



# Diversity, Belonging, and European Identity: A Case Study of the Bridging Borders Project

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## Abstract

This paper examines how contrasting local environments contribute to the development of intercultural competence, a sense of European citizenship or European identity among teenagers. The Erasmus+/eTwinning project Bridging Borders, Embracing Diversity – Learning Through Travel brought together students from three distinct contexts: a rural Slovenian village, the metropolitan city of Hamburg, and the desert island of Fuerteventura. Students aged 13–15 collaborated on six thematic areas—nature, people, language, sustainability, food, and school life—culminating in a co-created multilingual digital pamphlet and post-project reflections. Thematic analysis of these outputs revealed that place-based contrast helped students appreciate cultural and environmental diversity while recognizing commonalities in their daily lives and values. Drawing on the concept of reflexive European identity—formed through dialogue and engagement with difference—this study situates its findings within the broader context of recent research. Studies by Isabell Nic Craith & Laura K. Taylor (2024) and Phillip Jugert et al. (2025) confirm that school-based cross-cultural encounters can meaningfully foster a sense of European identity among youth. Similarly, other research indicates that learning about Europe through civic and collaborative experiences enhances adolescents' identification with Europe. In this project, despite geographical and cultural differences, students consistently reported the realization that “our lives are not that different,” suggesting a strengthened sense of shared identity.

**Keywords:** Diversity, European Identity, European Citizenship, Inclusion, Intercultural Competence

## 1. Introduction

In an increasingly globalised and interconnected world, young people are growing up as members of multiple communities—local, national, and supranational. Among these, European identity has emerged as a key form of what Craith and Taylor (2024) describe as a superordinate identity: one that transcends national borders and has the potential to foster inclusion and reduce intergroup bias. Developing such an identity during adolescence is particularly valuable,

as this is the stage when social attitudes and civic orientations are still forming and thus most open to influence.

According to the European Commission (2016), education plays a vital role in cultivating European citizenship—not merely as knowledge of institutions, but as an attitude of belonging, participation, and shared responsibility. Scholars such as Delanty (2007) describe European identity as reflexive: it is not imposed from above but constructed through engagement with cultural difference and the continuous negotiation of what “being European” means in daily life. This view positions identity as dynamic and dialogic—something experienced and reinterpreted through contact, exchange, and reflection.

Recent research supports this approach. Using a rapid evidence assessment, Craith and Taylor (2024) found that European identity among children and adolescents is shaped less by political knowledge and more by relational experiences—friendship, empathy, and cooperation across borders. Such identity formation is reinforced by intercultural projects, mobility programmes, and collaborative learning contexts that allow students to see themselves as both distinct and connected. Civic and cross-cultural learning experiences positively correlate with adolescents’ sense of belonging to Europe and with their endorsement of democratic and inclusive values.

This paper addresses these challenges by examining how local contrasts—between a rural Slovenian village, metropolitan Hamburg, and the island of Fuerteventura—shaped students’ understanding of identity and belonging in the Erasmus+/eTwinning project *Bridging Borders, Embracing Diversity – Learning Through Travel* (Pipuš, 2024). Through collaborative tasks and reflection, students learned to see Europe not as a distant concept but as a network of shared experiences, values, and responsibilities.



Figure 1: Project logo

Source: Personal archive

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on critical theories of European citizenship and identity, particularly the work of Gerard Delanty (2007), who has interrogated the evolving nature of belonging in a postnational Europe.

Intercultural competence is a key element in education for global and European citizenship. UNESCO (2013) outlines a conceptual and operational framework that emphasizes mutual understanding, respect, and dialogue across difference.

EU citizenship has not replaced nationality, it has reshaped the concept of national identity by introducing new transnational spaces of participation and recognition. Delanty frames this as a shift from citizenship rooted in the nation-state to one negotiated across supranational, national, and local levels, resulting in a more plural and dynamic understanding of what it means to belong in Europe (Delanty, 2007).

Complementing this, Sara Wallace Goodman (2014) examines how EU citizenship functions both symbolically and instrumentally. She notes that EU citizenship adds to national citizenship rather than replacing it. While it enables rights such as free movement, political participation across member states, and consular protection, Goodman argues that access to EU citizenship remains unequal across countries and often lacks the emotional weight of national identity. She highlights the weak affective attachment many citizens feel toward the EU, noting that emotional identification with European identity is often weak, ambiguous, or taken for granted.

Taken together, these perspectives emphasize that European identity is not imposed from above, but emerges through negotiation, interaction, and lived experience. It is both constrained and enriched by its coexistence with national identities. This makes European citizenship not a replacement but a complementary identity, potentially capable of fostering democratic participation, solidarity, and cross-border belonging—especially when supported by educational programs and intercultural encounters.

## **2.2. Research Context**

This paper combines theoretical inquiry with empirical insights drawn from the Erasmus+/eTwinning project Bridging Borders, Embracing Diversity – Learning Through Travel. The project involved over 50 students aged 13–15 from three distinct local contexts: a rural Slovenian village, the metropolitan city of Hamburg (Germany), and the island of Fuerteventura (Spain). These sites were deliberately chosen to reflect contrasting geographic, cultural, and socio-economic environments within Europe.

Participants collaborated across borders researching six thematic areas—nature, people, language, sustainability, food, and education—engaging in both virtual and in-person interactions. Outputs included a co-created multilingual digital pamphlet on the six topics and a range of reflective materials. The project was not only pedagogical but also intercultural, fostering meaningful encounters that prompted students to examine their own identities in relation to others.

Building on this framework, the study aimed to understand how adolescents experience and negotiate European identity through intercultural learning. Specifically, it explored how environmental and cultural contrasts between rural, urban, and island settings shape students' sense of diversity, belonging, and European citizenship. It also examined how mobility, collaboration, and reflection within such projects influence adolescents' intercultural competence and empathy. In this respect, the research assumes that intercultural collaboration within mobility-based education strengthens students' European identity by fostering reflexivity, empathy, and recognition of shared values across contexts.

## **2.3. Data and Analysis**

The study drew on multiple forms of data to capture students' experiences and learning outcomes. These included questionnaire responses, multimedia project outputs, written

reflections, and group workshop logs produced during and after the mobilities. The questionnaire combined both quantitative and open-ended items, providing complementary numerical and narrative insights. All responses were collected anonymously, following Erasmus+ and eTwinning ethical guidelines.

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to examine qualitative materials, identifying how students conceptualized European identity, how local differences contributed to intercultural understanding, and how they reconciled local and European belonging. The analysis followed an inductive, six-step process of coding and theme development. To ensure credibility, two researchers reviewed the coding independently and discussed any discrepancies until consensus was reached.

Quantitative data from the questionnaire were analysed descriptively, with percentages calculated based on the number of respondents per item. Missing responses were excluded from the denominator. Because the survey was anonymous, findings were reported in aggregate form rather than by school site.

Together, these methods provided a coherent picture of how intercultural collaboration, reflection, and place-based contrast shaped students' understanding of European identity and belonging.

### **3. Background**

#### **3.1. European Citizenship: Legal and Political Dimensions**

European Union citizenship was formally introduced by the Maastricht Treaty in 1993. It is a complementary citizenship: every citizen of an EU member state is automatically also a citizen of the European Union. This citizenship grants specific rights that go beyond national borders, including:

1. The right to move and reside freely across the EU.
2. The right to vote and stand in local and European Parliament elections in any member state.
3. The right to consular protection by any EU country when outside the EU.
4. The right to petition EU institutions and access European Ombudsman mechanisms.

However, EU citizenship is not a full political identity. It does not replace national citizenship, nor does it provide a single cultural narrative or emotional attachment. As scholars like Goodman (2014) notes, it functions as a legal framework with aspirational potential—an effort to bind individuals to a supranational project without erasing national belonging.

In contrast to legal citizenship, European identity is a broader and more contested concept. It refers to how individuals feel European—or don't. It can be defined as:

A sense of belonging or identification with Europe as a cultural, political, or historical community, beyond national or regional identities.

European identity can be reflexive, meaning that it forms not through indoctrination or top-down messaging, but through engagement with diversity, travel, language learning, and intercultural encounters (Delanty, 2007). It is also plural and layered, often coexisting with national and local identities rather than replacing them.

Unlike the United States, which has a centralized civic narrative and symbols (flag, anthem, constitution), Europe lacks a single, emotionally resonant story of itself. The EU motto "United

in Diversity" reflects both the aspiration and the difficulty: Europe's strength lies in its pluralism, but this also complicates the formation of a shared identity.

Several challenges remain:

- emotional attachment to Europe remains weak for many citizens,
- identification with the EU varies widely by age, region, and education level,
- there is no "European public sphere" comparable to national media and politics.

Unlike national identity, which is often tied to clear borders, shared language, and cultural similarity, European identity tends to be more layered and plural. People usually do not see themselves as just European—they are German and European, Slovenian and European. This dual sense of belonging reflects the EU's "unity in diversity" model, which values national uniqueness while also building on shared principles like democracy, human rights, and solidarity.

But holding both identities can create friction. National identity is often shaped from a young age—reinforced through school, language, media, and social norms. European identity, by contrast, tends to feel more abstract. It's shaped by institutions and policy, but less visible in everyday life. As Goodman (2014) points out, EU citizenship gives people certain rights, like mobility and access, but does not always offer the same emotional pull or symbolic meaning as national identity.

A comparison with the United States is helpful here. U.S. national identity formed early around shared values, symbols, and a strong narrative of inclusion—what is often called the "melting pot" or "salad bowl." While America has its own divisions, its national identity feels more unified and civic in nature, not just ethnic or historical.

Europe is different. It is not a nation-state, and the EU is not a traditional federation. European identity has to work alongside 27 national stories, languages, and collective memories—including histories marked by war, division, and different worldviews. As a result, being European is often something that is built over time, not inherited—and that can make it feel more fragile.

Education plays a role here too. While American schools often teach national identity directly, European identity tends to grow more indirectly—through programs like Erasmus+, eTwinning, school partnerships, and mobility opportunities. These offer space to experience what it means to be European, but not always the language or tools to talk about it.

Still, strengthening European identity matters—especially now. As the EU faces growing nationalism, misinformation, and global instability, a shared sense of belonging can:

- Build solidarity and reduce prejudice.
- Strengthen democracy by connecting people to institutions.
- Encourage mobility and cooperation across borders.
- Support peace by replacing exclusion with inclusion.

Young people are key. Civic and intercultural experiences increase young people's sense of European belonging. Similarly, Craith and Taylor (2024) found that it is not abstract knowledge, but connection—through empathy, friendship, and shared experience—that drives identity formation.

In that sense, identity is not just symbolic—it is practical. It shapes who gets included, who participates, and who feels at home. Projects like *Bridging Borders* are not about teaching

European identity, but about creating space to live it—through collaboration, contrast, and connection.

### **3.2. Understanding and Measuring European Identity**

Scholars have long debated how to conceptualise and assess European identity, balancing its civic, cultural, and affective dimensions. Bruter (2005) distinguishes between civic identification with European institutions and cultural–emotional attachment to shared values and belonging. This dual perspective remains relevant today, as studies show that adolescents develop European identity not through political knowledge but through interpersonal contact and shared experiences (Craith & Taylor, 2024).

In educational contexts, Byram’s (1997) model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) offers a complementary framework. It emphasises curiosity, openness, and critical cultural awareness as essential to understanding difference and fostering mutual respect. These competencies align with the aims of Erasmus+ projects such as *Bridging Borders*, where learning occurs through cooperation and reflection rather than instruction alone.

Contact theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) provides the psychological mechanism linking interaction and identity. Building on this foundation, contact theory offers a psychological explanation of how interaction between members of different groups can reduce prejudice and foster inclusion. Originally proposed by Allport (1954), the theory argues that meaningful contact under certain conditions encourages individuals to perceive each other not as representatives of separate groups, but as collaborators pursuing shared goals. These optimal conditions include equal status among participants, cooperation rather than competition, the pursuit of common objectives, and the presence of institutional or social support. When these are met, contact leads to greater understanding, empathy, and the dismantling of stereotypes.

Later research has shown that contact does more than reduce bias; it can also promote what is known as identity expansion. Through repeated positive interactions, individuals begin to feel as part of a broader, shared identity. In the European context, such experiences can extend feelings of belonging beyond the national level toward a more inclusive sense of European citizenship.

Within educational settings, these processes are particularly powerful. Intercultural programs like Erasmus+ and eTwinning provide the cooperative, reflective, and institutionally supported environments that allow contact to flourish. When adolescents work together across linguistic and cultural boundaries, they not only practice empathy and communication but also experience, in concrete terms, what it means to belong to a diverse yet connected European community. In this way, contact theory helps explain how structured intercultural learning can transform difference into belonging and support the development of a shared European identity.

## **4. Case Study**

### **4.1. Project Description**

*Bridging Borders, Embracing Diversity – Learning Through Travel* was a collaborative Erasmus+/eTwinning project designed to explore how travel and intercultural exchange can foster European identity, digital literacy, and sustainable awareness among adolescents. Conducted from 2023–2025, the project involved over 75 students (24 from Slovenia, 26 from Germany, and 25 from Spain) aged 13–15 from three diverse school environments:

- OŠ Gustava Šiliha Laporje, Slovenia (rural),
- IES Santo Tomás de Aquino, Fuerteventura, Spain (island),
- Gymnasium Alstertal, Hamburg, Germany (urban).

Participation was voluntary and required parental consent in accordance with Erasmus+ and eTwinning ethical standards. Students were selected through open school calls, and all activities were conducted in compliance with GDPR and local child protection regulations. Each school brought distinct local contexts, educational priorities, and Erasmus+ goals, yet shared a unifying focus: to engage students in experiential learning across six thematic areas—language, people, food, nature, education, and sustainability—through travel, collaborative tasks, and digital platforms.

The project was structured around:

- Three international mobilities (Slovenia, Spain, Germany), each focused on a different theme of tourism (e.g., sustainable tourism, outdoor recreation, European identity).
- Blended collaboration via the eTwinning platform, using tools like Padlet, Canva, Google Maps, and translation apps to connect students asynchronously.
- Hands-on, real-world tasks, such as workshops, field visits, reflection logs, digital storytelling, environmental debates, and language labs.
- A co-created multilingual digital pamphlet as the final product, combining insights from all schools and topics.

The curriculum aligned with Geography, Environmental Science, Cultural Studies, ICT, and Social Studies. Evaluation was built into the project using surveys, rubrics, and both teacher and student reflections.

The overarching aim was to explore how European citizenship and identity are experienced and constructed through cultural exchange, intercultural learning, and digital collaboration, particularly within tourism—a sector inherently shaped by mobility, diversity, and technology.

#### **4.2. Project Findings**

The evaluation combined quantitative ratings and qualitative reflections from over 50 student participants. Not all participants responded to every question; therefore, the number of responses (n) varies by item. Percentages reported below are calculated based on the number of students who answered each question, and missing responses were excluded from analysis. The evaluation survey included both closed-ended (1–5 scale) and open-ended questions. Closed-ended items measured satisfaction across seven dimensions (participation, collaboration, resources, activity design, and overall experience), while open-ended questions invited reflections on learning outcomes, intercultural understanding, and future improvement. The following tables summarise the quantitative and self-reported learning outcomes from the post-project survey.

*Table 1. Quantitative Evaluation of Project Experience (1–5 scale)*

Survey item	n	Mean Score	Interpretation
Satisfaction with participation in the project	60	4.32	High satisfaction
Satisfaction with team members' participation	60	3.88	Fairly high satisfaction
Satisfaction with school resources	60	4.42	High satisfaction
Communication and collaboration with peers	60	4.18	High satisfaction

Survey item	n	Mean Score	Interpretation
Communication and collaboration with teachers	59	4.27	High satisfaction
Quality of activity planning and presentation	60	3.77	Fairly high satisfaction
Overall satisfaction with the project	58	4.38	High satisfaction

*Note.* Scores are reported on a 1–5 scale, where higher values indicate stronger satisfaction or agreement. Source: (Pipuš, 2025).

*Table 2. Self-Reported Learning Outcomes*

Reported learning outcomes	% of respondents
Improved foreign language skills	79.7%
Greater interest in European cultures	73.0%
Better understanding of diversity and unity in Europe	68.9%
More open-minded and respectful toward others	67.6%
Improved digital skills	66.2%
More independent and open to new experiences	66.2%
Increased knowledge on sustainability	56.8%
Developed empathy and emotional awareness	47.3%
Challenged stereotypes	41.9%

*Note.* Percentages reflect the proportion of students selecting each statement among those who responded to the question (*n* varies per item). Source: (Pipuš, 2025).

Qualitative themes were derived through inductive coding of open-ended answers and reflective texts, as described in Section 2.3. The results point to clear educational, intercultural, and personal outcomes. Evaluation data were collected after each international mobility and again at the project’s conclusion in spring 2025. Findings are grouped into thematic areas:

#### **4.2.1 Identity and Belonging**

Over 68% of students reported a stronger understanding of what it means to live in a diverse and united Europe (see Table 2), with many expressing that they came to see their peers from other countries as similar rather than distant. Common comments included:

*“That you have more in common with people from other countries than you think.”*

*“Realizing that we are quite similar.”*

*“Europe works together.”*

The thematic focus on European identity through tourism allowed students to critically and personally engage with their own and others’ cultural narratives. These findings of shared values and daily-life parallels facilitated a stronger sense of European belonging, aligning with Delanty’s (2007) idea of reflexive identity constructed through dialogue. Importantly, students’ expressions of belonging were affective rather than cognitive. They did not define “being European” through rights or institutions but through feelings of connection, recognition, and similarities. This suggests that intercultural contact, when structured through meaningful collaboration, can transform abstract citizenship into embodied understanding—a key outcome of experiential education within the Erasmus+ framework.

#### 4.2.2 Language and Communication Skills

Nearly 80% of students (see Table 2) reported improvement in foreign language skills (English, German, Spanish, Slovenian). Students highlighted real-life conversations during mobilities and online collaboration as key contributors to their linguistic development.

*“My communication skills improved a lot with foreign people.”*

*“I learned more English and about German culture.”*

Language learning occurred organically through dialogue and teamwork rather than formal instruction. Students emphasised that interacting with peers during joint activities—rather than classroom exercises—helped them gain confidence and fluency. The integration of digital tools such as Padlet, Canva, and virtual meetings also expanded their communicative repertoires, supporting both linguistic and intercultural competence.

Beyond linguistic improvement, students described gaining confidence in expressing themselves and understanding others across language barriers. This suggests that communication in mobility contexts served a dual function: as a practical skill and as a medium of intercultural connection.

#### 4.2.3 Intercultural Awareness and Stereotype Reduction

Students frequently described becoming more open-minded, respectful, and empathetic. Roughly 67% explicitly mentioned increased respect toward people from different backgrounds (see Table 2).

*“Now I respect them more and I think that other cultures are interesting.”*

*“I don't judge other people if they are different—I like to speak with them to understand them better.”*

The project directly confronted stereotypes, using activities such as inclusion workshops and "Dialog im Dunkeln" (Dialogue in the Dark), which helped students reflect on bias and difference. About 42% of participants reported that they challenged their own stereotypes. In addition to cultural differences between countries, students also encountered other types of diversity—experiences that challenged norms and expectations rooted in their local environments. For example, students from the rural Slovenian school reported that this was the first time they interacted with openly gay students or male peers who wore makeup. These moments, while initially surprising for some, became opportunities for discussion, acceptance, and reflection on how gender expression and identity vary across regions and cultures. These findings illustrate how structured intercultural contact can foster reflection and empathy—key competencies for inclusive European citizenship.

#### 4.2.4 Sustainability and Tourism Awareness

Over 56% of students gained knowledge about sustainability, particularly in tourism (see Table 2). Field trips to fair-trade initiatives, water treatment plants, and discussions on tourism in general offered concrete insights into how tourism impacts local environments and communities.

Students articulated a new understanding of responsible travel, with responses like:

*“Everything about sustainability.”*

*“Sustainable tourism and cultural preservation stood out to me.”*

*“We have to travel with awareness.”*

This broader interpretation reflects the pedagogical aim of the project: to link ecological consciousness with intercultural understanding and responsible mobility.

#### 4.2.5 Digital and Life Skills

Students improved digital literacy, with 66% noting gains in using online tools for communication and collaboration (see Table 2). Activities using Canva, Padlet, AI-based story creation, and virtual debates required creative and critical digital engagement.

In addition, many students reported personal growth in independence, social confidence, and emotional awareness, showing how mobility contributes to broader youth development.

*“I gained independence and overcame social anxiety.”*

*“I became more confident about travelling alone.”*

#### 4.2.6 Social Integration and Friendships

The most cited benefit across all qualitative responses was friendship and cross-cultural social bonding. About 30% of students described making new friends abroad as the most valuable aspect of their participation. Representative comments included:

*“Meeting new people and learning about how they live.”*

*“That finding new friends is not as hard as I thought.”*

*“We can be friends with anyone.”*

*“That you have in common more than you think with a lot of people.”*

These connections and shared experiences are pivotal in shaping affective European identity—not merely through institutional affiliation, but through real human connection, echoing the findings of Craith & Taylor (2024).

The *Bridging Borders* project enhanced students’ understanding of European identity, improved their language and intercultural skills, and fostered both digital literacy and sustainable awareness. Most importantly, it enabled participants to experience Europe not as an abstract idea but as a lived, shared space of difference and connection.

Through travel, technology, and meaningful dialogue, students transitioned from national perspectives to broader transnational thinking, offering empirical support for education’s role in fostering reflexive, relational, and inclusive European citizenship.

### 4.3. Limitations

While the *Bridging Borders* project yielded valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. The participant sample was relatively small and self-selected, which may have introduced bias toward more motivated or internationally minded students. Language barriers occasionally affected participation and the depth of reflection, particularly among younger participants. The age differences between partner schools (ranging from 13 to 15 years) also influenced group dynamics during mobilities.

Not all students answered every survey question, resulting in variation in response counts across items. Since the questionnaire was anonymous, it was not possible to analyse differences between schools or demographic subgroups. The short duration of the project—spanning two school years—limits the ability to assess the long-term effects of mobility and intercultural learning on identity formation.

Finally, while the qualitative analysis captured a broad range of experiences, it relied primarily on self-reported data, which may over-represent positive outcomes due to social desirability bias. Future research could address these limitations through longitudinal mixed-methods designs, incorporating pre- and post-assessments, teacher observations, and follow-up interviews to track longer-term impacts on European identity and intercultural competence.

## 5. Discussion and Implications

The *Bridging Borders* project demonstrates how intercultural educational experiences can play a transformative role in developing students' European identity, intercultural competence, and sustainability awareness. By bringing together students from rural, urban, and island communities, the project created an educational space where difference was not only visible but valuable—a precondition for fostering the kind of plural identity that European citizenship requires.

The findings align with broader research emphasizing that identity development in adolescence is deeply shaped by interpersonal and environmental contexts. Schachner, Hölscher, and Moscardino (2024) show that diversity-supportive classrooms—including collaborative intercultural activities—enhance students' ability to construct meaningful and inclusive cultural identities. This finding aligns with longitudinal research by Mayer et al. (2025), who examined how short- and medium-term experiences shape adolescents' European identification over time. The *Bridging Borders* project functioned similarly: international teams, themed mobilities, and multilingual collaboration offered students real-life opportunities to reflect on who they are in relation to others.

These findings reinforce the need for learning experiences that foster intercultural competence, as advocated by UNESCO (2013), to support inclusive identity development in diverse societies.

Students' reflections revealed a recurring theme: “we are more similar than we thought”. This echoes what scholars call the relational turn in identity studies, where identity is seen as not just what one is, but how one relates. By enabling direct contact, cultural comparison, and reflection, the project moved European identity from abstraction to experience—especially among adolescents, a group still negotiating their sense of self.

Moreover, the project's focus on tourism as a learning lens gave students a practical and accessible entry point into deeper themes such as inclusion, sustainability, and multilingualism.

One of the most significant findings was the emotional power of friendship and cross-cultural bonding. In contrast to institutional narratives of European integration, students experienced belonging through connection. This supports Schachner's (2024) argument that peer interaction in diverse settings enhances positive identification, especially when combined with supportive adult facilitation and reflection.

This also illustrates the affective dimension of citizenship—where students don't just learn about rights, but feel a sense of commonality. The fact that nearly 70% of participants reported greater openness and empathy toward other cultures suggests that European identity, at least for adolescents, is best nurtured through relational experiences rather than through top-down instruction.

While the project was effective in many ways, its findings are shaped by certain limitations, which have already been stated. Firstly, the sample was relatively small and self-selected, likely skewing toward more motivated students. Language barriers, age gaps, and logistical

challenges during mobilities occasionally hindered inclusion. The short duration of the project makes it difficult to assess long-term identity development. Future research could explore how longer-term intercultural exchanges (e.g., over multiple school years) impact European identification, or how similar models work in non-EU countries or underrepresented communities.

The *Bridging Borders* project suggests that European identity is not something students are taught, but something they come to feel—through dialogue, contrast, and connection. Intercultural education, especially when rooted in real experiences and supported by reflection, can bridge not only geographical but psychological borders, transforming the concept of Europe from an institution into a shared space of belonging.

As Schachner (2024) remind us, identity formation during adolescence is a co-constructed process, and it is within educational settings—especially those that embrace diversity—that young Europeans learn not only about Europe, but how to belong to it.

## 6. Conclusion

In a time of increasing social polarisation, nationalism, and global uncertainty, fostering a shared sense of European belonging among young people is both a challenge and a necessity. This paper explored how the *Bridging Borders, Embracing Diversity – Learning Through Travel* Erasmus+/eTwinning project enabled adolescents from Slovenia, Germany, and Spain to engage with the idea of European identity through intercultural dialogue, collaborative learning, and reflective mobility experiences.

By connecting students from diverse local contexts—rural, urban, and island—the project provided a living laboratory for exploring difference and commonality. The findings suggest that students developed a stronger sense of European identity not through abstract instruction, but through personal encounters, shared tasks, and emotional connections. This supports recent research (e.g., Schachner et al., 2024) that emphasizes the relational and developmental nature of identity formation during adolescence, particularly in intercultural settings.

The thematic areas—language, sustainability, food, education, nature, and people—offered multiple entry points for meaningful engagement. Students emerged not only with greater language competence and digital skills, but also with increased empathy, openness, and awareness of their role in a shared European space. Their reflections confirm that belonging to Europe is not just about treaties or institutions, but about understanding, respect, and mutual recognition.

The project also highlights key implications for educators and policymakers. Intercultural experiences must be structured, inclusive, and reflective to effectively support identity development. Furthermore, themes like sustainable tourism and digital literacy can be leveraged to make European citizenship both relevant and actionable for young people.

In sum, *Bridging Borders* demonstrates how education can build bridges—not only between countries, but between minds and identities. By equipping students with the tools to navigate diversity, the project helped shape a generation that sees itself not just as Slovenian, German, or Spanish—but as European.

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