

Bridges are devices that unite

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

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"Bridges are devices that unite, that connect and that allow access from one place to another, knowing, going to the future, walking from one person to another, which is the same as saying, from one universe to another. This is the raw material of education."
(Berény, 2010)

Educators involved in this project felt the need to have access to new ways of understanding the educational action, which would inspire and encourage them to develop new pedagogical processes in a context of sharing and collaboration. BRIDGING made it possible through the creation of partnerships that promoted continuous exchanges of knowledge between different organizations of city life: schools, cultural institutions

and universities, in four countries: Portugal, Belgium, Finland and Poland. Art was used as a cross-cultural mediator, allowing children to discover their city and establish relationships with others, despite the existing cultural and linguistic differences.

The new dimension of this close collaboration, sustained over three years, between educational, cultural and academic partners, allowed expanding the activities from the local level to the European one, enabling the growth of the creative and innovative potential of the various actors.

Our underlying principle was that the arts can act not only as a mediating device of the local educational process, but also as a cross-cultural tool, considering art a simultaneously idiosyncratic and universal language

that contributes to the construction of a cultural identity at European level. In this way, the involvement of the different countries enabled a greater knowledge of other cities, other forms of relationship between the school and the urban environment, confronting the local and the international, through a common language while respecting other languages and cultures. It was our intention to get to know and share different cultural contexts and different work experiences, pursuing the central challenge of building bridges to each other's cities. In our perspective, it is the immensity of resources and interests that the artistic field provides that makes it a privileged mediator in pedagogical work with a view to creating critical attitudes towards society, strongly aligned with the essential competences of the 21st century, crucial to the most diverse school learning skills (namely, autonomy, collaboration, respect and problem solving).

BRIDGING aimed at breaking the common split between formal and informal learning through the close cooperation of a diversity of actors - educational, cultural institutions and universities across several areas of knowledge (Education, Sociology, Psychology, Design, Architecture).

Thus, a new professional development model was enacted, based on the observation in loco of the educational practices developed in the multiple contexts (educational, cultural and their interface), using different tools. This new model, in addition to using key research-based components - communities of learning and reflexive practices based on real situations (Buyse et al., 2010; Early et al., 2017; Pianta et al., 2017), gave rise to the creation of a reflective portfolio that simultaneously guided new pedagogical approaches

throughout the project. The artistic exploration of the urban space - in its diversity, fragmentation and multiplicity - led to authentic and meaningful experiences and at the same time to the expansion of educational context, using the urban territory as content, motto and source of inspiration.

There is a popular saying that "one cannot love what one does not know." This affective reason would be already a good reason to set

out the discovery. However, knowing diversity and experiencing it constitutes the very DNA of urbanity - biodiversity, the multiplicity of resources and opportunities, the knowledge of other cultures. If culture is a worldview, transculturalism should be the way to imagine a world that is diverse and to expand it to other dimensions and possibilities. The transnational strategic partnership made it possible for each partner's field of action to

be extended and enriched by increasing the knowledge of the multiple realities, allowing children to act directly in different urban spaces, thus increasing their active European citizenship.



Project Goals

1. CHILDREN

> Promote children's foundational skills for lifelong learning such as citizenship, through artistic action-research projects linked to the discovery of their urban environment and other urban environments, through sharing with children from other countries;

> Promote children's social and civic competences based on active discoveries of the urban environment, which will provide an impetus to build bridges (rather than barriers) and improve relationships, by sharing and enjoying diverse experiences and personal choices;

> Promote children's communication skills, through a wide range of communication means, such as music, visual arts, and performing arts, as well as communication in the mother tongue;

> Promote cultural sensitivity and expression;

> Promote children's confidence in communicating with others who speak another language or other non-verbal and artistic languages.

2. EDUCATORS/TEACHERS

> Enable early childhood educators/teachers to deal with the most pressing challenges in a global, plural, diverse context, providing professional development opportunities that involve sharing and live observations of good practices;

> Promote transdisciplinary actions leading to the improvement of existing teaching practices.

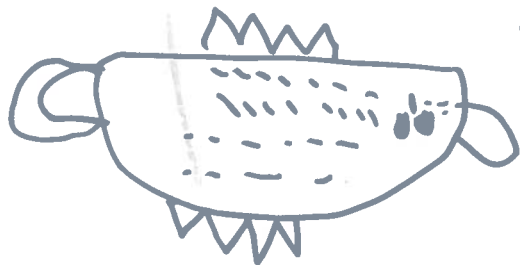
3. EDUCATIONAL, CULTURAL AND ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS

> Contribute to transforming the role of partners as educational services for citizenship;

> Create new and sustained social networks;

> Promote the cross-fertilization of different discourses (education, arts, psychology, sociology and architecture) that allow an effective operationalization of the educational process of all those involved.

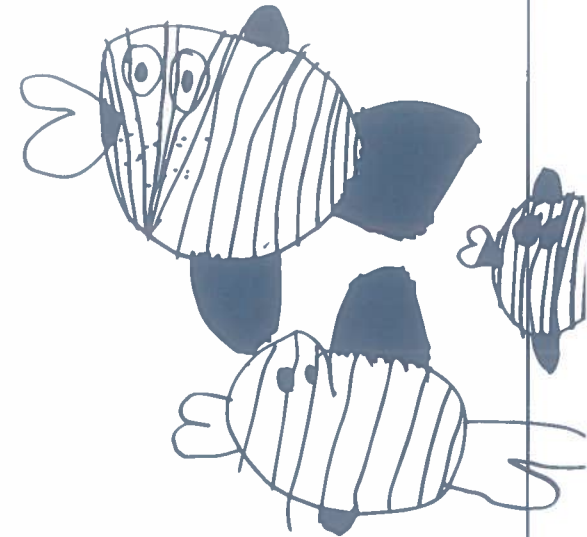
The keywords in the relationship between partners as well as in the distribution of tasks were: communication, partnership, cooperation and cross-fertilization.



Target Audience

> Children aged between 2 and 10 who attend partner schools contexts in 2019/21 were directly involved in action-research projects for the exploration of their city, as well as indirectly in various dissemination actions. More than 1000 children and their families were involved, through dissemination actions, both within the institution and in the urban environment, particularly through cultural institutions.

> Researchers from Universities and other professionals in the field of early childhood education, art and citizenship through the provision of open seminars; university students were involved, through their participation in professional development seminars and Erasmus internships.



Project development, reflection, and dissemination



The project was developed at three levels, in a holistic way and encompassing all participating actors.

A. Exploration of each participating city, in partnership with cultural entities and universities

B. Exploration of the other cities involved, partners in the project.

C. Reflection and dissemination of the materials produced by the children and the adults involved.

Activities and Research

1. Exploration and reading of the city / materials production

The children explored the surrounding space, through visits and the discovery of new and old paths.

> Children created mental maps (e.g., home-school trajectories);

> Visits to the city (local shops, parks, means of transport, cultural spaces);

> Children audio and video recorded sounds and images of the city;

> Children jointly reflected, in a large group, on the selection of records to prepare videos;

> Children drew, painted, and used music and dance to translate the various experiences.

2. Dissemination and sharing: transnational bridges

Children jointly planned dissemination actions (they shared their story of their experiences and activities) with their community (families, children from the wider community and other citizens) with the support of the cultural institutions. The dissemination actions were recorded by the children to document the interactions/ reactions of the community.

Other cities:

> Children shared materials, video-documentaries, records and reflections with children from the other the countries;

> Children were cultural interlocutors, presenting to groups of children in their institution what they have learned about other children.

This project was built with a socio-constructivist vision based on democratic and participatory methodologies where the project rationality is used to involve children in lived learning.

The project methodology will be common in the various explorations carried out in schools providing several cycles of research/ registration/dissemination in a collaborative and dynamic way.

Various activities of exploration and knowledge of the city were carried out by the children, which were later disseminated and shared with other countries. Each activity continually involved the active participation of children from their planning (e.g., what they wanted to know, how they were going to do it) to their assessment (e.g., what they learned, what they liked most, what was different). Children's reflections were recorded by the educators/teachers and constituted crucial material for the monitoring and evaluation of the project's success.

In the first phase, a close collaboration between professionals was established, through mobility actions and virtual meetings. Visits, gatherings and meetings had as main objective sharing of experiences and ideas and the confrontation of various pedagogical approaches, with the motto of cultural diversity and European identity.

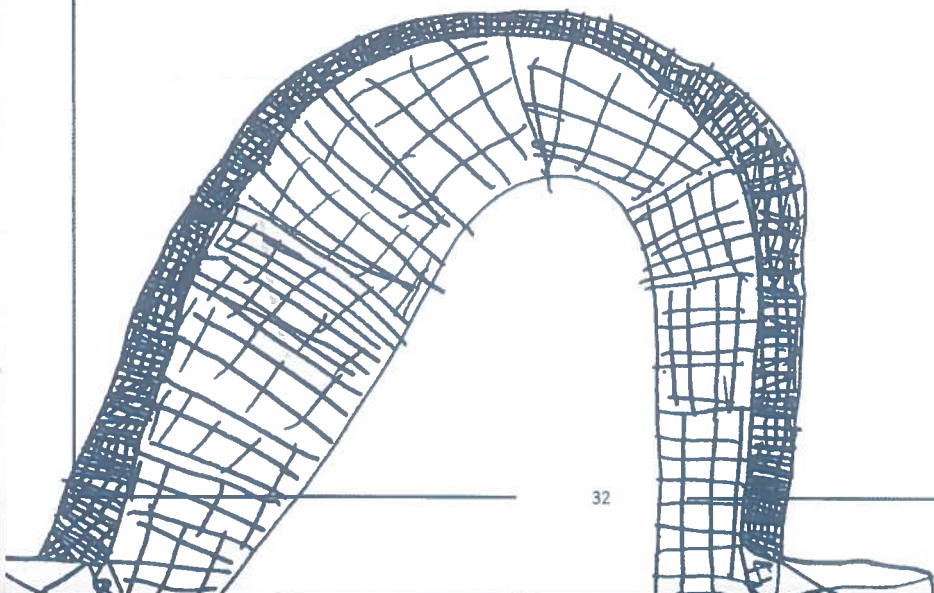
In a second phase, children shared their products with children from other countries, through digital devices, including sending materials by post. This sharing triggered new inquiries, questions and problematizations, not only about their city, but also about the cities of others, which led to new explorations and intervention actions in their city. The professional development actions allowed the trainees to discover new information and

communication technologies as well as models for the inclusion of children in the entire educational process.

It should be noted that the project reconciled, in the same space, at the same time, and through the observation of the same situations, the multidisciplinary work from a group that rarely has the opportunity to meet on these issues: educators, researchers and technicians, which had a fundamental role throughout the process. Group discussions focused on supporting children in order to learn social and civic values, such as citizenship, through artistic projects related to their discovery of the urban environment. Sharing reflections and experiences contributed to leverage the knowledge of each professional, exponentiating the possibilities of creating something bigger, articulated, congregated, and placed at the service of improving the services provided to children and, certainly also, originating new ideas for joint projects.

Professional development actions have brought benefits at the individual level, to the participating contexts and to the professions in general. Educators/teachers were motivated to implement and disseminate innovative practices after their participation in the action. This sharing made it possible to develop more creative and undoubtedly innovative pedagogical practices for all stakeholders.

Across all countries, the COVID-19 pandemic triggered new challenges to all partners involved. In the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, ECEC centres were closed, and new measures were adopted with profound changes in children's, families', and professionals' lives. The possibilities to travel, to meet the others or to freely circulate in the local contexts were severely affected. The



channels of communication and daily ways of interaction were disrupted, leading ECEC professionals to develop new and innovative strategies for supporting children and families. The reality of COVID-19 has pressured partners to find and develop new ways of communication and interaction among children, local settings and countries. While the human interactions cannot be replaced in the same ways, inventive strategies have been put into place, aiming at strengthening the fragile and powerful relationships among all. Importantly, the global crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of ECEC as a critical sector to support families and children and underscored how ECEC professionals are the cornerstone of a country's ECEC system (OECD, 2020).

