of over 1300 schools of both levels of education -primary and secondary- and a number of more than 10000-12000 appointed teachers of all disciplines. It is one of the largest educational organizations in Greece – responsible for schools and teachers in three Prefectures, Achaia, Etoloakarnania and Ilia. Its task is to co-ordinate, supplement, back up and implement the educational policies of the Ministry, along with supervising the implementation of various education projects, like European projects, in schools. Head of the Directorate since January 2010 is Dr. Giorgos Panagiotopoulos. One of his primary goals for evolutionary transformation rather than mere evolution of existing practices is to reinforce the educational process in schools under his jurisdiction. In this way, transformational strategies can meet a radically altered external educational environment which impacts the future of the students in Western Greece.

History

The Regional Directorates for the Primary and Secondary Education in Greece were actively launched in 2002 (legislation 2986/2002). This new legislation established the Regional Directorate directly under the auspices and control of the Greek Ministry of Education and Life Long Learning. Additionally, there were three departments, the Administrative, the Department of Scientific and Pedagogical Guidance for the Primary Education and the one for the Secondary Education. The responsibilities for the first Administrative Department were modified by a new legislation (3467/2006). In 2008 (339672/D4), there was a clear distinction between the Administrative and Financial Service; PDEDE was directly established as a Directorate (Διεύθυνση) with the 3 main departments and 2 sub-divisions.

Teachers within PDEDE had successfully participated in European projects with 3 preparatory visits, 44 Life Long Learning Programme (LLP) projects, 29 schools engaged in the projects, 8 teachers' training, and also 500 students and 93 teachers visiting other European countries.

Based on the successful results from such participation in European projects, the new evolutionary and transformational educational strategy adopted by the PDEDE targeted at the establishment of a European Projects Team within the Directorate (EU-PDEDE) among other targets. EU-PDEDE mainly aims to coordinate, create and promote European projects under the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) in Western Greece as well

as disseminate the projects outcomes and best practices in the schools and educators. In this way, EU-PDEDE can monitor, record, control and support the results of already existing European projects as well as provide assistance to schools wishing to participate to new LLP European projects. EU-PDEDE was officially launched on 01/09/2011 targeting at planning and developing: (a) an information hub for the region about the European projects; (b) a link between the European Union, the Greek Ministry of Education and the schools and educators of Western Greece; (c) a Greek teachers' community in order to actively engage them in European projects within Western Greece; (d) more effective dissemination of the European projects results and outcomes in local and regional level and thus extending their impact; (e) multiple educational interventions based on project outcomes and best practices derived from European projects; and (f) effective management and coordination of the European projects based on the educational needs in the region in order to increase the local impact of the previous actions.

EU-PDEDE aims and objectives

EU-PDEDE's aims and objectives are: (a) to support Lifelong Learning in Primary and Secondary Education; (b) to develop new skills, practices and technology applications that meet real needs of teachers and schools; (c) to create innovative methodological approaches through exchange of ideas and proposals based on the diversity of project participants; (d) to expand and implement the best practice among training providers in three counties and those of the European Union; and (e) to direct implementation and dissemination of results of European Projects in PDEDE impacting the daily teaching practices.

Actions for evolutionary transformation in Western Greece

There are three main actions for educational evolutionary transformation in Western Greece: the European Projects Portal, teachers' ongoing onsite and online help and support, and the creation of a Community of Practice. The European Projects Portal targets at providing information about the LLP in several formats based on users' preferences such as abstracts, detailed texts and slides. Such information provision is also supported by onsite EU-PDEDE Team members' visits in official annual gatherings and schools as such. Lastly, the creation of a Community of Practice targets at teachers' support as well interactive exchange of information and development of new ideas for project proposals.

The online and onsite strategy provided the framework for the transformational activities and was based on the following five steps:

1. **Information provision:** The first step was based on mere information provision and one way information communication from the EU-PDEDE to the teachers and schools of the region via an information portal (<http://blogs.sch.gr/eu-pdede>). Information here is related to both information about the European projects as well as best practices and outcomes directly derived from local projects. Such best practices are designed to offer practical and immediate advice as well as interventions for the everyday educational practice.
2. **EU-PDEDE 'real' and web presence:** The second step targeted at increasing local and national awareness about the team so as to make the information available to a wider audience as well as acquiring feedback based on the two usability evaluations of the portal. Such presence was successful and evident as to the increase of (a) interest in participating in proposal writing, (b) group members in the 3 available web communities on Facebook, Slideshare and the Greek Educational Network, and (c) views on the documents available on Slideshare with the document about the EU-PDEDE creation reaching the hottest topic on Facebook for one hour immediately after uploading it.
3. **EU-PDEDE Communities:** The third step was the interactive engagement of 3 communities' members. The different communities were developed based on Greek teachers' preferences and finding them on their locus rather than creating a new virtual location for them. It also refers to the discovery of crucial

core members who will be able to provide support on a more local level. Such engagement was also successful especially on the face-to-face interaction and Facebook.

4. **EU-PDEDE Community Support:** The fourth step targets at the active engagement and collaboration of the EU_PDEDE communities members with minimum intervention from the EU-PDEDE initial team.
5. **Best Practices for Educational Innovation:** The last step targets at the identification of best practices to promote educational innovation in the schools and the teachers within the region. These practices are gathered and disseminated via the web portal to encourage direct implementation in the educational everyday practice serving as a medium for innovation and change in the current educational environment.

With the above three targets - actions to provide information as well as support and the associated evolutionary activities, EU-PDEDE aims at online and onsite convergence of innovative changes via the involvement of the Greek teachers in European projects. Although the EU-PDEDE creation as a team may not be innovative in other European countries, the EU-PDEDE initiative and the ground-breaking frameworks are contextualized and associated with the Greek educational environment and every day practice. As a result, EU-PDEDE conveys evolutionary change and transformation in difficult times for the Greek education and economy.

Conclusions

The newly founded team to support European projects at the Regional Directorate of Primary and Secondary Education in Western Greece, EU-PDEDE, aims at providing help and support to the teachers who would like to get involved in European projects. A second aim is to disseminate and implement best practices deriving from European projects results within the primary and secondary Greek schools. This initiative was anchored in the great importance attached to the evolutionary change and innovation conveyed by the European projects in order to successfully support Lifelong Learning in Primary and Secondary Education. Consequently, EU-PDEDE, by implementing the European projects results and best practices, targets at the reinforcement and development of new skills, best practices and technological applications in the everyday educational practice and thus, meeting the needs of teachers and schools in the area. Moreover, such effort also supports the design and development of innovative methodological approaches through multicultural collaboration and the exchange of ideas, based on the diversity of project participants. Thus, EU-PDEDE facilitates, supports and directs the implementation and dissemination of results of the European Projects in PDEDE impacting the teachers' views, attitudes, perspectives, ideas and everyday educational practices.

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