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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 and 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 Delanty’s (2005) 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 such as Nic Craith & Taylor (2024) and Jugert et al. (2024) confirm that school-based cross-cultural encounters can meaningfully foster a sense of European identity among youth. Similarly, data from ICCS 2022 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; Inclusion; Intercultural Competence; Placebased-based Learning