

# WORKING IN A MULTICULTURAL GROUP

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The European Values Education Project is the educational part of the European Values Study. The project was planned to last for three years including eight exchanges between student teachers from Germany, Turkey, Slovakia and the Netherlands. In the first year of the project, German and Slovak students as well as Turkish and Dutch students had mutual exchanges. The exchanges lasted for two weeks, one in each country, during which the groups worked together using the maps of Atlas of European Values, developing lessons and conducting these lessons in schools. They also wrote critiques of the prepared materials. One of the second year's exchanges took place between Germany and Turkey. The two groups first met in Istanbul in February 2011. The results from this exchange along with the evaluations of the student teachers deliver a considerable insight into the dynamics of multicultural groups.

The group was formed by participants aged between 21 and 31, 6 males and 14 females. All of the Turkish student teachers are senior students in Foreign Language Education whereas the German student teachers have a common major in Geography Education.

Evidently, the mother tongues are German and Turkish. In addition to these two languages, English is used as a common language.

Among the 20 student teachers, eleven had previous experiences with multicultural groups such as in Erasmus, Work and Travel and International Projects.

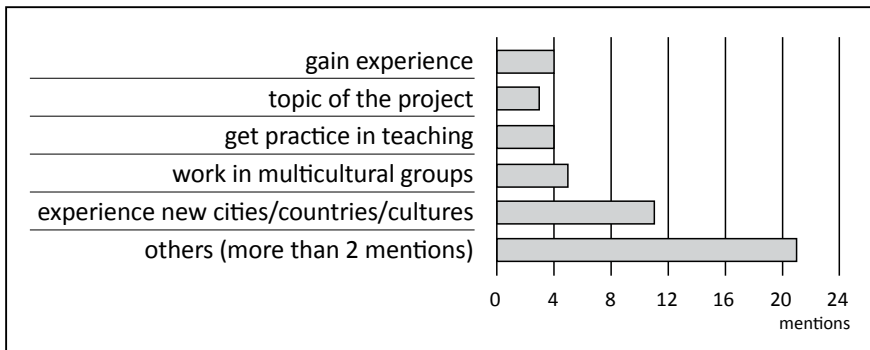
The aspect this chapter is concentrating on is 'working in a multicultural group' and the sub-divisions are: the reasons for attending, the expectations of the participants, the problems and positive outcomes resulting from the program as well as its overall evaluation.

## MOTIVATION

At first, we speculated about the students' motivation for taking part in this project. The assumed motives which form the basis of this work, will then be analysed and compared with the empirical facts of the questionnaire.

The first aspect that we considered as being relevant for the students to take part in this exchange project is the non-recurring opportunity and at the same time, the great challenge of teaching abroad. Since German and Turkish students will only be able to understand each other with the help of the English language, this fact might be a reason as well. Moreover, the students' motivation might be to get to know different points of view. Maybe, some of the participants might want to broaden their horizons, which can be a motive, too. Evidently, all participants want to become teachers. Thus, one might be motivated to have a closer look at the teacher training system at both universities and also at the work at school. It might be interesting to see the working conditions a teacher has to face. Another motivation could be the wish to get higher qualifications in relation to professional competences by taking part in this exchange. The last possible reason is the desire to visit another city and learn something about the culture there.

After predicting certain motivations, the actual motives are shown in graph 1.



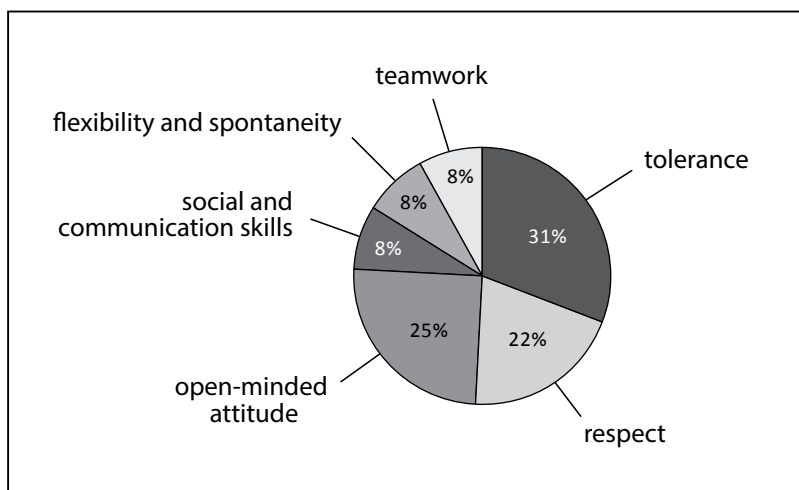
Graph 1: Motivation for participation

Some of the student teachers mentioned the aspect of reading and discussing certain issues regarding Europe (e.g. European values) as a reason for participating in the project. Another participant decided to join the exchange due to the suggestion of some friends who had already taken part in it. For one student, the reason for participation was that it was compulsory to do a project. On the other hand, another participant argued that his motive was to take part in an important project. Several students named the chance to get to know other cities, countries or cultures. Another student stated that he wants to work on cultural perspectives. Since all participants work as teachers during the exchange, some argued that they wanted to learn more about the education system in another country. Some

students tied in with this opinion by stating that they like to apply the strategies in the future. Another essential motive of the participants is to gain an academic experience through this project. Moreover, some people said that the topic of the project was their motive for taking part in it. Several students wanted to work abroad later; so, it was their only reason to join the EVE-project. Others wanted to build new friendships or improve their English.

## REQUIREMENTS

In order to achieve a certain goal, it is essential for the student teachers to comply with certain requirements. Due to globalisation and accreting possibilities of network communication, working in a multicultural group is going to be of increasing importance in all of our lives. For this reason, we regard it as highly interesting what the students of the German-Turkish group considered to be necessary for making this work (see graph 2).



Graph 2: Requirements for a successful co-operation in a multicultural group

There are some aspects that were mentioned by only one or two interviewees, as for example harmony, honesty and sympathy.

Additional requirements that were judged indispensable by a bigger amount of students rather focussed on the general work within groups: social and communication skills, teamwork as well as flexibility and spontaneity.

There are three aspects that were mentioned by the majority of the group: tolerance, respect and an open-minded attitude. Those attributes represent essential guidelines for any multicultural context.

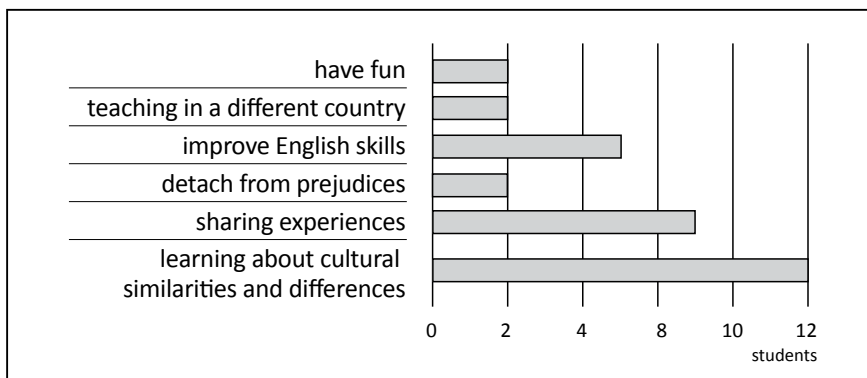
Furthermore, some requirements were stated just once, but represent those guidelines as well, like intercultural comprehension, empathy and the general interest in other cultures.

Thus, it becomes apparent that the group thinks that usual behavioural patterns have a lower importance for the work in culturally mixed groups, whereas basic strategies that deal with multiculturalism are evaluated as more important for a successful cooperation within a multicultural group.

## POSITIVE SIDES OF MULTICULTURAL GROUP WORK

All of the participants in this year’s project stated that the EVE-project provided a number of personal and academic opportunities for them, namely teaching in a different country, building new friendships, sharing experiences, developing team-work spirit, learning more about cultural similarities as well as differences, learning more about prejudices and getting rid of them, developing new ideas, improving English skills and having fun.

The German-Turkish group rated learning more about the other culture and its similarities as well as differences the highest (see graph 3).



Graph 3: Positive sides of multicultural group work

Actually, we focused more on the Turkish culture this time, since the project took part in Turkey. Especially, through the outdoor social activities which the Turkish group organized, the Germans had a chance to get to know Turkish culture much better. In addition, both groups claimed that they could share a number of experiences during the project which have broadened their horizons to a great extent. When two people from different cultures come together and are really interested in learning about the diversity among cultures, they can experience a lot.

The Turkish group also emphasized that they learned a lot about cultural prejudices. Therefore, they got the chance to get rid of their stereotypes regarding the

German culture, as a result of building new friendships. Thus, getting to know a different culture by spending some time with its people can be a great way of getting rid of one's stereotypes. In our experience, there is a lot to share and a great chance to develop new ideas by looking at concepts from the viewpoint of people with a German cultural background and this is a great way to be more creative.

Furthermore, we could develop an evident team-work spirit during our preparations for instructions, instructions themselves and the publication stage. Most significantly, we did our best to achieve a fair amount of work within the groups. Last but not least, most Turkish participants reported to have had a lot of fun during the whole project.

On the other hand, some of the German groups emphasized the opportunity to teach in a different country, as they were the ones to go to another country and to apply the strategies at particular schools with their Turkish partners.

## DIFFICULTIES WHILE WORKING IN A MULTICULTURAL GROUP

In addition to the advantages stated above, the Turkish as well as the German group mentioned certain difficulties while working with partners from another country. Mostly, the participants from both groups reported to have experienced particular problems while using English, which has to be used during the whole group work, as it was the common language for all participants.

Moreover, some of the Turkish students claimed to have had difficulties with language only when the spoken language had to be switched into the native one. In other words, when they needed to talk to other Turkish participants in their own native language, they realized that they could only speak it at a much slower rate.

## OVERALL JUDGEMENT OF THE PROJECT

While looking into the dynamics of multicultural groups like the group in this exchange, it is of great importance to also find a place for the feelings of student teachers to have a better picture of the exchange and group work.

We asked every participant of the exchange group whether they judge the result of this cooperation (among Turkish-German student teachers) as successful and fruitful. 20 students out of 20 answered in a positive manner. This is a valuable indicator of the exchange week and its results.

In another question, we asked all the participants how they felt about working with student teachers from another country. Almost all the answers were positive: *good, excited, happy, comfortable, loved it, great, satisfied, really well, self-confident, very good, enjoyable, exciting, very positive.*

Some student teachers explained why they felt so positively by giving reasons such as learning much about another culture.

However, there are student teachers who felt that it was difficult to work with a person from another country because the partners have different ideas and teaching styles, but they concluded that it was an interesting experience, because they learned from these differences. The student teachers believed that they were able to represent and reflect their culture in a meaningful and real way by working together.

Some student teachers mentioned problems like time pressure and stress. These factors inevitably affected the group dynamics.

A different question about feelings was 'How did you feel teaching in a Turkish school?' Similarly, the comments were mostly positive. Some student teachers stated that it was a great opportunity. They pointed out that it gave them a chance to see the school system. A great number of German student teachers indicated that they felt self-confident after teaching in Turkish schools. This is a very meaningful outcome for us, because helping student teachers to increase their self-confidence and teaching skills (even in another language) is one of the aims of the exchanges.

## LONG-TERM EFFECTS

After explaining the student teachers' views on working in a multicultural group, including its positive sides as well as resulting difficulties; it is also necessary to comment on long-term effects of this cooperation in the eyes of the student teachers.

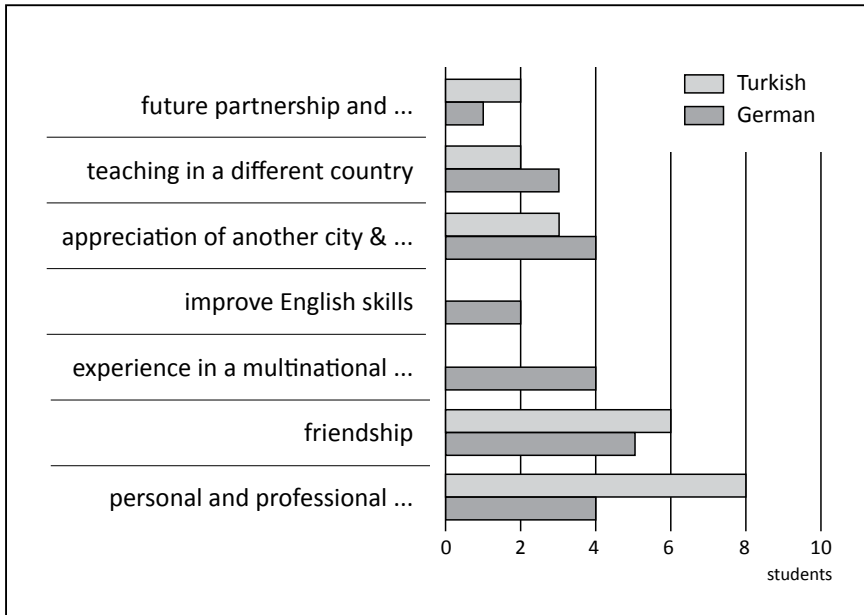
In exchange projects with people from different cultures, the first step would be maintaining efficient group dynamics and a good working atmosphere. Before the exchange, participants usually have various reasons, motivations and expectations. Whether they will come true is up to how the exchange proceeds. After the exchange, participants have new expectations for the future and we analysed them under the heading 'long-term effects' of the exchange week.

The most common statement from the whole group was 'personal and professional development' (see graph 4). It was top of the list of the Turkish students.

German student teachers put 'friendship' in first place and then 'personal and professional development' which for them has an equal importance as 'understanding of another culture and city' and 'experience in a multicultural group'.

Another interesting result also comes from the German group, as some students mentioned language development like 'improving English' and 'learning Turkish'. However, there is no such data from the Turkish group, despite the fact that all the Turkish participants are studying Foreign Language Education. This is probably due to the fact that Turkish student teachers need to use English as

a medium of communication in most parts of their lives and studies, so they do not think about it or state it explicitly.



Graph 4: Long-term effects of the exchange

Only one person from the German group and two people from the Turkish group named ‘future partnership and cooperation’. However, we are aware of the fact that this small-scale questionnaire is not valid enough to say that participants do not believe in future partnership or cooperation. It might easily be because they did not think of it at the moment of writing.

As we mentioned above, this is the second year of the exchanges and it was the third exchange for some members of both groups. However, as some students graduated or could not attend the project this year for any other reasons, there are new participants along with experienced ones. To be able to really analyse the issue of the ‘long-term effects’ of the project, it might have been good to take a closer look at the ideas of those participants who attended the project last year and this year. This might have given us some more information about whether the results they expected have come true or not. Unfortunately we do not have the appropriate data. So maybe next time a better approach might be to ask for the participants’ expectations right after the exchanges and then again after one or two years and see how many of these future effects have really happened.