

EFIL: long term educational exchanges for secondary school pupils in Europe

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EFIL is the European Federation for Intercultural Education in Europe, a federation of 22 NGOs dedicated to the promotion of intercultural education through the exchange of pupils in secondary schools (efil.afs.org). More than 10,000 volunteers are organised in some 500 local chapters in the following countries:

- * Austria
- * Belgium
- * Czech Republic
- * Denmark
- * Finland
- * France
- * Germany
- * Hungary
- * Iceland
- * Italy
- * Latvia
- * Netherlands
- * Norway
- * Portugal
- * Russia
- * Slovakia
- * Spain
- * Sweden
- * Switzerland
- * Turkey
- * United Kingdom

Within this network, **932 European pupils are currently spending their 11th or 12th year in a school of another European country** and live as members of a family selected and supported by EFIL volunteers. This programme has been in effect since 1971 and the number of intra-European exchanges has doubled in the latest 10 years.

EFIL belongs to the worldwide network of AFS Intercultural Programs (www.afs.org): under the AFS scheme another 4,000 European pupils are spending a school year in North and South America, in China, Japan, South East Asia, Australia, New Zealand, Egypt, Tunisia and South Africa – while almost the same number of pupils from those regions are currently hosted in Europe by European schools and families for a year.

Efil and the European Institutions

EFIL has cooperated with the educational projects of the Commission since 1974: EFIL experts have provided advice and input on matters that had to do with mobility and intercultural education. For instance, in 1975 EFIL conducted the first “exchange of young workers”, that later led to the establishment of PETRA and LEONARDO. In 1980-81 EFIL completed an extensive study on different types of educational exchanges in Europe (“Fifteen Studies on Youth Mobility in Europe”). Throughout the 80’s EFIL participated in consultations on the development of ERASMUS. The most recent work is the survey on “Mobility of Secondary School Pupils and Recognition of Study Period Spent Abroad” (2003) (efil.afs.org/act/ge_mobility.htm).

EFIL has also been an active partner of the Directorates of Education and of Youth in the Council of Europe: several international symposia in Strasbourg were dedicated to youth mobility and education and, more recently, a pilot three month exchange of secondary school pupils between Western and Eastern European countries was implemented between 1998 and 2002, thanks to a grant of the Norwegian government. An example of this cooperation is the paper on “Youth Mobility: the Challenge of Quality” prepared for the European conference of the ministers of youth in 1994.

A pedagogical approach

Within EFIL and AFS pupil exchanges are seen as a way to achieve a better understanding of oneself and of one's own culture through the "mirror" of other cultures. In the past 30 years EFIL and its member organisations have cooperated with teachers' and head-teachers' associations to investigate the tools that may help pupils to acquire an intercultural attitude and numerous publications bear witness of this effort, especially in Austria, Belgium, Finland, Italy, Spain.

Since 1985 AFS works within an educational framework, which includes specific educational goals as defined by experts in international education from 16 countries. In order to achieve these goals, the world-wide organisation uses an orientation and counselling programme that helps exchange students to develop their intercultural skills. Several organisations have also developed quality charters (www.aja.org, [www.\(Finnish\).==](http://www.(Finnish).==)) which have inspired the EU Commission's quality mobility charter.

Leading interculturalists and members of SIETAR (Society for Intercultural Education Training and Research) have been associated with AFS and EFIL in this effort. The most recent example is the three year study under completion by Professor Mitchell Hammer to assess the intercultural competencies that a pupil may acquire during one year of school in another country. This study involved 1500 pupils (www.intercultural.org/idi/idi.html).

Monitoring the results

On the operational and logistical side, AFS and EFIL have adopted a system of evaluation through questionnaires that are submitted by all pupils involved, their natural parents, their host parents abroad, their host school. They were developed by an independent agency (*Service Plus* in Switzerland) in their starting phase and are now continued in-house. In addition, all national members of AFS and EFIL evaluate one another's work in the areas of psychological and pedagogical support on an annual basis.

The level of satisfaction expressed by pupils and their parents is positive in over 90% of the cases. The satisfaction of the host families is positive in 75% of the case. The satisfaction of the host schools is also positive in 75% of the cases.

Other empirical researches have been conducted by study groups within our organisation to assess the specific learning that occurs while on an exchange program: foreign language acquisition, communication skills, social skills, increased ability for independent study, public speaking, human development, intercultural sensitivity, world affairs interest, citizenship.

Mitchell Hammer's study is the most sophisticated attempt that AFS/EFIL have made to measure the level of intercultural competence that is achievable by secondary school pupils during a year in another country: it is a tool that deals with the educational value of the exchange. The more personal impact on the students has been highlighted by the Council of Europe's 5 year evaluation of its east-west exchanges (www.efil.afs.org/==).

Upper secondary pupil mobility in the ILLP programme

EFIL has been asked to make recommendations on the paper about "Upper secondary pupil mobility in the ILLP programme" and wishes to submit the following observations drawn from its experience:

1. Two keys to success: host families and out-of-school counsellors

In our experience host families and out-of-school counsellors have been the keys to a successful integration of a foreign pupil in the community.

A satisfactory experience depends much more on the host family than on the host school: a pupil may gradually accept a different school system and do well, if he/she is happy and at ease with the host family. The contrary is usually not true: most exchange pupils fail also at school, if they are not adequately supported at home.

Approximately 50-60% of the pupils require intensive counselling sessions during their stay abroad (and half of them need to change host families). Again we have found that the biggest responsibility lies with the out-of-school counsellor, who has a more comprehensive view of the pupil's needs and of his/her relations with the hosting environment: family, peers, friends.

2. Host-families

In the case of AFS/EFIL host-families are found by volunteers, who interview each potential host family and prepare a set of information, to enable the national staff to do a successful matching. In 28% of the cases the matching is not successful and the volunteers or staff have to look for a second or even a third host family.

We support the Commission's current thinking on not paying families. Pupils should expect to become members of their host family – not guests or economic agents.

3. Counsellors – tutors – mentors

In our case, each student is supported by two volunteer counsellors: the policy of AFS/EFIL is to have a tutor at school for academic issues and a counsellor outside of the school for all other needs: conflicts with the host family, socialisation problems, sentimental problems, homesickness, medical emergencies, disciplinary problems, drug problems, financial difficulties, out-of-school activities, management of free time.

4. Pre-departure training – orientation

Pupils receive an intercultural orientation course in their home town by local volunteers who have been trained for this purpose. At the national level, they are grouped by departure dates, which vary according to the beginning of the school year in each country, and they received last-minute orientation the day before departure. Our experience tells us that orientation at the time of departure is much less effective than orientation weeks or months before departure in one's own home town.

Training and lodging costs for these activities are carried by our organisation.

5. Recognition of study abroad

Recognition of study period abroad is still an unresolved issue in many countries: the EFIL survey of 2003 shows that only a handful of countries have a clear policy either set by the government or practiced by the schools. Elsewhere schools seem reluctant or uninformed or even opposed to long term pupil mobility.

We welcome the current thinking of the EU Commission to provide funding in those cases where schools validate the exchange experience. It is important for the sending schools to remain in close contacts with their pupils in that case.

One of the issues in the recognition debate is that schools seem to deal with individual exchanges predominantly in terms of curricula and equivalence of courses. At the most they see only the linguistic benefits of the exchange. There is a real obsession with the issue of evaluating pupils who follow a different curricula abroad. The “human growth” of the pupils is difficult to assess. The Council of Europe’s pilot project has clearly demonstrated that pupils tend to do academically better after an exchange, in all study fields.

6. Funding

AFS and EFIL have noticed that the most relevant costs connected with their individual mobility programme are not the logistical ones (international travel and insurance), but the ones related to the well-being of the pupils abroad: preparation and orientation before departure, post-arrival orientation, language training, counselling, school books and equipment, local transportation to/from school, school meals, evaluation sessions during the year, end-of-year assessment and preparation to returning home.

7. Legal aspects

Parents have become rather quick in bringing a host-family or a host-school to Court, if they are not fully satisfied with the programme. In our case, AFS bears full legal responsibility for the well-being of the students and stands in Court if a case arises. Therefore we recommend to look carefully into the tripartite agreement that is suggested in the paper under consideration, to clarify – for instance – who is responsible if a host-family “misbehaves” towards the hosted pupil and the natural parents decide to take legal action.

8. Preparing the ground

The most shocking result of our survey in 2003 was the very high number of schools that did not return our questionnaire or refused an interview with the head-teacher or gave opposite answers to the same factual questions within the same country. The issue of individual student mobility seems to be a rather “unknown animal” throughout Europe and it will require much more information and clarity on procedures and roles.

It would be useful to set quality standards for the schools as well as for cooperating organisations that may help the schools in carrying out the programme. The European Head Teachers’ Association has discussed this point on many occasions in order to help to identify good practices and avoid improvisation.

In order to launch a successful programme, the Commission and the National Agencies must address these issues and be ready to provide adequate training, support and guidance to the participating schools.