Evaluation of the Processes of EU Education Projects in Private Schools and Effects of COVID-19 Pandemic[1]

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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of this study is to assess the procedures of EU education projects implemented in private schools, as well as the impact of the Covid-19 epidemic on these processes, based on the perspectives of private school personnel. When the literature is examined, although there are a few studies on the contribution of EU education projects to private schools, there is no study that examines the entire project process from a holistic perspective.

*Design/Methodology/Approach: T*he phenomenology method, one of the qualitative research methods, was used. The working group consists of 12 private school administrators and teachers having participated in the EU education projects.

Findings: It is concluded that private schools have significant problems with both internal and external factors in every aspect of the projects. However, private schools also produce some practical solutions for these problems. In addition, participation in EU education projects has the potential to make significant contributions to both individuals and institutions. Furthermore, with the effect of the COVID-19 epidemic, online and hybrid models are projected to be employed more frequently, and participants believe that online initiatives cannot achieve the same aims as projects with direct participation.

Highlights: The content of the programs should be revised with alternative online or hybrid models, especially "international mobility", an important part of EU education projects, which is prevented because of Covid-19.

Öz

Çalışmanın amacı: Bu çalışmanın amacı, özel okullarda uygulanan AB eğitim projelerinin prosedürlerini ve COVID-19 salgınının bu süreçlere etkisini özel okul personelinin bakış açılarından hareketle değerlendirmektir. Literatür incelendiğinde, özel okullara AB eğitim projelerinin katkısının incelenmesine yönelik birkaç çalışma olsa bile proje süreçlerinin tamamının yürütülmesine ilişkin bütüncül bir bakış açısıyla inceleyen bir çalışma yer almamaktadır.

Materyal ve Yöntem: Araştırmanın amacına uygun bir şekilde nitel araştırma yöntemlerinden biri olan fenomenoloji yöntemi kullanılmıştır. Çalışma grubu AB eğitim projelerine katılım sağlamış 12 özel okul yöneticisi ve öğretmenden oluşmaktadır.

Bulgular: Elde edilen bulgulara dayalı olarak, özel okulların projelerin her alanında hem iç hem de dış faktörlerle önemli sorunlar yaşadığı sonucuna varılmıştır. Ancak özel okullar da bu sorunlara yönelik bazı pratik çözümler üretmektedir. Ayrıca, AB eğitim projelerine katılım hem bireylere hem de kurumlara önemli katkılar sağlama potansiyeline sahiptir. Bunlara ek olarak, COVID-19 salgınının etkisiyle online ve hibrit modellerin daha sık kullanılması öngörülmekte ve katılımcılar online girişimlerin doğrudan katılımlı projelerle aynı hedeflere ulaşamayacağına inanmaktadır.

Önemli Vurgular: Kovid-19 pandemisi nedeniyle önüne geçilen AB eğitim projelerinin önemli bir parçası olan "uluslararası hareketlilik" başta olmak üzere alternatif online veya hibrit modellerle programların içerikleri revize edilmelidir.

INTRODUCTION

The social, economic and political goals of the EU, shaped by its founding philosophy, necessitate educational cooperation between EU member and candidate countries. The international economic and political competition created by the effect of globalization is another factor that compels this cooperation between member countries (Cankaya, Kutlu & Cebeci, 2015). Erasmus+, the European Union's Education and Youth Program, is currently funding education projects between EU member and applicant countries. This award program, which runs from 2014 to 2020, includes the previous years' Comenius, Leonardo, Erasmus, Grundtvig, and Transversal Programs, also known as lifelong learning programs. Erasmus+ offers participants, including students and educators, the opportunity to study, train, gain work experience, and volunteer abroad. In addition to individual grants, Erasmus+ promotes transnational collaboration among educational, training, and youth institutions and organizations. It also contributes to national efforts to modernize education, training, and youth systems (Citizens Information, 2021).

Although Turkey is not yet a member of the EU, as a member of the European Commission, it can participate in the European Commission's EU Education and Youth Programs, which aim to strengthen cooperation in the field of education and youth among participating countries. Turkey started these programs as a pilot in 2003 with the National Agency and became a full member of the EU Education and Youth Programs on April 1, 2004. Until 2006, Socrates, Leonardo da Vinci, and Youth Programs; during the 2007-2013 period, Lifelong Learning and Youth Programs were carried out. The Erasmus+ Program, which covers the last period of 2014-2020, is carried out by the EU Education and Youth Programs Center, also called the Turkish National Agency (UA) (UA, 2020).

Many schools in Turkey apply for projects within the scope of these programs. Participation in these projects can make important contributions to schools: Besides making important contributions to the cultural, personal, institutional, and social development of school administrators, teachers, and students, it also improves their foreign languages (Yılmaz, 2019). In their research, Dilekli and Dikici (2008) concluded that administrators, teachers, and students involved in the Comenius project increased their interaction with each other, gained the ability to work in a group, and that teachers began to use new methods and techniques in education more frequently. In addition, participation in EU projects contributes significantly to the prestige of the school; parents are more likely to prefer these schools (Kesik & Beycioğlu, 2020).

Current statistics show that public schools take part in projects within the scope of EU Education Programs at a much higher rate than private schools. For example, 213 applications were accepted for Main Action 1 Learning Mobility of Individuals - School Education Staff Mobility Projects; While only 3 (1%) of these applications belong to private schools, 210 (99%) belong to public schools (UA, 2019a); a total of 669 applications were accepted to the Erasmus+ Inter-School Exchange Partnerships (KA229) program in 2019. While 75 (11%) of these applications belong to private schools, 594 (89%) belong to public schools (UA, 2019b). However, in 2004, when the first applications were made to these projects, the application rate of private schools was much higher than that of public schools. For example, even in the capital Ankara, 7 of the 8 schools that applied to Comenius program projects in the city center were private schools, while only 1 was a public school (Türkoğlu, 2004). It should also be noted that compared to today, the number of private schools in that year was proportionally much less than public schools (MEB, 2005). It is seen that despite the increase in the number of private schools (MEB, 2021), the number of applications made by private schools to EU education projects is decreasing.

In general, private schools are considered to be more adaptable to innovations than public schools. For this reason, it can be thought that the number of applications from private schools is higher in the first years and that the number of applications from public schools increases as they gain experience in the following years. However, considering the proportional increase in the number of private schools in the Turkish education system, this explanation alone will not be sufficient. According to the MEB 2021 statistics, the number of private schools in formal education on the basis of primary, secondary, and high school constitutes 14% of all schools (MEB, 2021). It should also be remembered that hundreds of private schools have been closed during the pandemic period (NTV, 2021). In addition, these statistics also include the types of schools that can only be opened as official schools, such as Imam-hatip secondary and high schools. These statistics clearly show that although the number of private schools has increased proportionally, the number of applications made by them to EU education projects has decreased over the past years.

Although private schools are private sector organizations, they are obliged to provide education, which is a public service whose framework is determined by the constitution and laws. The constitution of The Republic of Turkey states in Article 42/6, "The principles governing the functioning of private primary and secondary schools shall be regulated by law in keeping with the standards set for the state schools" (AYM, 2019, p. 41). Moreover, regardless of the type of school students attend, they should benefit from equal opportunities in education. In addition, private school teachers, like public school teachers, should have the opportunity to gain experience and develop themselves personally and professionally by participating in these projects. Considering the aforementioned information, private schools may have some particular obstacles, difficulties, and problems with the implementation and participation in EU educational programs, as opposed to public schools. The institutional and individual contributions of these initiatives should also be assessed from a holistic viewpoint so that private schools and their personnel are motivated to engage in EU educational programs.

Although there are several studies on the contributions of EU education programs to schools, no research on private schools has been found when the relevant papers in the literature are searched. Furthermore, no study has been found that looks into

the issues of EU education projects in private schools. As a result, this study, which examines EU education projects in private schools from a holistic approach, as mentioned above, is deemed relevant.

The primary goal of this research is to thoroughly examine and evaluate the implementation of EU education projects by private schools in Turkey, using the perspectives of private school administrators and teachers.

Based on this purpose, the following three sub-objectives were determined:

1) To identify the issues and solutions in the application, implementation, and evaluation processes of EU education projects.

2) To identify the contributions of EU projects to schools and individuals.

3) To discuss potential modifications induced by the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on EU education projects.

The following questions were posed to the participants in order to attain these objectives:

For the first purpose:

1. What kind of problems can be experienced with stakeholders inside and outside the school during the application and execution of EU projects, and what is being done to solve these problems?

For the second purpose:

2. What are the reasons for a private school to apply to EU projects/what motivates them?

3. What kind of contributions does participation in EU projects make to the internal and external stakeholders of the school?

For the third purpose:

4. Considering the Covid-19 pandemic, how have EU education projects been affected by this process, and what kinds of modifications and transformations might be expected for these projects?

METHOD/MATERIALS

For this study, a qualitative research strategy was chosen because qualitative approaches are particularly beneficial in determining the meaning that people assign to situations and events that they encounter (Merriam, 1998). Phenomenology, a qualitative research method, is specifically chosen in this study because the goal is to establish what EU education projects mean to private school administrators and teachers. A phenomenological investigation, according to Creswell (2007), describes the meaning for multiple persons of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007, p. 57-58).

The research study group consists of 12 people holding various positions (founder, administrator and teacher) in private schools and having previously experienced at least one EU educational Project. Furthermore, these people differ in terms of gender, age, seniority, and educational level (Table 2). The multidimensional perception of the phenomenon experienced by diverse persons is explored in phenomenological investigations, and therefore it is attempted to discover what the common points are in the perspectives, thoughts, and reactions to this phenomenon (Fraenkel, Hyun & Wallen, 2012, p. 432). The code names of the participants and their positions in the schools are shown in Table 2.

In accordance with the study's objectives, individuals in the study group were chosen using maximum variation sampling, which is one of the purposive sampling procedures. Maximum diversity sampling aims to give many points of view from different people in order to reveal a complex phenomenon. Individuals of various ages, gender, educational level, sectoral experience, and other personal features and qualities are involved in the study (Creswell, 2017, 268). The most important thing to understand about this sample strategy is that the researcher is seeking to identify what kind of commonality, similarities, and, of course, variances exist across distinct scenarios (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018, p. 120).

Table 2

Some Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Code	Gender	Position	Age	Experience Year	Educational Background
P1	Male	Founder & School Principal	44	20	Bachelor's Degree
P2	Male	School Principal	40	17	Master's Degree
P3	Male	School Principal	32	10	Bachelor's Degree
P4	Male	School Principal	35	8	Bachelor's Degree

Code	Gender	Position	Age	Experience Year	Educational Background
P5	Male	Founder& School Principal	35	9,5	Bachelor's Degree
P6	Female	School Principal	50	32	Bachelor's Degree
P7	Female	School Principal	47	27	Bachelor's Degree
T1	Female	Group Leader& Teacher	39	16	Master's Degree
T2	Female	Teacher	45	23	Master's Degree
T3	Female	Teacher	30	7	Bachelor's Degree
T4	Female	Project Coordinator & Teacher	41	17	Doctoral Degree
T5	Female	Assistant Manager & Teacher	47	26	Bachelor's Degree

In the study, questions were directed to the participants with a semi-structured interview form. The semi-structured interview methodology is employed for this study, which is part of the interview method of qualitative data collection instruments. In semi-structured interviews, certain types of questions are prepared for all interviews. The interviewees are asked the same questions in the semi-structured form (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). A thorough assessment of the relevant literature was used to create the questions used to collect data. Two field specialists' comments were sought while creating the questions, with the goal of increasing the research's validity. In addition, the "direct quotation" method, a qualitative study validation method, was applied. The "researcher variation" technique is another validation strategy utilized in this area. Two researchers separately assessed the data, and the themes selected by both researchers were then included in the findings (Christensen, Johnson & Turner, 2015, pp. 404-406).

Although face-to-face interviews were requested in the research, the interviews were held online due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Zoom Program, one of the online communication platforms, was used and it was tried to establish maximum interaction with the participants by ensuring that the cameras were open during the interview. The interview process was as follows: first, the participants were given preliminary information about the purpose and importance of the research, interview rules, and the confidentiality of personal information. Secondly, the concepts such as internal stakeholder, external stakeholder, and project dissemination activities were explained in the interview questions. Finally, permission was requested from the participants to record the interview, and the interview was recorded. During the interview, notes were taken when necessary.

The data was analyzed using a content analysis technique developed for phenomenological research. In the literature, the general classification in qualitative data analysis takes the form of descriptive and content analysis. The content is summarized and analyzed within the framework of predetermined categories in descriptive analysis. Descriptive analysis is shallower than content analysis; content analysis data is investigated in depth, allowing the formation of previously unknown categories and dimensions (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018, p. 239). According to Creswell (2021), content analysis starts with developing a list of important expressions in the interview data (coding). Afterward, the inconsistent and important ones of these statements are gathered under larger units, and thus, the themes of the research are obtained. In this research, 5 main and 15 sub-categories were obtained as a result of following the above-mentioned processes using the content analysis approach.

In all processes of this research, the rules of scientific research and publication ethics were followed by the researchers. In addition to that, an Ethics Approval Certificate was obtained.

Before the interview, the participants were interviewed, and it was established that they would engage in the research with their consent. It is said that the interviews conducted using the video recording method would be kept confidential and that they can only turn off their cameras if they wish and continue just with the picture and sound recording of the researcher; it was also indicated that they could leave the meeting at any time. The code name was employed in the research to safeguard the participants' privacy.

FINDINGS

The analysis resulted in five primary topics and 13 subtopics under these major topics. The following will present these key topics in order and in conjunction with their related subthemes.

1. EU Education Projects Application Process

The following are the two sub-themes that have emerged from this theme:

1.1. Issues Relating to the Application

The key issues in the application process are low teacher motivation, issues with provincial and district national education directors, and the complexity of bureaucratic procedures. According to one of the teachers (T3), the problem of motivation is as follows:

Due to the workload and intensity, there was not much demand anyway. None of the teachers came and said, "Take me with you.". I always got feedback like this; "I'm not looking for trouble, what will I do abroad with the responsibility of 6 children?" I got such returns. Nobody wanted to volunteer.

The teacher (T3), as an example, explained the problems they had with the provincial and district national education directorates with the following words:

"During the application process, I had a lot of trouble with the district's national education. The district neglected national education, neglected everything, and nobody knows how it works... This cannot happen; I'm going to the directorate, and my papers are complete for a letter that will require approval from the district and province. It's our first time doing it. We had a lot of trouble when I first went. This document is missing, this document is more, etc. I went first, I took everything according to the list of documents they wanted. Despite this, some are missing, some are too much… There is a voice coming out of every head in the district national education. Nobody knows what they are doing; Especially in the department responsible for private schools…"

1.2. Solutions for the Application Process Issues

Teachers are given incentives to solve difficulties, according to the respondents, and project consultancy and trainings for teachers and students are provided. As an example, the school principal (P3) said:

"I presented a plaque of success to the teachers at the project returns. Together with our founders, we have provided a small increase in raise. We presented certificates of achievement to both students and teachers... Because the teacher is motivated... Even asking the participants if they need something during the project gives them satisfaction."

Regarding the consultancy and training services supplied to teachers, a teacher (T5) who was significantly involved in the initiatives said:

"In fact, as a teacher who is interested in projects, I have been constantly telling my colleagues about the contributions of the projects. We have made presentations and workshops for the teachers. We give training on what European Union projects are, what they are not, and how to write. We have received the training from experts from people in Turkey who do this job well."

2. EU Education Projects Implementation Process

The following are the two sub-themes that have emerged from this theme:

2.1. Issues Relating to the Implementation

In the implementation process of the projects, the main issues are disruption of classroom education, negative parental attitudes and behaviors, and unethical financial expectations of school founders. Teachers who are responsible for the projects sometimes fail to do the lessons. Because they may be abroad due to the project or they may be hosting participants from different countries. Some parents' attitudes and behaviors may also cause issues. (T1) explains some of them in these words:

"It is already difficult to take children abroad, but it is much more difficult when the students are Turkish. Parents are obsessed with too many things... First of all, they need to be persuaded... For example, we started with 10 students and continued with only 6 of them... When foreign students come to Turkey, it's not a problem for their families, but when we go abroad, our Turkish families almost want their kids to stay in the same room with us..."

Some private school founders may want a significant portion of EU education project money to remain in the school budget, even if it is not ethical, legal, or compatible with the aims of education. According to an experienced school principal (P1);

"I think 7-8 out of 10 private school founders want teachers and students to learn something, while 3 may want 10.000 Euros to the school budget."

2.2. Solutions for the Implementation Process Issues

In general, the participants' solution recommendations are as follows: confidence establishment and persuasion process for parents, determination of criteria for selection of students, and precautions taken to prevent disruption of classroom education. T1 described their efforts to persuade parents as follows:

"In order to convince parents of their children's participation in the project; We made an effort by showing them where their children will stay, even by organizing video conferences. The most important thing is that we showed the academic outputs of the children. They will have opportunities to experience both social competence and foreign language… We showed these, we had to hold a lot of parent meetings."

P4 shared the way they discovered to demonstrate that there is no discrimination among student

We did not choose our students randomly. We had our criteria. That's why we didn't have much trouble. Apart from that, they should not have received any disciplinary punishment. Also, since the subject of the project was coding, we took those whose computer skills were above average. We identified the students as the main participants and alternate participants…

3. Individual and Institutional Contributions of Participation in EU Education Projects

The following are the four sub-themes that have emerged from this theme:

3.1. Contribution to School Promotion and Prestige

Based on the responses of several participants, it was established that EU education projects benefited the promotion and prestige of private schools. (T1) summed up the activities that helped to promote the school and boost its reputation as follows:

"Only a wall was prepared in our school where the project will be shown; trophy, exhibition with images, newspaper... We appeared on Swedish television and were guests on Polish radio… Newspapers reported on them."

3.2. Developing Staff Personally and Professionally

Participating in EU education programs, according to private school employees, makes a distinctive contribution to the personal and professional development of teachers and principals. (P6) states that

"It brings the teacher into contact with a variety of students as well as people from other countries. So, they can learn firsthand what is done in different countries' schools, how pupils study, and from whom they acquire their education. I believe the teachers' vision is evolving."

3.3. Developing Students Personally and Academically

According to the findings, EU education projects supported the personal and academic development of private school students. A private school founder shares his opinion as follows:

"Students increase understanding, strengthen their abilities to promote our country and understand the value of scientific information. And they develop a positive perspective on foreign languages and other cultures. Moreover, their self-confidence increases."

3.4. Developing Collaboration Skills with Other Organizations

Schools can generally collaborate with other institutions in project processes by interacting with them. For instance, while P1 stated that they received brochures and contributions from the Ministry of Environment and Ministry of National Education (MoNE) on recycling in 2012; P6 added that during their host period, they worked with the municipality and a few local stores on gifts.

4. Reporting, Dissemination, and Promotion of EU Education Projects

The following are the three sub-themes that have emerged from this theme:

4.1. National Education Directorates' Insensitive Attitudes

Some participants complained about the insensitive attitude of the education directorates toward the dissemination and promotion activities of the projects. For example, (T4)

"They proposed to shoot a TRT documentary simply since the project KA3 has been completed. This was required by the national agency. Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials arrived. But nobody came. So sad…"

4.2. Turkish National Agency's (NA) Institutional and Solution-Oriented Approach

NA's solution-oriented and institutional methods were encountered in reporting, dissemination, and promotion of EU education projects, according to the responses made by the participants. (T3) highlights that

"In the National Agency, we did not have any problems in general. The National Agency has been very supportive in this process. We had a small problem, and there were immediate solutions. They are solution-oriented."

4.3. Dissemination and Promotion Activities of Schools

Some private schools engage in dissemination and promotion initiatives for EU education projects that they have completed. This is how F1 describes:

"We might say that participating in projects moves us forward. We demonstrate that we are always reinventing ourselves and that we benefit from numerous fields and countries in broadening our students' horizons. We distribute it to all parents and guests who visit our school during registration and school advertising days. We also post the project promotion film on our school's website and social media channels."

5. EU Education Projects in Covid-19 Pandemic

The following are the two sub-themes that have emerged from this theme:

5.1. Pandemic's Negative Impact on EU Education Projects

The majority of interviewees indicated that the pandemic had a very negative impact on their projects; they also stated that online projects do not fulfill the same goals as programs with direct participation. (T3), as an example, explained the situation in these words:

"Well, we had to do our last activity online. I think our project has been very negatively affected. There is a situation that contradicts the purpose of the project. It would have been more appropriate for the National Agency to extend it for one more year instead of giving an additional six months."

5.2. Transformation of the Projects

On the question of "What type of changes and transformations do you expect for these projects?" a large number of participants responded that digitalization-related changes are unavoidable. These modifications could allow preschool groups that aren't normally participating in the project to participate, and they also claim that the costs can be cut by hosting the planning meetings online. They also suggested that if the projects are conducted online, even partially, the internet infrastructure in schools should be reinforced. (T3)'s thoughts on the matter are as follows:

"If things keep going this way, it seems that everything in the world will be over Zoom. We went through a similar process: we would normally visit the school and view the wonderful surroundings around us, but due to the pandemic, they created a movie for us to watch. With our students, we sat in front of the computer, watching the school and its environments."

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

According to the preliminary findings of the study, the obstacles commonly encountered by private schools during the application phase of EU education projects include low teacher motivation, communication issues with national education directorates, and the complexity of bureaucratic procedures. EU education projects can be viewed as one of the significant sources of professional development for teachers, it is clear that improving teacher motivation is critical. The motivations of teachers for professional development predict participation in professional development activities and a variety of factors can influence teacher motivation (Richter, Kleinknecht & Gröschner, 2019). According to Demirer and Dak (2019), if teachers have previously produced an EU education project, they may be assigned to write more projects the following year, which is too much for teachers. They claim the increased workload leads to a lack of motivation and inefficiency. Besides that, other studies in the literature show that disadvantaged working conditions and workload of private school teachers negatively affect their performance, job satisfaction, and professional development (Çimen & Karadağ, 2020; Chudgar&Sakamoto, 2021, Uğurlu & Sözer Özdemir, 2021; Manikandan, & Suresh, 2021; Gündüz, 2005), which is consistent with the findings of this study in the context of applying to EU education projects.

It may be suggested that, in order to boost the engagement of private school instructors in EU education programs, working conditions be improved and legal procedures made to increase their motivation. Participation in EU education programs may potentially be a significant condition for governmental financial support for private schools.

The findings of this study reveal that throughout the application process for EU education projects, private school personnel have communication issues with national education directorates, as well as problems stemming from negative bureaucratic attitudes. The participants reported that they were quite exhausted, especially in the paperwork, and that each officer said different things and misled them. In Turkey, research on national education directorates backs up the above findings. According to Kulaksz (2010), it is a concern that during the approval process, provincial national education directorates request unneeded documentation from teachers who travel overseas as part of EU education programs. In a study conducted by Birel and Başar (2010), they found that formal correspondence in education directorates is problematic. According to Aktan (2018), qualities such as empathy, professional expertise, and guidance are among the values that are least featured in the strategic plans of provincial national education directorates. Ardıç and Aslanargun (2020) also determined that human- and bureaucratic-related issues are among the most fundamental issues confronting administrators in district national education directorates. It is advised that new studies be conducted on school participation in EU initiatives and the challenges that arise from national education directorates. Furthermore, all relevant personnel of the national education directorate can be given in-service training on EU education and youth programs, and school participation in EU education projects can be considered an important factor in the promotion of national education administrators to higher positions.

The findings of the study demonstrate that, in order to enhance involvement in EU education projects, school administrations might provide monetary and moral incentives to teachers who participate in these projects. In addition, to encourage involvement in projects, schools receive training and consulting services. Relevant studies show that better salary is one of the key aspects that influences the morale and motivation of instructors in private schools (Ertürk, 2017; Din, Malik, & Afzal, 2019). Besides, Artvinli, Çetintaş, and Terzi (2020) stated that the practices in the scientific counseling process for teachers contributed positively to teachers' professional development during the project preparation phase. In a study of 4006 TUBITAK science fairs held in schools, Okuyucu (2019) also concluded that teachers and students require expert assistance. However, according to Demirer and Dak's study (2019), some schools with low institutional capacity may apply for a project by having the support of consulting and training firms. As a result, they warn that project quality may suffer and that schools may be required to return project funds to the Turkish National Agency.

The findings of the study revealed that private schools' participation in EU education projects produces several contributions, both individually and institutionally. It not only raises the school's institutional status but also broadens the school's experience in collaboration with other institutions. It also contributes to the professional growth of teachers as well as the academic development of pupils, particularly in terms of foreign language abilities. It also contributes significantly to both their personal and cultural development. According to Kulaksız (2010), EU projects improve the popularity of the school and give it prestige. In line with our findings, Kesik and Balcı (2016) classified the contributions of EU education projects to schools in a scale development study they conducted: Institutional Development, Personal/Professional Development, Social Development, Foreign Language Learning, and Cultural Development. According to Tavşan's (2013) research, Comenius School Partnerships Projects improved education quality by fostering intercultural conversation, improving foreign language acquisition, developing European consciousness, and enhancing teacher and student participation in projects.

The participants were also found to be involved in dissemination and promotion efforts after the project, according to this study. These activities can be viewed as both a tool for promoting the school and a requirement the European Commission must meet. In all communication and dissemination activities and outputs, such as events, internet websites, and publications, beneficiaries must prominently acknowledge the European Union's contribution (European Commission, 2021). However,

participants' concerns that national education directorates are unresponsive to the announcement and promotion of these projects' outcomes should be noted.

Aside from the ones described above, some of the findings in our study are regarded as significant in terms of their contribution to the literature. It is deemed important that the outcomes such as the functionality of EU education projects during the Covid-19 pandemic and the transformation they will undergo during this process, the fact that parents may cause some difficulties to school management regarding their children's participation in EU education projects and that some private school owners attempt to incorporate grants from these initiatives to the school budget in ways that are not consistent with the project's goals. Furthermore, by examining the problems encountered by private schools during the project process, we hoped to start a discussion about why private schools' participation in EU education projects decreased despite the relative increase in the number of private schools and their proportional increase in the Turkish Education System. Undoubtedly, this phenomenological study has significant shortcomings. This survey only included employees working in private schools in Istanbul; research can also be undertaken based on the perspectives of private school staff working in different provinces. Furthermore, the research was based solely on the opinions of private school personnel; studies including students, parents, provincial and district directors of national education, and National Agency staff will ensure that the findings of this study are more accurately analyzed.

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Statements of publication ethics

We hereby declare that the study has not unethical issues and that research and publication ethics have been observed carefully.

Examples of author contribution statements

D.B. searched the literature, collected, presented and interpreted data, wrote the conclusion and discussion part of the manuscript. M.B. gave the idea for the thesis topic, contributed the literature, interpreted data, encouraged D.B., supervised the findings of this work. Both authors discussed the results and contributed to the final manuscript.

Researchers' contribution rate

The study was conducted and reported with equal collaboration of the researchers.

Ethics Committee Approval Information

This study was approved by the Ethical Committee of Educational Studies of Istanbul Medeniyet University (Date: 01/02/2021; No.: 2021/02-02).

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