

The importance of motivation and interest

The initial experience of presenting at a conference in Athens 2014 was meaningful to me. Firstly, by feeling valued for my knowledge and input, but also for being able to share my interest in Greek philosophy and its relation to my own concepts/ideas regarding living as an autistic person. This led on to a meeting with others who were also to become involved in the Transform Autism Education project, as they had just received news that the project had received funding. This meeting helped indicate to me some of the structural and cultural differences in Greece in terms of how services and schools are arranged with regard to autistic pupils, and about how school life and teaching was organized. This encounter led to my own involvement in the project, yet also showed how great autistic participation in the project was possible plus the suggestion of involving lead autistic consultants for the project within the Greek and Italian teams. It also gave me a sense of value in terms of having insider knowledge for others to draw upon. These links also provided ways in which to combine my previous knowledge with new cultural knowledge, which could make my own contributions more useful and meaningful. I thought about the cultural differences and I felt that those centered around stigma. As a result of stigma, it is not easy to be open and positive about autistic identity. One of the issues I picked up through visits to schools, for example, was that many pupils were clearly undiagnosed. By applying this new found knowledge with that of others on the project, we not only involved autistic consultants, but also increased autistic participation at transnational meetings. At the fourth transnational meeting in Birmingham, I suggested further autistic involvement in this. This was spearheaded and implemented by the project manager, leading to her involving twelve autistic people in the next transnational meeting. The process has been realised in terms of greater participation and learning throughout the team on autistic participation more generally. Being part of a wider transformative change within the field, where autistic participation has moved from being relatively unheard of or tokenistic to now being considered the new standard in the field, this project has also shown the potential for wider changes in this area internationally. It has also highlighted that autistic participation is by no means straight forward. We have all understood the need to reconsider what community

means for different people, and we need to think carefully about the role of the autistic person and what participation actually means for them.

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