Research report:

factors supporting **learning** in mobility projects

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UNIQUE YEAR OF LEARNING

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Conclusions from the *interviews* with participants of the European *Youth in Action* Programme

Description of the research

Aim

To identify and describe factors supporting learning in mobility projects in order to organise learning in the way that gives as much space as possible for those factors.

Method: Phenomenological analysis.

Number of texts/interviews: 10

Interviewees:

- Have experienced mobility projects themselves.
- Are able to tell their story in the languages of the interviewers.

Type of mobility projects: Youth exchange - 4, International training course - 4, Long term voluntary service - 2, Study visit - 1

Location of projects: Spain - 3, Lithuania - 3, Latvia - 1, Georgia - 1, China - 1, Guatemala - 1

Process of interviews

The main aim of each interview was to encourage people to say as much as possible about how they lived their mobility projects.

There is no limit to what they say - it can be just too little. So we asked the questions and let them talk. If they didn't get to the point of talking about "learning factors of the mobility experience", as such, it is not a problem. Actually it is good. We just need a description of their lived experience to see if there are any results.

Questions we asked

1. Please remember different mobility projects you have been in.

2. Choose the one you feel you learned the most or you feel it is the strongest, most colourful. Tell your story of it from beginning to the end as detailed as possible.

We could also ask additional questions during the interview. Questions like:

- The brightest moments of this experience?

- The strongest learning moments during this experience?

- How did you experience help during this experience?

- Are you grateful for something after this experience?

- Anything else to add?

Three interviews were made by Arturas Deltuva. 7 more interviews were recorded by the three people interviewed by Arturas. So we collected 10 interviews to be analysed. The three interviewers were:

Laimonas Ragauskas, Aga Byrczek and Juste Rakauskiene.

Analyzing the texts

We based our procedure on one of the classics described by A. Giorgi. (Giorgi A. Phenomenology and Psychological Research. Pittsburg: PA, Sagnesne University Press 1985) and adapted by A. Deltuva (PhD paper "Personal development in long term training programs for youth leaders" 1999) and A. Cepiene (PhD paper "Phenomenological perspective on development of transversal competences in professional training" 2010).

Step by step procedure

All texts were transformed into less subjective language or one could say into a more unified language used in the framework of education.

Main content centres related to the process and outcomes of the mobility process were identified by researchers; it is important in this process not to "invent" anything different from what is said by interviewees, but to identify what has really happened.

Every individual text was reviewed again and the content was sorted according to previously identified content centres. If I noticed some content that I was not able relate to any previously identified content centres, I added a new content centre. The aim is not to lose the content of experience described by participants. What follows is a collection of the insights voiced by participants, arranged by content centre.

Results of the research

The main learning factor for him was his personal interest formed from a previous mobility experience

Did not have a plan, but had a strong intuitive direction according to which she was developing herself and improved

Strong interest has helped to achieve their learning objectives independent of (not) receiving ideal learning conditions

Strong personal interest

Made all possible efforts to achieve her learning objectives; his own curiosity was very helpful

She participated in the difficult to reach, but desired country, where she got to only after overcoming many obstacles; so her participation was highly motivated, responsible and with great enthusiasm

Moments when he had a possibility to learn, to ask questions according to his interests were the most useful for him

Strong personal interest

Strong personal interest made their learning possible even when ideal learning conditions were not present and it also made their learning more fruitful. The interest could be very clear and conscious or intuitive but emotionally charged. The person with strong personal interest is looking for flexible space in the programme to reach their learning objectives. If the programme is too structured, based on the organisers' needs oriented it might provoke irritation and dissatisfaction of the learner or it might even provoke even stronger effort to strive for their learning.

A learning opportunity which is difficult to reach but desirable creates additional motivation to reach it and to participate as fully as possible. This interest (or lack of interest) might be rooted in their previous successful (or unsuccessful) learning experiences.

Transformed quotes from the interviews are highlighted in this report with bullet points.

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- The main learning factor for him was his personal interest formed from a previous mobility experience.

- Strong interest has helped to achieve their learning objectives independent of (not) receiving ideal learning conditions.

- She participated in the difficult to reach, but desired country, where she got to only after overcoming many obstacles; so her participation was highly motivated, responsible and with great enthusiasm.

- Proactive efforts to communicate brought to the new level of interaction.

They could be both organised and spontaneous moments

The formal part of the programme was a hindrance for achieving his learning goals. Because it felt as though it was established according to the organisers' wishes, rather than according to the learning objectives of the learners. He felt frustration because of that.

Moments when he had a possibility to learn, to ask questions according to his interests where most useful for him

He was irritated by an overload of formal activities that didn't meet his learning aims; and unstructured time when she could talk according to her honest interest was the most useful. Some of the organised parts of the programme only hindered personal learning goals.

Learning was useful in those moments when he made a conscious effort to achieve the learning objectives and it was possible to have a sincere contact with the person of other culture

Knowledge of learning mechanisms

Knowledge of learning mechanisms helps participants to be self-directed learners and to reach their learning results even when ideal learning conditions are not completely provided.

- She knew about a use of mentoring and could find it herself when it was needed.

- He used his knowledge of how to structure learning (active interaction and reflection time possibility) for his own learning.

- She managed to find the group of people as the non-judgemental space where she could understand her situation and herself better.

- His learning interest is coming from his experience that intense contact, an intense personal relationship is enriching.

- She understood that her knowledge about learning mechanisms allowed her to learn even if support from the side of the organisers is not ideal.

- It was difficult in the group; he couldn't find the way to communicate with the rest of the group; there was anger growing, he did not know what to do; he didn't know where and how to look for help.

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The learning moment for him was when had to be in international group for a common task and they had to use the content of educational program so far

Though the learning process required and effort, but it was followed with a sense of meaning

Informal, unstructured time helps to achieve the unexpected discoveries; Informal communication spaces made room for spontaneous and personally important learning

Authentic, real experience

She was fully mobilized, has gone through very strong emotions (fear, or will to do it, anger, due to obstacles, joy and relief when the threat has passed), the moments of existential fragility (she has experienced fragility of human life - unexpected deaths of people with whom she became very close), compassion and a sincere desire to help, a full sense of responsibility for the people that she had to care about

The need to create a vivid result for local community made her participation live and motivates

Her feeling that she is doing some real stuff, that her contribution is very important to the local community, that there is nobody standing behind to correct her in case of mistake, made her feel very responsible and motivated

Direct interaction (semi-organised and informal) with people from another culture (local or/and international)

The learning moment for him was when had to be international group for common tasks and they had to use the content of educational programme so far

Real, authentic experience

Real, authentic experience means that learning experience goes beyond the isolated learning situation. It has direct link to the daily life of participants or to the daily life of other people (usually it is a local community), it is partly based on honest spontaneous interaction with people of another culture, the interaction is based on honest interest. This kind of experience is followed with emotional involvement and increasing motivation, with an appearing sense of meaning. It motivates to put efforts to overcome difficult, uncomfortable moments during the mobility project.

- Implementation of knowledge gotten so far made him aware of his learning results; Real learning happened because of close to reality task; The learning moment made him feel exited; Now he is exited to realised that he learned and he is using in in his daily life.

- The brightest learning - to do a real stuff (writing an application together in the international group).

- Interaction with local community with a lot of mutual trust and interest.

- Obviously missed an opportunity of natural communication with the hosting country participants.

- Learning was useful in those moments when they had a possibility of sincere contact with people from another culture.

- He could interact with different people from the hosting country honestly and naturally and by this he was experiencing and learning the real life of that country.

Push for intercultural challenge

Interviewees in most cases recognise their tendency to stay in their comfortable conditions (some might even say "comfort zone"), but they also recognise that accepting the intercultural challenge is fruitful in the sense of learning and personal development. This challenge comes like a push from outside by giving hints to "go for it", by giving activities, inviting (I say pushing) to act in intercultural groups, staying in the foreign culture/country.

- She had the process of moving from not enjoyable beginning with lack of social network and lack of understanding to the more balanced state when the social network was establishing and she understood the context better.

- She learned to create an acceptable social distance to different people according to her needs and interpersonal synergy. It was new and annoying to have a big emotional distance and still do something together. She learned to accept it: she got experiential material to reflect on her character, her communication strategies, her ability to compromise her wishes and visions on how things should happen; she became more aware of her limits but also she kept being optimistic because of her ability to develop herself and because of more vivid directions of her further personal development; real, though uncomfortable interaction with new people helped her to face and know herself better.

He felt that forcing the group of participant to leave their national sub-groups and to join divers groups was sometimes challenging but fruitful at the end. It appeared to be useful to stay in groups without participants from the same country: it becomes a motivating challenge, it is interesting and they could experiment with other ways to communicate, not just verbal communication.

It helps to leave the safe cocoon at home and help to dare to believe that "it is realistic" to go away for a long time was very useful and encouraging

Push for intercultural challenge

Happy to have experience of staying in an uncomfortable country for him, but the country with more challenges. It helped to grow on the personal level.

New activity with the challenge helps to learn a lot and has higher residual impacts

Got out of the comfort zone by becoming a part of athe group with uncomfortable people

Exchanges were full of experiences with a real challenge (city tasks, climate), which left a deep impression, and enhanced self-confidence

See also: *Safe space for reflection*

Safe space for reflection

Safe space for reflection is named as a need to counterbalance the challenging part of intercultural experience during mobility projects. National groups or just groups where someone feels safe, proper moments and methods serves well for this counterbalance. Lack of it is experienced in a very negative way, especially in the case when knowledge of experiential learning mechanisms was absent.

- Trust between volunteers was essential for feeling safe and therefore able to face real challenges.

- She felt a great need of the space where all the volunteers can speak out openly not about work only, but about all the personal processes in the group and individually.

- He needed moments and methods to reflect and to identify, to verbalise his experience

- Space for self-help, reflection meetings (organised or self-organised) was needed.

- Friends as the safe and supportive space for reflection and for support, honest advice, for comfort and trust were very helpful.

- Support power in the national group:

  Fellow friends from the national group helped a lot: they can talk in their own language and they felt that they could hear and say what they needed.

  The interests of their national group went in different

He needed moments and methods to reflect and to identify, to verbalise his experience

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Safe space for reflection

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See also: *Push for intercultural challenge*

directions; he felt anger and aggression. It was not possible to talk about it, there was no safe space. It was horrible.

Opportunity to reflect on their experience with people in their own language was very useful and appreciated.

Possibility to talk to the person whom she knew very well and had full trust and could speak in her mother tongue was needed.

He appreciated the opportunity to reflect on his experience with a more experienced person from their own culture in their own language.

Quality of intercultural group communication

Quality of intercultural group communication serves as the context for learning in mobility projects. The fact of what is often referred to as "interculturality" in the group has it's own impact already; at least it works as the possibility to open up their own identity. Research data allows us to name a specific list of supportive characteristics of relationships in mobility projects, such as openness, goodwill, respect, trust, mutuality of honest interest, patience. The atmosphere based on this kind of relationship encourages people to speak even if they are not perfect in the foreign language. Supportive atmosphere in intercultural group goes together with quality group process. Time is an important factor here: the group process needs to be "long enough" for participants to go through many experiences and reflect upon them.

- The fact of interculturality in the group:

  Understanding the context of another culture helped her to widen her perspective (there is something more than you are used to).

  The mobility project helped to learn about others and to open herself on a deeper level. She could see other ways of thinking.

- Possibility to represent/open their cultural identity:

  Pleasant and motivating feeling of belonging and being recognised.

  She was proud of their behavior that has touched the local community stereotypes.

  The opportunity to reveal their culture, created a joyful and motivating sense of recognition.

- Supportive characteristics of relationship:

  Openness, goodwill, communication skills, language knowledge of people from another country helped her personal learning process.

  Moments of honest sharing, mutuality of their interest were enriching.

  Interaction with local community was based on big trust to them from the local community and trust between volunteers.

  Supporting, helping relation with respect and patience was felt as very useful.

  Open and honest atmosphere in the international group.

- Language:

  Supportive atmosphere helped and encouraged them to speak in imperfect English.

  Foreign language was a challenge and a learning opportunity at the same time.

- Length and continuity of the process:

  It was the first continuous experience of living away from his parents. So he had to learn to live it.

  Long-lasting experience of autonomy, self-dependence was useful.

  A longer process helps to reach comfortable level of interaction.

- Quality group process:

  Helping the group to get to know each other in order to create honesty in the group and to be able to function as a group.

He felt the lack of possibility to communicate in small groups sincerely and informally.

He felt the lack of possibilities to socialise informally and sincerely.

Possibility to get to know the group to create the atmosphere of sincerity in the group was missing.

Experience of help and group support helps to feel part of the group.

The way of organising (dynamic, involving, supportive) was more important than the topic of the mobility project. It helped to feel comfortable and to be participative, to be involved, to be part of the group.

Structured work in small groups or even pairs was useful for the group atmosphere and personal learning.

The organisers took care of the intercultural group process and well-being of participants by giving clear structure. This created a warm, friendly atmosphere in the international group.

Help of organisers/educators

We have a big list of possible educational support divided in sub-categories: organisational support, individual support, encouraging group process, framing the program, attitude of the educator. This support was experienced by the interviewees. But in most cases we had to ask directly for this to be named, unless people felt the lack of something. They didn't mention support of educators without being asked when support was there.

- Organisational support:

    Proper information about unexpected and expected events.

    Organisational help by mother organisations during and even after working hours.

- Individual support:

    The working conditions also contribute to the learning success.

    Availability for help including after the project if experience was intensive.

    Encouragement to dream and to follow the dream.

    To have individual mentoring in order to help the person to transform experience into learning experience: what is going on with you and how you can use it.

    Helping to learn about learning mechanisms so people can learn themselves even if support from the side of organisers is not ideal.

- Encouraging the group process:

    Helping the group to get to know each other in order to create honesty in the group and to be able to function as the group.

    He felt the lack of possibility to communicate in small groups sincerely and informally.

He felt a lack of getting to know each other and because of this to start communicating sincerely.

Structured work in small groups or even in pairs helped.

He felt the influence of the organisers by making the learning process involving, participatory and he liked this influence due to the friendly, encouraging relationship to the group.

He feels that the positive atmosphere in the group was encouraged by the team and it was crucial for learning success.

She appreciates activities that help to create a supportive group atmosphere.

The organisers took care of the intercultural group process and well-being of participants by giving clear structure. This created a warm, friendly atmosphere in the international group.

Activities uniting groups and encouraging interaction, helping to trust each other create a feeling of togetherness, the joy of togetherness in the group of different people.

The atmosphere for open participation with opportunity to say honest opinions (including critical) and honest emotions without fear was created.

Organisers encouraged a positive atmosphere in the group and in the learning process.

- Framing the programme:

    Flexibility in the program. The pressure by the organisers to generate the pre-planned product felt like not being useful at all. He felt the program was well structured, but flexible and possible to change according to the changes in the learning and group processes.

    She appreciated the involving, interactive methodology that creates honest interaction and gives space for personal contribution.

He was not looking for or expecting any educational help; but was very happy to have at least a small organised activity.

Informal socialising space encouraging natural interaction according to authentic interest.

Organised unusual experience leaving deep impression.

The best help of organisers - not overloaded programme.

Giving a helpful framework for close-to-reality activity was experienced as helpful.

Invited experts help to learn skills.

- Attitude of educators:

A friendly relationship of the expert and personal attention helped and encouraged participants to learn new skills.

The interest in the subject and in the group by the educators was encouraging to learn.

The diagram contains these speech bubbles around a central node "Joy of togetherness in the group of different people":

- Activities together create a feeling of togetherness, joy of togetherness in the group of different people
- Experience of togetherness on all levels – topic, living, emotional interaction
- He had a feeling of a unique experience because of the unique group of similar age and interests and they will never see each other again
- At first participants remained in their groups by nationality. It was annoying. Only at the end of the project he found a link with other groups of participants. He experienced a great deal of excitement. Other groups of participants showed sympathy for their group. He experienced pleasantly surprising interest of people from other countries to him and his national group
- They experienced a pleasant and motivating feeling of belonging and being recognised
- He felt a very close relationship to people from other countries. It was a new, never experienced before feeling. Although before the exchange he had doubts if he was able to become part of the international group and if the group will accept him.

Joy of togetherness in the group of different people

I was very happy to recognise this phenomenon of mobility projects, because I have experienced it myself many times and I value it so much. Is it a learning factor? I think so. Why I think so? I don't know.

- Experience of togetherness on all levels – topic, living, emotional interaction.

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Conclusions

Conclusions

Experience of the interviewees of the research factors supporting learning in mobility is structured in 8 main content centres:

Strong personal interest made their learning possible even when the learning conditions were poor or not there at all. Strong personal interest made their learning more fruitful. The interest could be very clear and conscious or intuitive but emotionally charged. The person with strong personal interest is looking for flexible space in the program to reach their learning objectives. Too structured, organisers' needs-oriented programme might provoke irritation and dissatisfaction of the learner or it provokes even stronger effort to strive for their learning. Difficult to reach but desirable learning opportunity creates additional motivation to go for it and to participate as full as possible. The interest (or lack of interest) might be rooted in their previous successful (or unsuccessful) learning experiences

Knowledge of learning mechanisms helps participants to be self-directed learners and to reach their learning results even when learning conditions are not completely there.

Real, authentic experience here means the moments that learning experience goes beyond the isolated learning situation. It has a direct link to the daily life of participants or to the daily life of other people (usually - a local community), part of this is an honest spontaneous interaction with people of another culture, the interaction is based on their honest interest. This kind of experience is followed with emotional involvement and increasing motivation, with appearing sense of meaning. It motivates participants to put an effort to overcome difficult, uncomfortable moments during the mobility project.

Interviewees in most cases recognise their tendency to stay in their comfortable conditions, but they also recognise that accepting the intercultural challenge is fruitful in the sense of learning and personal development. This challenge comes like a push from the outside by giving hints to "go for it", by giving activities, by inviting (I say pushing) to act in intercultural groups, by staying in the foreign culture/country long enough.

Safe space for reflection goes with the need for a counterbalance to the challenging part of intercultural experience during mobility projects. National groups or just groups where someone feels safe, proper moments and methods supports this counterbalance. Lack of it is experienced in a very negative way, especially in the case when knowledge of (experiential ?) learning mechanisms was absent.

Strong personal interest:

Knowledge of learning mechanisms:

Real, authentic experience:

Push for intercultural challenge:

Safe space for reflection:

Quality of intercultural group communication:

The quality of intercultural group communication serves as the context for learning in mobility projects. The fact of interculturality in the group has it's own impact already at least it works as the possibility to open up their own identity and to realise the difference of others as the resource. Research data allows to name a specific list of supportive characteristics of relationships in mobility projects, such as openness, goodwill, respect, trust, mutuality of honest interest, patience. The atmosphere based on this kind of relationship encourages people to speak even if they are not perfect in the foreign language. The supportive atmosphere in the intercultural group goes together with a quality group process. Long enough group process is part of it.

Help of educators/ organisers:

We have a big list of possible educational support divided in sub-categories: organisational support, individual support, encouraging group process, framing the program, attitude of educator. These types of support were experienced by the interviewees. But in most of the cases we had to ask directly for this to be named. They didn't mention the support of educators without being asked about it. Unless people felt a lack of something, they were mentioning unfulfilled needs.

Joy of togetherness in the group of different people:

It is a feeling of connection with people from another context, another culture. It is followed with feelings of joy, positive surprise, motivation to participate and to keep in touch. I was very happy to recognise this phenomenon of mobility projects, because I have experienced it myself many times and I value it so much. Is it a learning factor? I think so. Why I think so? I don't know.

Follow-up possibilities

It is useful and recommended that international mobility organisers and educators:

1. Analyse what they recognise from the results of this research

2. Discuss what they can do intentionally in order to foster the learning factors during learning mobility projects.

3. Share the results with participants and ask them if they recognise their own experience? If they learnt something from the research? If anything important was missed?

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It is important to understand that the learning factors identified during the research can serve as the principles, but not as a specific recipe "how to do". The specific 'how" should come from creative solutions adapted according to the specific group and specific context.
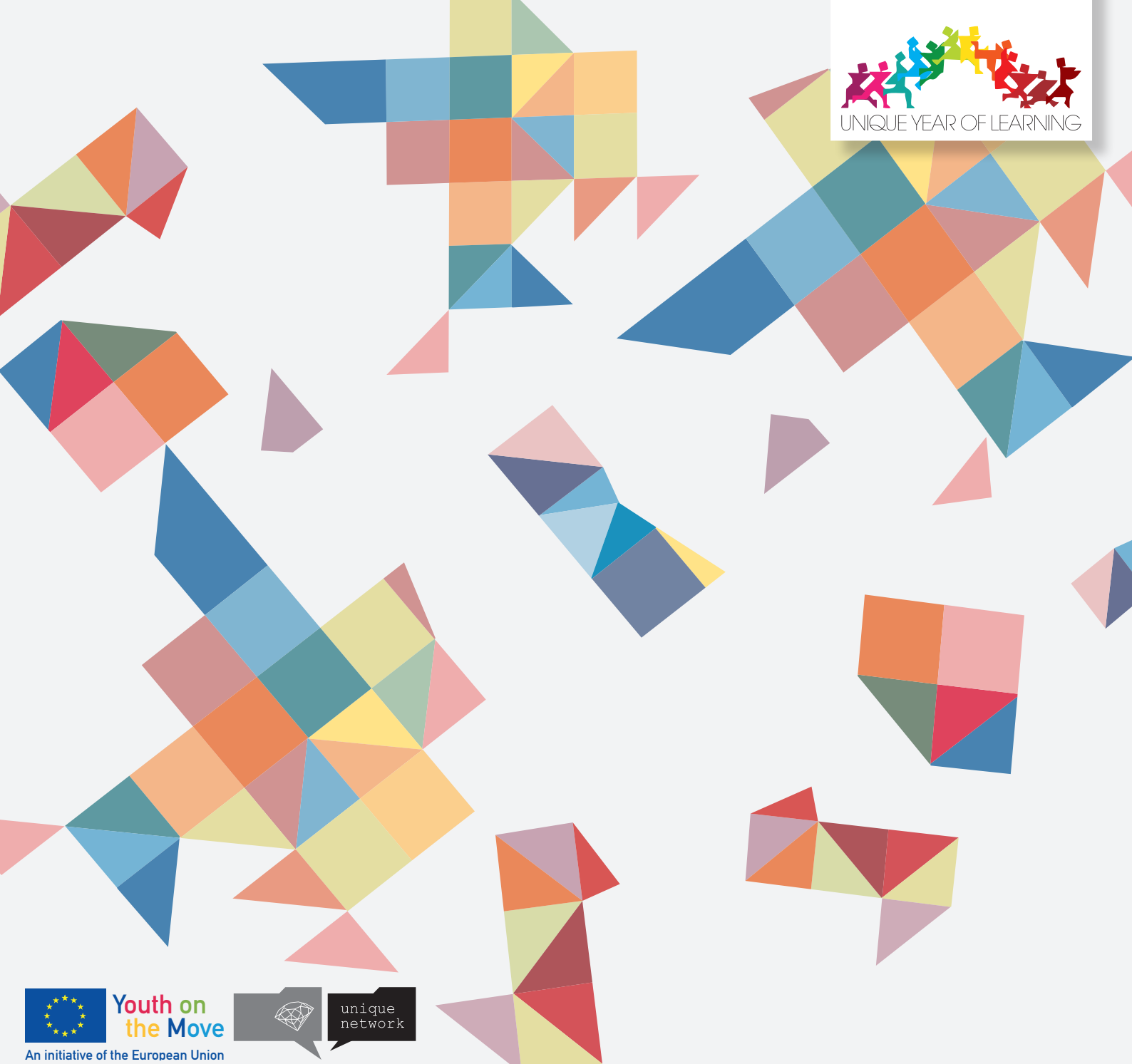
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