BAS RESEARH REPORT

BAS
BEYOND APPARENT STEREOTYPES

REFLECTING ON THE BAS EXPERIENCE THROUGH THE LENS OF THE TRIFOLD BAS RESEARCH.

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Preamble

Since Mars 2020, the whole world has suffered from the pandemic of COVID 19, strongly impacting our way of life, personal freedom, and mobility. What we thought untouchable has become a rare good, travelling and discovering other countries and cultures. This crisis also saw a rapid development of new communication tools with Teams, Zoom, google meet and other platforms allowing to communicate throughout the world from home (for those who have the privilege of having an internet connection).

While intercultural connections became easier through the new communications tools, stereotyping was reinforced as countries were judged on their performance of fighting the pandemic. Social media, and the media in general, played an important part in increasing perception of nationalist views 'us' and the others; obviously enforced by the closing of national borders. The situation fed very well into the – since years – increasing nationalism in Europe and worldwide.

The BAS project was therefore even more topical. The challenges were broadened, and new dimensions were added. The original idea of organising non-formal intercultural physical exchanges with young people to develop intercultural competences and skills, and to lower stereotypes while increasing European identity and citizenship, became obsolete as travel became impossible. The project was based on the evidence that travelling and immersing in other cultures might impact on stereotypes, fostering tolerance and enhancing social cohesion in culturally diverse societies. The extra-muros school trips were to offer fertile ground for experiential learning due to their transformative capacity.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the fundamental field research had to be adapted and reviewed. The physical co-created trips became virtual 'trips' and online encounters. The objectives of the project stayed the same, but in a new context and revised conditions. Already planned trips were cancelled leading to a great amount of disappointment, not only amongst the students, but also amongst the teachers who had together with their students and partner schools invested considerable time and energy in preparing exceptional experiences. It should be underlined that young people in general, suffered greatly of the pandemic with their social life almost disappearing. Therefore, it seemed adequate to add an extra aspect to the research, the focus groups, aiming to understand the impact of Covid on the participants.

The virtual encounters constituted indeed a highlight as they allowed, at least virtually, meeting new people in other countries, gaining some insight into cultural characteristics, such as lifestyle, cultural heritage and social habits. In that perspective, the project has been successful as the overall feedback of students and teachers of the experience was very positive and the outcomes showed the relevance of engaging in activities with people in a different cultural environment.

Yet, the results of the research might have been different (or not) if students were able to travel and have the physical and cognitive experience in the partner country. Future research will hopefully allow to determine the role of extra-muros field trips on stereotypes and European identity and citizenship.

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INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, we are experiencing a rise in nationalism and conflicts between communities. The reaction to the refugee crisis in 2015 and the closure of borders during the pandemic are the latest expression of the fear of the "other". Such events tend to reinforce existing prejudices in a community (culture or country) of another group/community/nation. As prejudice we can define the animus, or negative bias, toward social groups and their putative members (Paluck et al., 2020, p. 536). The reaction to the increasing growing cultural diversity is often reclusion and retraction, and a growing support of community, 'nativism' and nationalism. In the realm of institutional politics, this movement leads to an increase in anti-European stands from populist parties in many European countries (Kneuer, 2019, p 1-2). One of the key questions that needs to be addressed in this context is how European societies characterized by a growing diversity can promote (European) citizenship and tolerant attitudes towards 'others' in a way that does not stigmatize or misrecognize cultural identities.

To respond to this question, the project looks into intercultural competences and skills among young people at secondary school level of 15/16 years of age. These youngsters are still in the phase of the "impressionable years", which is roughly between the age of 12 and 24. Based on the "impressionable years hypothesis proposes" that individuals are highly susceptible to attitude change during late adolescence and early adulthood and that susceptibility drops precipitously immediately thereafter and remains low throughout the rest of the life cycle (Krosnick, Alwin, 1989, p.416). We opted for pupils in grade 9 or 10, since they should have acquired sufficient English language skills enabling them to communicate with students from other countries. Building cultural skills and competences teaches pupils to analyse people as distinct and multifaceted individuals and moves beyond natural stereotyping and clichés fostering social inclusion. The aim of BAS is to tackle and surpass the existing stereotypes and to lower prejudice. The best way of doing so is to immerse the students in another cultural context.

The BAS project wishes to provide students with a deeper insight into cultural characteristics, such as lifestyle, cultural heritage and social habits. This is achieved with the help of a transnational approach and the encounter with the 'other' through a series of intercultural exchanges. In addition to the positive and constructive cognitive experience, the mobility of youngsters contributes to the shaping of a sense of place and a European identity through the building of bridges encompassing geographical and cultural boundaries.

The BAS Research Report

The current research report, which is a result of the "Beyond Apparent stereotypes (BAS)" project, provides the reader with information on the nature of the project and an insight on the impact that the project had on the participants. To begin with, the theoretical context and the methodology around which the BAS activities and the trifold BAS research were built, will be presented. The whole project revolves around exchange. But just before the crucial phase of actual exchanges, Europe and the world were confronted with COVID-19 and, in its wake, the biggest crisis since the Second World War. The document will therefore present the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on participating students followed by the presentation of interesting research findings through the four "Country reports" (Belgium, Bulgaria, Greece, Spain). The report ends with a thematic cross-group analysis, highlighting important research findings including differences and similarities across the different groups and a conclusion/reflection on the BAS experience.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to understand how the project unfolded, it is important to understand the theoretical background of the same. After discussing the definition of stereotypes, the role of schools and the non-formal learning through intercultural exchange theories are examined.

1.1 BREAKING STEREOTYPES THROUGH INTERCULTURAL EXCHANGE

As aforementioned, the immersion of the students in another cultural context can be a useful tool in tackling and surpassing existing stereotypes and prejudice.

1.1.1 DEFINING STEREOTYPES

Stereotypes have always been a feature of societies, but they have gained interest from researchers in various disciplines from the 1950ies onwards. In recent years, research on prejudice and stereotyping has rapidly expanded (Dovidio et al, 2019, p.4). Stereotypes and social representations play a significant role in the rise in nationalism and conflicts between communities.

But what is a stereotype?

'Stereotypes are beliefs about the characteristics, attributes, and behaviours of members of certain groups. More than just beliefs about groups, they are also theories about how and why certain attributes go together' (Hilton & Von Hippel, 1996, p. 240). They tend to simplify a complex environment (Dovidio et al 2019). As Allport (1954) noted, stereotypes can be a consequence as well as a cause of discrimination because they serve to both, justify past episodes of discrimination and perpetuate new forms (Dovidio et al, 2005, p. 223). From one perspective, stereotypes are represented within the mind of the individual person. From the other perspective, stereotypes are represented as part of the social fabric of a society, shared by people within that culture (Macrae et al, 1996, p. 4). When stereotypes are consensually shared within a society, their consequences become more pernicious, because they affect entire groups of people in a common way (Macrae et al, 1996, p. 4). Although stereotypes are not necessarily negative in nature, stereotypes about out-group members are more likely to have negative connotations than those about in-group members. The social categorization of people as in-group and out-group can also have immediate affective consequences. At the most basic level, there is a tendency for more positive emotional responses to in-group members (Dovidio et al, 2005, p. 224).

Stereotypes in modern societies

While stereotypes seem to be a part of our basic moral foundations and have always existed and been transmitted in various ways, they are formed and amplified by cultural institutions, social networks and the media. Despite the media's significant role in mediating social interaction and communication on a global scale, they have at the same time also helped to facilitate certain forms of negative behaviour. Social media, for example, have certain feed algorithms that can limit the amount of exposure to information that is counter to or generally dissimilar from one's own views (Whitenack, Sanders, 2019, p.81-82), thus perpetuating the person's current worldview. Moreover, mass media provide a source of indirect, often negative information concerning the same minority groups, thus promoting stereotyping and racial prejudice (Fuochi et al, 2020, p.195). For instance, image or video sharing platforms have made it particularly easy to spread different types of material allowing various orientated groups to flourish online.

These groups include racist, xenophobic, and extremist groups (Oksanen et al, 2014, p. 254). The creation of these groups can be explained, amongst others, as a reaction to the increasingly growing cultural diversity of society. The result is often reclusion and retraction and a growing support of community, 'nativism' and nationalism. By 2014, it became clear that populism and xenophobia have been growing throughout Europe and have surpassed the 20 % electoral mark in Austria, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, France, Denmark, Norway, and Hungary (Guia, 2016, p.1). In the realm of institutional politics, this movement leads to an increase in anti-European stands from populist parties in many European countries. As stated by Buti and Pichelmann (2017, p.8) "At a time when populist parties are riding on the coat tails of a backlash against globalisation rooted in both economic and cultural causes, the European project seems to be the perfect culprit". It is in this context, that the question on how the increasingly diversified European societies can effectively promote European citizenship and tolerance without stigmatizing or misrecognizing cultural identities, arise.

1.1.2 THE ROLE OF SCHOOLS AND THE NON-FORMAL LEARNING APPROACH.

Education has been found to have a liberalizing effect on social attitudes, at least concerning non-economic issues (Zakrisson et al, 1998, p. 117). In this regard, schools can play an important part in the process of socialization, social inclusion and in the building of representation of others. Research at the end of the 20th century observed that xenophobic tendencies seem to be higher among less educated individuals (Ray, 1990, p. 188), while higher education tended to correlate with tolerance (Elchardus et al., 1999). Research has pointed out the enormous importance of the school as a socialization agent, especially as a source of political information (Kavadias, 2004, p. 539). Even the most utilitarian educational systems try to transmit the quintessence of culture, i.e. conceptions on beauty, justice, and goodness. Schools have also recognised the need for students to become global citizens and to develop intercultural competences (Walton et al, 2015, p. 216). This formative task of education becomes even more crucial as societies become more complex (Kavadias et al, 2017, p. 31). In this sense schools can be thought of as a modern "rite of passage" from child to citizen that contributes to the degree of social cohesion in a society. It remains, however, an important question to know whether, how, and under what conditions schools can have an impact in fostering social cohesion.

There is a renewed attention to civic education which reflects broader concerns about the state of civic culture and the civic engagement of young adults (Galston, 2004, p. 2019). Civic education is significant for sustaining a viable democratic civic culture (Kavadias et al, 2017, p. 30). There is, however, no strong evidence for the effectiveness of this approach in promoting tolerance or social cohesion. Contrariwise previous studies of European curricula and formal education show that intra-muros civic and historical teaching methods do not impact as significantly on the attitudes towards tolerance and democracy as *experiential* learning. In fact, Geboers et al. (2013) highlight that research on civic education, conflict management and peace education stress the importance of experiential learning. 'Good citizenship'' requires people to behave socially but also be willing and able to reflect upon political and social issues and contribute critically to society. Generally speaking, citizenship is learned during the course of life through participation in different social practices. For young people, school is not only one of those practices, it is also an institution that explicitly aims at facilitating and optimizing the development of citizenship (Geboers et al, 2013, p. 159).

Learning "extra-muros" and the impact educational travels

In the Horizon Report on trends, challenges, and technologies for schools in Europe, Johnson et al. (2014) pointed on implementation of informal education outside the school walls as one of the main challenges of the educational system of Europe for the upcoming years. Outside class activities, such as educational travel, are recognized as valuable educational tools for environmental and scientific education by promoting an appreciation and

understanding of classroom concepts. One of the common forms of these activities outside the school walls are field trips. Field trips are usually arranged by schools, with educational purposes and taking place in engaging and interactive settings. Various scholars have shown that such trips can enhance students' interest, motivation, and other aspects of learning (Morag & Tal, 2011, p.747). Field trips offer an opportunity to motivate and connect students to appreciate and understand classroom concepts, increasing the student's knowledge foundation, promoting further learning and higher-level thinking strategies (Behrendt & Franklin, 2014, p. 242). Bos et al. (2015) have highlighted that those students tend to be more attentive when learning "extra muros''. Field trips are also a significant contribution to the learning experience by extending and complementing classroom teaching (Storcksdieck, 2001, p. 9). In Eraut (2000), it is mentioned that non-formal educational interventions often arise from unplanned and non-institutionalized experiences occurring anywhere and at any time. This is important because as Falk et al. (2012) state, tourism experiences offer many new and different sights, sounds, tastes and sensations (Bos et al, 2015, 862) providing fertile ground for non-formal and non-institutionalized learning.

The travelling experience offers thus fertile ground for experiential learning. Overall, the tourism sector is deeply connected to intercultural issues. Intercultural dialogue is extremely important for fostering tolerance and enhancing social cohesion in culturally diverse societies (Council of Europe, 2016). Encountering another culture through social interaction can contribute significantly to cross-cultural understanding (Diekmann et al, 2019, p. 163). There is a plethora of opportunities for intercultural experiences for travellers, as culture is expressed in many facets of society such as architecture, food, education etc. (Diekmann et al 2019, p. 164). Travelling, as a social force with a transformative capacity at societal level, appears to be an adequate tool to help prevent and reduce conflicts and deal in a constructive and peacebuilding manner with stereotyped representations (Desboilles-Higgins, 2006, p. 1201). Moreover, leisure and tourism are considered to be an opportunity for self-development and learning, and seeking experiences that expand understanding of one-self and the surrounding world (Falk et al., 2012, p. 914). According to Falk et al. (2012, p. 913) "the vast majority of this non-school-based learning is 'free-choice'", which is learning characterized by a reasonable amount of choice and control over what, where, when, with whom and why they learn' (Bos et al, 2015, p. 862). The BAS project is therefore making use of the "tool" of non-formal intercultural exchanges in order to develop intercultural competences and skills among young people at secondary school level of 15/16 years of age. These youngsters are still in the phase of the "impressionable years[1]", which is roughly between the ages of 12 and 24. The project wishes to tackle and surpass the existing stereotypes - in case they do exist - and lower prejudice. The best way of doing so is to immerse the students in another cultural context. This cultural immersion approach can be broadly described as a method in which participants engage in activities with people in a cultural environment different to their own. The aim is to, 'promote cross-cultural sensitivity, enhance self-awareness in relation to cultural contexts, focus on commonalities among cultures, and promote the awareness of the subjective level of culture' (Walton et al, 2015, p. 220). The project wishes indeed to go beyond cultural general representations and provide students with a deeper insight into cultural characteristics, such as lifestyle, cultural heritage and social habits and understand the underlying reasons. The core objective is directly related to the need for a transnational approach. In addition to the positive and constructive cognitive experience, the interaction of youngsters contributes to the shaping of a sense of place and a European identity through the building of bridges, encompassing geographical and cultural boundaries.

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[1] The term "impressionable years" refers to a flexible and vulnerable time to change attitudes among adolescents and young adults. It implies that impressionability has a feature of changeability.

An intercultural exchange requires a thorough planning. Two complementary theories, one from Porth (1997) and the other form Cushner (2004) provide a framework for the actual implementation of the students' exchange.

1.2.1 THE PHASES OF AN INTERCULTURAL EXCHANGE

It is important, for smoother planning and implementation, that all related activities are split in three distinctive phases based on Porth's model of trip organization. Porth (1997) highlights the importance of study tours as a way for participants to step out from their own culture and suggests that such a tour should be structured and delivered in three phases:

(1) predeparture preparation: An important phase that requires careful planning and preparation. This first phase is critical for orienting the students and preparing them for the experiential component of the trip.

(2) on tour: This is the on-site phase, which involves active learning and participation from the student. It might include site visits and seminars provided by local organizations, or presentations that are followed with question-and-answer sessions. It also provides opportunities for informal interactions, socialising and networking with locals. During the visit, the teacher may function as a coordinator and steward. It is important that the teacher/educator should also emphasize the roles and responsibilities of students during the tour. Clear definition of student roles and responsibilities during the tour are important. Each student is encouraged to take an active role in all meetings, seminars, and site visits.

 (3) integration of learning: This is the phase during which students return to campus and meet again in classroom. Teachers must recognize the importance of post field trip reflection and debriefing to maximize student interest and learning (Behrendt & Franklin, 2014, p. 241). It provides a chance for the teacher/educator to relate the student experiences and lessons learned during the tour to the theories studied in the predeparture phase. In addition, students are given the opportunity to provide feed-back on and evaluate the tour.

More recently Cushner (2004) offered guidelines for organizing meaningful education travels using a similar three-way approach:

(1) pre-departure guidelines,

(2) guidelines while travelling,

and (3) guidelines upon return

Cushner also stresses that travel is enriching, engaging and educational. It facilitates intercultural interactions that are necessary for developing a broader understanding of the world (Cushner, 2004, p.3).

• Phase I: Pre-trip preparation

The most important of all the steps when organizing a field trip is the careful planning. In this preparatory phase several issues of great significance have to be taken care of. While teachers are taking care of administrative issues, monitor student activities and encourage them to actively participate in the organization of the trip and the on-trip activities, students are the ones who play a key role (they act as guides, presenters, researchers) in this phase. The role-play learning experiences are enriching because 'they replicate a real-life situation as closely as desired;

wherein the students have to assume roles as they analyse situations and make decisions' (Tiwari, Nafees, & Krishnan, 2014, p. 261). This type of learning is beneficial for deep learning and allows students to better assimilate knowledge and its future applications. It helps students to develop creative and critical thinking skills in addition to improving their interpersonal skills and self-confidence (Diekmann et al, 2019, p. 166).

• Phase II: On-trip action

The on-trip phase is important because it actually provides experiential learning for the students (Wong, Wong, 2009, p.252). The teacher operates as a coordinator who must coordinate and arrange several practicalities such as accommodation, food, and transportation, and to make sure they are of good quality. The teacher also needs to remind students of and reinforce the learning objectives of the field trip throughout all the activities (Wong, Wong, 2009, p.254). It is important though, for the teacher, to provide students with freedom and autonomy to facilitate their learning during a field trip. Educational tours or field trips should be designed carefully and should not require students to be involved in too many compulsory activities. They should be provided with free time to explore by themselves and develop a flexible programme according to their needs and interests.

• Phase III: Post-trip action

The post-trip phase provides an opportunity for students to recap, reflect on, and integrate what they have learned both in the classroom and from authentic experiences during the field trip (Wong, Wong, 2009, p.255). This phase is of significance for the consolidation of all the experiential learning gained through the experience of the cultural exchange trips. Cushner (2004) specifically highlights the importance of reflection upon the trip experience. As he mentions in "Beyond tourism: A Practical Guide to Meaningful Educational travel", 'Good teachers make it a priority to take the time to help their students reflect upon what they are encountering and discuss what they have learned' (Cushner, 2004, p. 45). The reflection on the experience will lead to the conceptualisation/generalisation of the newly acquired knowledge.

1.2.2 INTERGROUP CONTACT AND GROUP DYNAMICS

A factor of great significance running through all the above-mentioned stages of the intercultural exchange preparation and implementation is that of the intergroup contact that will be developed among participating students. Communication and sustainable interaction between participants are key factors for the successful and long-lasting impact of the exchanges. Affect is an inexorable force in intergroup relations. Encounters with members of different groups might activate beliefs and thoughts, but they are also likely to activate feelings and emotions. In fact, contact with outgroup members is likely to be characterized by heightened levels of both arousal and affect (Esses et al, 1993, p. 63). When interactions between group members are successful, members are likely to feel happy, jovial, or satisfied (Esses et al, 1993, p.63). Considerable research further demonstrates that intergroup contact under appropriate conditions specified by the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954) is one of the most effective and robust strategies for improving intergroup relations, largely because it helps to alleviate intergroup anxiety (Dovidio et al, 2005, p. 229).

The work of Gordon W. Allport, author of the influential "The nature of prejudice" (1954), was taken into account when considering the intergroup dynamics between participating students as it has significantly influenced the development and evaluation of trip programmes (Pettigrew, 2006). Allport (1954) organized many disparate views on prejudice and synthesized them around three basic themes concerning cognitive, motivational and sociocultural processes. He found four contact principles were reckoned when organizing the trip related activities (preparatory and on-site) in which students from different backgrounds are going to interact.

These contact principles include:

(1) participating students having equal status while

(2) engaging in cooperative activities that

(3) work not only toward a common goal but also toward recognizing a common humanity (Allport, 1954, p. 281)

(4) in an authorising social environment that supports prejudice reduction. (Walton et al, 2015, p. 218).

In that direction the preparatory workshops as well as the common (between host and guest students)[2] activities are organized in a way that they are promoting the active engagement of students and the participation of all parties involved under equal conditions with the teachers working towards ensuring a safe and positive environment for their implementation.

Overall special attention is being given to the development and the maintenance of proper intergroup contact between participating parties. Hammer et al (1978) recognized three dimensions of inter-cultural competence: (i) ability to deal with psychological stress, (ii) ability to communicate effectively and finally (iii) ability to establish interpersonal relations. Development and maintenance of good interpersonal relations between guests and hosts, marked by respect for people in the other culture, free time spent with those from the other culture and sharing of personal information, is a factor of successful adjustment (Cushner & Brislin, 1995, p. 3).

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[2] The term "guest" refers to the students that will travel to another country and the term "hosts" refers to the local students that will welcome the visitors to their country.

2. THE BAS CULTURAL EXCHANGES: METHODOLOGY

Within the framework of the BAS project, four intercultural exchanges for secondary education students were realized within the project's lifespan. Students from the four partner countries, namely Belgium, Bulgaria, Greece, and Spain were provided with the opportunity to meet the students of the partner school and participate in a wide range of activities. Starting from the autumn of 2019 the participating schools from Athens (Greece), Barcelona (Spain), Brussels (Belgium) and Sofia (Bulgaria), kicked-off the trip organization of four, in total, intercultural exchanges, by implementing a series of preparatory activities.

Schools	Will travel to	Will host
Brussels	Sofia	Barcelona
Sofia	Athens	Brussels
Athens	Barcelona	Sofia
Barcelona	Brussels	Athens

Table 1: Original exchange set-up

Based on the two above explained models of Porth (1997) and Cushner (2004) and the work of Wong & Wong (2009) an adapted three-phase model was used for the organisation and implementation of the BAS virtual exchanges.

Figure 1: The three phases of the trip

2.1 THE PRE-TRIPS

As discussed before, this phase is essential for orientating and engaging the students. Under the guidance of the teachers, getting to know their peers form the partner school before the trip will indeed help encouraging students to actively participate in the experience. Therefore, after the initial selection of the participating groups of students a series of virtual workshops, with a duration of approximately one hour, took place between the partner schools. In total four workshops were organised, corresponding to the four exchanges. The aim was to introduce all the students to each other, to discuss diverse topics related to cultural aspects and personal interests of the participants and start building an intergroup contact. The workshops were carefully planned in a way that ensured the engagement of the students and the equal participation of all sides. During the sessions, students had the time to get to know each other and discuss topics of interest while presenting elements of their local culture. Moreover, students were able to exchange ideas regarding sites they should visit in their hosting cities and activities they could consider. This was a significant aspect of the meetings given that BAS aims to actively involve students in the development of trip programmes.

Teachers facilitated those workshops and provided concise reports of the sessions after the implementation of each workshop and. The preparatory workshops conducted during the pre-trip phase were made possible with the use of technology (mainly through skype) and helped building relationships among students characterized by curiosity and respect for the "other".

Exchange 1	Exchange 2	Exchange 3	Exchange 4
Brussels to Sofia	Sofia to Athens	Athens to Barcelona	Barcelona to Brussels
19 guest students from Brussels visiting Sofia	23 guest students from Sofia visiting Athens	22 guest students from Athens visiting Barcelona	22 guest students from Barcelona visiting Brussels

Table 2: Cultural Exchanges plan

Despite the connection problems that were reported in 2 of the four workshops, students found a way to communicate, felt relaxed and expressed their desire to carry on communication and to meet each other, as the teachers which facilitated those sessions mentioned in their reports. Indeed, the first results of the workshop implementation were highly encouraging. In addition, students filled in a survey on stereotypes and cultural and tourism practices and general societal aspects for the BAS research (see chapter 3 & 4)

Pre-Trip Workshop/Session		
Participants	Hosting Students/Teachers	Guest Students/Teachers
Place and Length	At school[3], Approximately 1 hour	
Mean of Implementation	Online (skype, zoom, etc.)	
Aims	Ice breaker	Establishment of first contact
Content	Student introductions	Cultural briefing (youth culture, local culture, sights, traditions)

Table 3: Preparatory Workshop Overview.

In anticipation of the actual implementation of the exchange students from guest and host groups remained in contact through their social media cultivating in this way their intergroup contact and building a relationship of mutual trust setting the scene for their cultural exchange session, the core activity of the BAS project[4]. As aforementioned, the exchanges were scheduled for spring of 2020, however, the Covid-19 crisis led to a change in the manner of implementation from physical to virtual.

2.2. THE ON-SITE PHASE: CHANGE OF SET-UP DUE TO THE PANDEMIC: A FUNDAMENTAL SHIFT IN THE PROJECT

When the pandemic broke out, there was still hope to simply postpone the trips and travel either in autumn 2020 or even in spring 2021. Yet, when it became clear that travelling was no option throughout the period of the project and an obtaining an extension was not possible, partners had to shift from physical trips to virtual trips. The accompanying teaching staff voiced the expressions of disappointment they received from students regarding those developments. Not only could they not travel, but also they could not host students from the partner school. All very well thought-through activities and jointly prepared activities of the trips had to be cancelled or reviewed. In hope of being able to organise a trip, students changed classes and not all originally planned classes could participate.

The initial programs had to be adapted in terms of the numbers[5] and nature of the activities (see overview of activities table 2). The crucial on-site phase involving active learning, experiencing the other culture, and providing opportunities for informal interactions and socialising, had to be shifted to the screen. Many of the original planned

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[3] The workshops took place between November 2019 and January 2020 before the Covid-19 outbreak.

[4] It should be noted that this is not to the case of the Spanish group which was largely changed due to the initial postponement and the distance between the original planning and the actual implementation of the activities (March 2020 to February 2021)

5 Of around 40 activities foreseen in the original planning (physical trips), 20 virtual activities took place within the framework of the virtual exchanges.

activities were outdoor activities (field trips, sightseeing, museums, participative sport and art events) while the full-days of activities initially planned had to be reduced to a limited number of hours of online activities per day in order to avoid students' exhaustion (given the nature of the virtual approach). In particular, the "outdoor" activities and visits were replaced with video and ppt presentations which tried to make up for the loss of the physical experience. Moreover, quiz sessions were added to the programmes in order to motivate the students and keep the engagement high regardless the absence of physical contact.

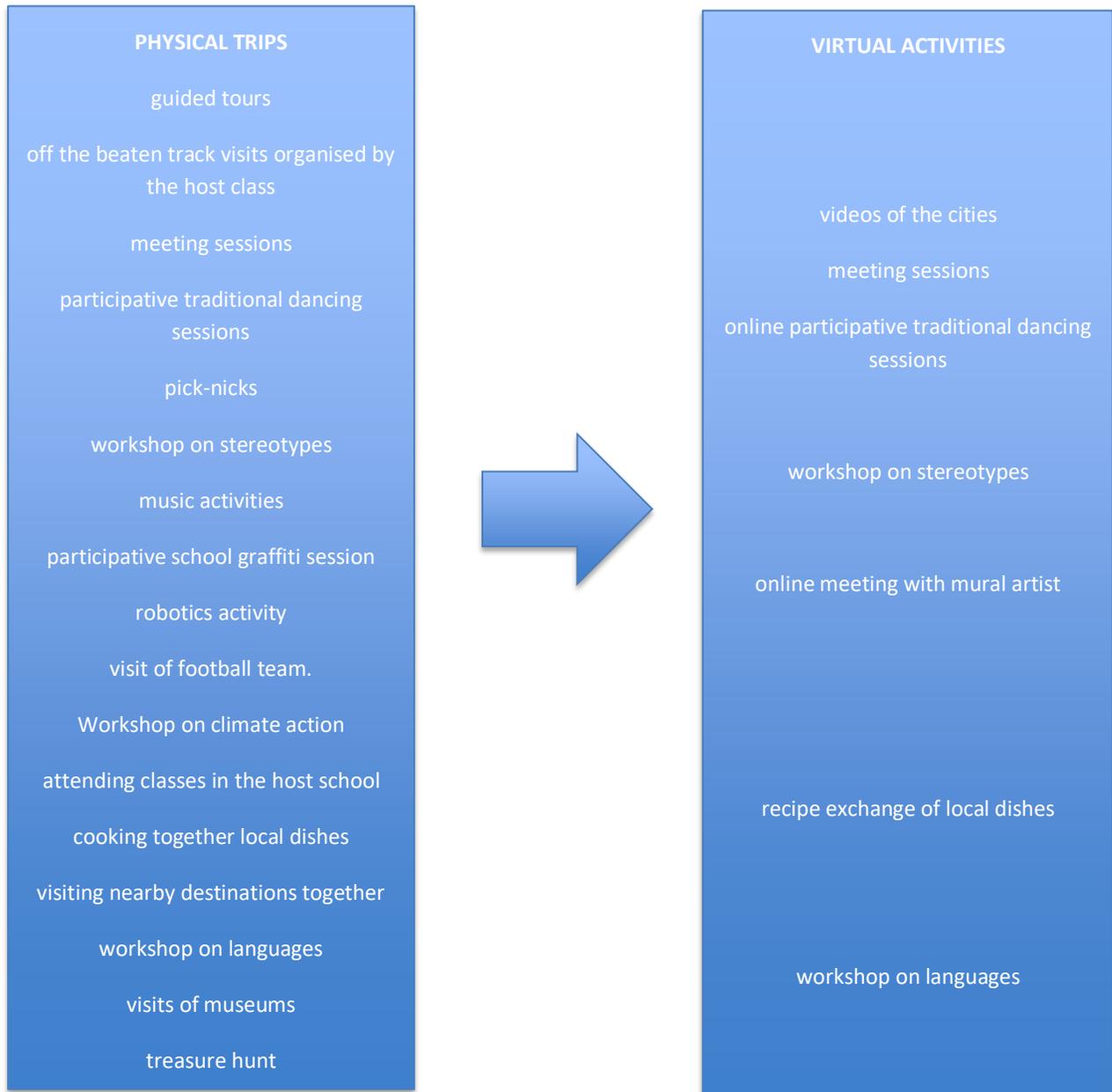| **PHYSICAL TRIPS**	**VIRTUAL ACTIVITIES**
guided tours	
off the beaten track visits organised by the host class	videos of the cities
meeting sessions	meeting sessions
participative traditional dancing sessions	online participative traditional dancing sessions
pick-nicks	
workshop on stereotypes	workshop on stereotypes
music activities	
participative school graffiti session	online meeting with mural artist
robotics activity	
visit of football team.	
Workshop on climate action	
attending classes in the host school	
cooking together local dishes	recipe exchange of local dishes
visiting nearby destinations together	
workshop on languages	
visits of museums	workshop on languages
treasure hunt	

Figure 2: physical trips activities and virtual activities

The partners, and particularly the teachers of the participating schools managed to motivate students and to prepare a week of virtual exchange by paying special attention to the original objectives and spirit of the BAS project. It has

been reported that virtual field trips can be an alternative or complementary to field activities because they are able to simulate the realities of the "outside" world in the classroom (Seifan et al, 2020, p.2). Yet, the virtual field trip is a digital stimulation and cannot be considered equivalent to real-life experiences as all the interactions are controlled by the technical conditions. Informal social encounters and the building of personal relationships resulting from sharing space and time at the destination, is less to happen and the cognitive experience of the destination cannot occur. However, research has shown that while virtual fields are digital simulations, still can provide effective authentic learning experiences (Ho, 2020, p.24).

In the context of the research, students were asked to reply to specific questions about their experience after the interactive exchange sessions (See chapter 3 & 4).

The Exchanges

The Belgian sample included students of the 5th year of secondary education at the Public school GO! Atheneum Unesco Koekelberg, located in Brussels. The youngsters were split into two groups, a "host" and a "guest" group. The "host" group hosted the Spanish students from Barcelona in a series of virtual activities during the week of 22-26 February of 2021 while the guest group was hosted by Bulgarian students in the same week. Of the total 42 participants, only 21 returned both the pre-survey and post-survey thus allowing comparisons.

The Bulgarian sample included students from 127 SU I.Denkoglu in Sofia. They were virtual hosts for the students from GO! Atheneum Unesco Koekelberg Belgium and virtual guests in the Athens school 2nd Lyceum of Vrilissia.The guests and the hosts were two different groups of students. In total 45 students participated in the activities . Out of them 45 returned the pre-survey and 44 the post-survey.

Greek students participated in two of the planned intercultural exchanges as hosts and guests. A group hosted the Bulgarian in a series of virtual activities during the week of 15-19 February of 2021 while a second group was hosted by Spanish students in a week-long virtual intercultural exchange on the week of 8-12 February of 2021. Students attended the activities while at home through Google meet platform. There was a certain overlap between the two groups as several participants participated in both groups (guest and host). Out of the 29 participants, 29 returned the pre-survey and 28 the post-survey.

Catalan students from La Mina high school (from preschool through college preparation and VET, in San Adrián del Besós, Barcelona) participated in two of the planned exchanges, as hosts and guests. The same group hosted students from the Greek high school in a series of virtual activities during the week of February 8-12, 2021 and participated as guests in the virtual exchange with Belgian students the week of February 22-26, 2021. Although students participated, for the most part, in both groups (guest and host), the pre-survey counted 25 responses, and the post-survey counted 19 (although one did not really answer it).

2.3 THE POST-TRIP

The post-trip is dedicated to reflecting on the experience and integrate the experiential learning. Being aware of the impact the pandemic had, particularly on young adults (REF), the partners decided to organise focus groups with each school to understand their perception and how it might have influenced the results of the research. In addition, students participated in another post-trip survey to see whether some of their perceptions had changed. Both methodologies and results will be outlined in chapter 3 & 4.

3. THE BAS RESEARCH: METHODOLOGY

This section presents the methodologies of the tri-fold BAS research that investigated students' feelings, attitudes and beliefs throughout their participation in the project. As mentioned before participants were students of secondary education level, still in the "impressionable years". The basic assumption here is that the impressions young people gain at this stage of their lives and the impact they have on attitudes will continue into their later lives. This means that if we succeed in making young people aware of prejudices in this age phase, we can assume that they will also be critical of stereotypes and prejudices later on. The core of the project therefore consists of influencing a number of attitudes related to openness and critical thinking. This implies that we had to map attitudes and beliefs over the course of the project, i.e. before and after the experiences.

3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

Participants were asked to reflect on their experience in every phase (pre-exchange, on-site, post-exchange) of the exchange through their participation in the BAS research that was running in parallel with the learning activities preparation and implementation. This was important for exploring the possible shifts in emotions and attitudes before and after students' involvement in the BAS exchanges.

Pre-survey → ESM → Post-survey

Figure 3: Schematic representation of the research design

We have surveyed the students via on-line questionnaires. The surveys were prepared in Qualtrics and had predominantly a quantitative character, with closed questions (multiple choice, Likert scale etc.). Some qualitative, open ended questions were included mainly in the post-survey.

At first students were asked to reply to the **pre-exchange survey** which explored participants' existing attitudes on cultural and social issues as well as their opinions on out-groups, the pre-exchange survey was implemented four months before the planned exchanges. An **on-site survey** followed. Students were asked to provide an on-the-spot evaluation of each of the learning activities organized through the use of the experience sampling method (ESM). The ESM questions were concentrated in the evaluation on the impact of the activities. The cycle of the BAS research was closed with the launch of the **post-exchange survey** 4 weeks after the virtual trips, in which students were asked to provide evaluation of the whole experience and their interaction with the out-group in addition to a follow-up on items replied during the first survey.

The contents of the surveys (pre-,post-,esm-) included:

a. questions on stereotypes, factual knowledge and attitudes towards other groups, attitudes towards change, attitudes towards Europe.

b. social-demographic background variables that might confound possible relations.

b. questions on the perception of their own culture, social representations, relevant cultural heritage.

c. questions exploring the impact of the activities planned as part of the virtual exchanges (esm, post-).

The initial research planning had to be adapted as a result of the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on the project and its participants. Therefore, an additional methodology was added in order to track the impact that Covid-19 had on students. Four focus groups were organised, one in each of the partner countries with a selected group of students (8-10) participating.

In addition, teachers have been asked to participate in a short feedback-survey related to the exchange activities, experiences, and observations shortly after the virtual exchanges.

3.2 DATA COLLECTION

For the distribution of the pre-survey an anonymous link was used while the ESM and post-survey were sent directly into the participants' mailboxes through individual links allowing comparisons between pre and post-survey responses by the same participant. All surveys were built online with the use of Qualtrics which allows the implementation of short surveys needed for the experience sampling method (ESM). Students filled the pre-exchange survey before the implementation of the exchanges while the ESM questions were sent to students during the implementation, right after the completion of each planned activity. Finally, a post-exchange survey was sent a month after the completion of the exchanges and was filled in by participants during a month's period. Return rates of post and pre survey varied from 75% to 100% depending on the group. The focus groups were implemented during February 2021 in parallel with the virtual exchanges. The following section provides an overview of the results of this tri-fold research-approach.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

Before presenting the results of the different surveys, the results of the additional focus groups on the COVID-19 impact will be highlighted. These results will enable a better understanding of the data analysis given the context in which the BAS exchanges took place.

4.1 THE COVID-19 FOCUS GROUP: SETTING THE SCENE

As mentioned before, the Covid-19 outbreak greatly impacted the planning and delivery of the BAS project. More specifically the learning activities (intercultural exchanges), which formed the very heart of the project, had to be rethought. After all, we originally envisaged trips, whereas the whole sanitary situation just made travelling impossible. In the end, we opted for a visual alternative, whereas before we could only rely on the already existing equipment (in terms of hard- and software) of schools. Findings will be presented here along with some practical implications that the virtual approach (which selection as a way of delivery was a direct outcome of the Covid-19 crisis) engendered in the delivery of the activities as those were tracked in the post-survey student filled in after the end of the activities.

4.1.1 STUDENTS' ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS FORMED DURING COVID-19 CRISIS

How different European countries dealt with the Crisis: A Reflection

In general students from the different countries agreed on the fact that the crisis caught most of the countries by surprise:

"None of us was prepared neither were the governments." (Student X, Greece, 19 February 2021)

Though many agreed that some countries have manage the crisis in a better way than others:

"Every country handled it in each own way. Some countries didn't act early enough." (Student Y, Belgium, 2 March 2021)

When trying to justify why some countries did better than others there are some recurring themes popping up, namely culture, mindset/lifestyle and national health systems. The paradox, then, is that the students - while being made aware of negative prejudices and stereotypes - reverted to existing stereotypes about certain countries to explain differences in policy and severity of infections.

"It has a lot to do with the cultures. In Mediterranean countries people are in more contact with each other." (Student Z, Belgium, 2 March 2021)

"It has to do with people's mindset on following the rules. In some countries people don't follow the restrictions". (Student V, Bulgaria, 26 February 2021)

"It depends on the health systems in different countries." (Student W, Greece, 19 February 2021)

On travel restrictions

Students believed that travel restrictions indeed helped in the containment of Covid-19 spreading. In two of the focus groups (Bulgaria and Greece) the example of Australia was explicitly mentioned, which restricted travelling to its territory early-on, halting in this way the spread of Covid.

Regardless, students might be in favour of travel restrictions but only when those apply to all travellers and are not discriminatory. As one of the Belgian students mentioned:

"If you are going to put restrictions, do it for everyone." (Student Q, Belgium, 2 March 2021)

Stereotypes at the time of Covid-19

Given the nature of the BAS-project, students were questioned about prejudices and stereotypes towards specific countries/groups of people that might have been caused as a result of the Covid-19 crisis. Reflecting on that, students in most groups mentioned that it was generally people from East Asia that were targeted at the beginning of the outbreak but at the same time expressed their disagreement with that approach. As one participant of the Belgian group mentioned:

"I think it's really stereotyping. I remember in the beginning people from east Asia were being targeted as possible Covid-19 carriers." (Student Q, Belgium, 2 March 2021)

As mentioned before, though participants seemed to condemn any stereotyping, some answers on why some countries managed the crisis better than others, underline that they have indeed developed some attitudes on specific countries (Italy) or group of countries (Southern Europe). One Bulgarian participant mentioned:

"I think we handled virus better than other countries. In Italy there was a period when large amount of people took the virus, here not" (Student T, Bulgaria, 26 February 2021)

While others, like a Belgian and a Greek participants stated respectively that:

"It has to do with the cultures. In Mediterranean countries people are more outgoing and have more contact with each other." (Student Z, Belgium, 2021)

"It has to do with how people behave (lifestyle), for example in Italy people are more outgoing." (Student W, Greece, 19 February 2021)

Although it is perhaps too early to provide a full analysis of differences in dispersion, we suspect that other factors have played a role, such as the demographic structure, population density or the degree of globalisation (i.e. daily close international contacts) of regions. However, taking all these factors into account gives a complex picture. Unfortunately, young people tend to revert to more simple explanations of this complex phenomenon. The question is, however, to what extent the young people here do not reflect what was reported by the public in their respective home countries.

Reflection on vaccination and prevention measures

There is a consensus among participants that there should be priority in vaccination for some specific groups (essential workers, elderly).

"The people who must be vaccinated first are the health services (doctors and nurses), then "the elderly, those who are most at risk" and then "everyone" (Student S, Spain, 12 February 2021)

At the same moment there is frustration by the lack of vaccination at schools (at the time of the focus groups) and the neglect towards younger people.

"Schools should be a priority. There are not enough vaccinations at schools. Teachers meet more than 25 each day, their vaccination is critical". (Student W, Greece, 19 February 2021)

"Lot of students are not motivated because of being at home all the time. Young years will never come back, they'll be gone in a heartbeat." (Student Y, Belgium, 2 March 2021)

As stated above, there are participants that feel that the impact of Covid-19 among younger age groups is being underestimated. This frustration among the youngsters is being fueled by the way the crisis has been handled and the contradictory signals received by the manner measures that have been applied throughout the year. According to one of the students:

"At first, I was doing what they were saying, I thought they knew better than us. Then they change opinions all the time and I feel the government is playing with us. They are unreliable." (Student U, Belgium, 2 March 2021)

This erosion of trust is a phenomenon that has been felt in many countries. Statements such as the one made by the student above suggest that the loss of trust was more a result of fluctuating policies and a lack of firmness in vision and action on the part of policy makers.

4.1.2 IMPACT ON INTERCULTURAL EXCHANGES DELIVERY

Apart from its direct impact on the participating students, obvious from the results of the focus groups, the Covid-19 crisis, has also impacted the BAS intercultural Exchanges in multiple ways.

Hence it was proved to be effective on a satisfactory level, the choice of moving from physical encounters (trips) to virtual exchanges, caused some limitations in the intergroup contact of the participants as students were unable to meet in person and attended the activities from home (at least for the most part).

That along with few technical issues and the distance, caused by the virtual approach, impacted the engagement level of some participants, and caused some dissatisfaction. Some exchange evaluation statements [6] from participating students highlight the direct and indirect impact of the Covid-19 crisis on the delivery of the exchanges: *"Actually do the trip to Bulgaria and not virtually (although I know its no-ones fault)." (Belgium, postsurvey)*

"It would have been better for students to meet in person but the virtual exchanges were still enjoyable." (Greece, postsurvey)

"I would suggest having better technical facilities." (Belgium, postsurvey)

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[6] From the post-survey shared with students after the end of the exchanges.

Although we do not have robust statistics from our participants on this, the whole COVID-19 situation seems to have had a stronger impact on the socially disadvantaged participants. These had fewer opportunities for virtual participation, suffered more from communication barriers at the on-line moments and withdrew more quickly.

The above highlight the ways in which the Covid-19 crisis have impacted the project in general and the Intercultural exchanges. However, the exchanges, although virtual in nature and impacted by Covid-19 limitations, have managed to have a positive impact on the participating students as it will be highlighted in the next section.

4.2 COUNTRY REPORTS

4.2.1 BELGIUM

Participants Profile

All of the participants were secondary education students, aged between 16 (at the time of their selection) to 17-18 (by the time of the implementation of the intercultural exchanges). All are still in the phase of the "impressionable years'", which is roughly between the ages of 12 and 24. Out of 21 survey respondents, 16 are females while the rest identified as male, and one choose the "other" option. The vast majority has the Belgian nationality, with a small number declaring more than one nationality. Nine of the participants see themselves as part of a minority ethnic group.

Regarding their family background and social outlook 11 declared that they come from a middle-class family, two from an upper middle-class family while four stated that they come from a working-class family background, the rest chose not to disclose. Regarding the economic situation of their families eight out of ten claimed that they make ends meet easily or very easily each month.

When it comes to the educational background of their parents the results vary. In general, about half of the fathers hold a bachelor's degree or higher educational degree (master, Phd). That percentage is significantly lower among mothers. When it comes to their personal educational aspirations the vast majority of the respondents (17) are aiming at pursuing at least a bachelor's degree. Most of the students evaluate their English language skills in the intermediate/higher intermediate level (B1-B2).

Pre-exchange: Student attitudes and beliefs before the intercultural exchanges

Self-perception

Belgian students participated in the pre-survey when called to identify with a series of identities and chose to strongly identify (16 out of 21) with that of the national group (Belgian) and Europe (European). Seventeen respondents identified with the city (Brussels) while only three identified with the subnational Flemish identity. A larger survey (n=2985) regarding identity categories by youngsters showed that students positively identified with the district (21.6%), Brussels (20.8%), Belgium (30.0%), Europe (21.9) (Teney & Hanquinet, 2015, p.79-80). A more recent survey in schools in Brussel among 10th graders (same age as the current sample) provided a much more outspoken identification with Brussels (60¨%)

Social life and overall life satisfaction

Levels of satisfaction with life among Belgian participants were high at the time of the pre-survey with more than half claimed to be satisfied with their lives and the rest being largely neutral (neither satisfied nor dissatisfied). In line with this finding, the majority of the participants seem to lead an active social life. Close to two thirds meet friends outside the classroom at least once a week, while more than half meet at least ten people (outside the classroom) on a typical weekday. Most of their friends come from the same school or neighbourhood and are more likely to be of the same ethnic background (two claimed that most/all of their friends are of the same ethnic background and seven more claimed that more than half of their friends are from the same ethnic background). In addition, 13 are active in a sports club at least once a week.

Attitudes on Culture

When asked to evaluate a set of proposed definitions of culture, Belgian participants unanimously choose to identify culture as "A collection of practices: food, language, clothing style, religion, type of family, etc.". On the contrary, a third disagreed with identity culture as "Different ways people look like, their external appearance." Almost all participants agreed with the statement that a country can indeed have several cultures.

Perception of the "other"

Perception of the culture "other" was explored in the Q42[7] of the pre-survey where Belgians were asked to evaluate a series of items related to cultures in different parts of the world. The responses of the participants show a clear tendency towards a positive evaluation of statements that shed a positive light and a negative evaluation of statements that shed a negative light. In more detail, statements with the highest and lowest approval rate included:

Items with High Approval rate (5 strongly agree, 4 agree)	Respondents (=21)
I respect the values and customs of other cultures.	76%
People in my culture could learn a lot from people in other cultures.	67%
I am very interested in the values and customs of other cultures.	57%
Items with Low Approval rate (5 strongly agree, 4 agree)	
I dislike interacting with people from different cultures.	5%

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[7] Q42. Below are items that relate to the cultures of different parts of the world. Work quickly and record first reaction to each item. There are no right or wrong answers. Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with each item using the following five-point scale: 5 strongly agree, 4 agree, 3 neither agree or disagree, 2 disagree, 1 strongly disagree. (Neuliep, J. W., & McCroskey, J. C. . (2013), Ethnocentrism Scale)

Most other cultures are backwards compared to mine.	14%
I am not interested in the values and customs of other cultures.	14%

Table 4: Level of agreement with items related to the culture of others

When Belgian students were asked to ascribe certain features (trustworthy, arrogant, compassionate etc.) to people from specific countries the results were quite varied. Based on the responses, students tend to give a quite positive evaluation of their own country, claiming that people in Belgium are the most trustworthy. On the other side, the most negative features are usually ascribed to France, with 14 claiming that people in France are the most arrogant and seven claiming that they are the least compassionate. Belgian students do not seem to express any opinion on Bulgarian and Spanish people (the partner countries) though Spanish people are more positively evaluated by the Belgian group in comparison. It should be noted that many of the students chose not to ascribe specific characteristics to specific countries.

On-Exchange: Activity impact and Engagement/Interaction

During the week of 22-26 of February 2021, Belgian participants, hosts and guests, participated in a series of virtual activities which among others included presentations of school/city/country, language exchanges and quizzes. The virtual sessions took place via Microsoft Teams and for the most part the Belgian students were at school during the sessions (though at some moments, namely the last session students participated from home). Out of the total, seven respondents expressed some level of satisfaction (very satisfied, fairly satisfied, satisfied) with their participation in the activities while eight showed some level of dissatisfaction (very dissatisfied, fairly dissatisfied, dissatisfied), the rest remained neutral in their evaluation.

The most enjoyable parts of the exchange included the discussions among the students, the quizzes (kahoot sessions) and the Language exchanges. On the other side, participants mentioned that some technical issues along with some problems in the communication in English among the groups caused problems. Several students who were dissatisfied with the experience stated that distance played a role in their dissatisfaction. When asked for the least enjoyable aspect in the post exchange evaluation survey, one participant mentioned "That it was digital and not in real life". Within the Belgian groups there is a distinction between the satisfaction levels of the Host and Guest groups. When responding to the ESM questions the guest group, virtually visiting the Bulgarian students) showed higher levels of engagement and enjoyment in all activities in comparison to the host group, who hosted the Spanish students. For example, when asked how much they enjoyed the Language/culture exchange activity (that was implemented in both groups) six out of ten of the guest group students responded they enjoyed the activity "Very much". For the host group the enjoyment level for the activity was considerably lower with only four out of ten claimed to have enjoyed the activity "Very much".

This trend, which can be tracked also for the rest of the activities, could be possibly attributed to several limitations that have affected the host group more than the guest group. In general, there were several limitations in the communication of the groups due to the distance, technical and language issues. The main language used was English but there were certain limitations in the intergroup communication especially between Belgian and Spanish students. Six out of 21 of the respondents evaluated their communication with their peers in the lower end (1-4) of the ladder from 0-10.

Post-exchange: Student attitudes and beliefs after the intercultural exchanges (how they changed over time)

Impact of the exchanges on self-perception

Regarding participants self-identification in the post-survey, participants identify more as Europeans (11) and show a considerable identification with the city of Brussels (9). Both percentages are lower in comparison with the pre-survey. The reason behind is not clear, however, it maybe connected to the Covid-19 crisis.

Overall life satisfaction levels are lower than those of the pre-survey with just a third of the respondents claiming some level of satisfaction (very satisfied, fairly satisfied, satisfied). Students seemed to be affected by the Covid-19 crisis that started after   the pre- survey. As mentioned in the focus group (see 4.1.1), students expressed feelings of frustration on how the crisis has been handled by the government and the way that people are underestimating how much young people have been affected by the crisis. As one Belgian participant mentioned when referring to the need of vaccination provision among youngsters "Young years will never come back, they'll be gone in a heartbeat".

Impact on the perception of the "other"

When it comes to general cultural perceptions and attitudes the positive outlook tracked at the pre-survey was sustained. Following up on Q42 of the pre-survey, students were asked to evaluate a series of items related to cultures of different parts of the world to shed light on any possible impact that the exchanges might have on the perception of the "other".

As with the pre-survey, in general participants tend to negatively evaluate items which shed a negative light on the "other" and positively evaluate items with shed a positive light on the "other". However, in the post-survey a marginal boost in the number of students who seem open to "other cultures" can be observed. For example, those respondents who claimed that "*I am very interested in the values and customs of other cultures*", increased from 12 to 13. A finding that goes in line with the fact that close to half of the participants claimed to have broadened their horizons because of the exchange. It should be noted that the participants of the Covid-19 focus group, which took place at the time of the exchanges, showed a great deal of understanding of how cultural differences affect the way different countries reacted to the Covid-19 crisis and expressed their disapproval with people who were stereotyping certain groups of people (East Asians, Italians) during the initial Covid-19 outbreak.

From a socio-cultural aspect, Belgian students believe that youngsters tend to have less prejudice than their parents. They believe that women and men have similar prejudice towards other cultures and nationalities. In addition, the majority of the students believe that the economic situation is more important than language or nationality when considering the similarity of people in different countries.

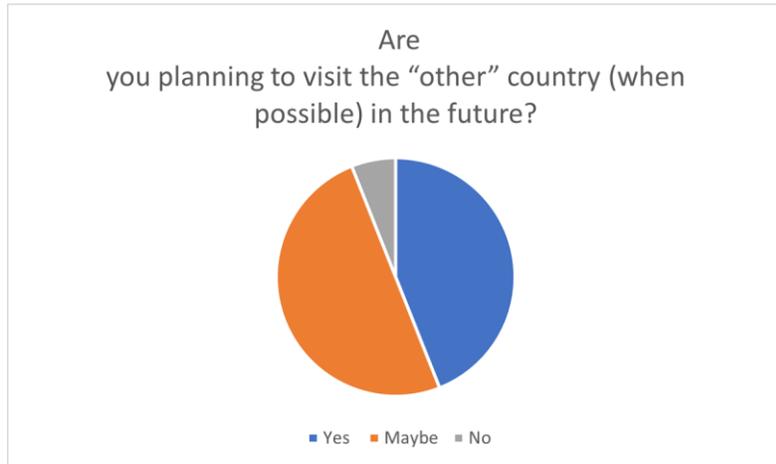*Intergroup Contact and overall experience impact*

Figure 4: Participants who are willing to visit the country of their exchange partners.

One of the most important aspects of the exchanges was the development of a strong intergroup contact between the groups. The post-survey evaluation showed that the intergroup contact has been achieved at a satisfactory degree. More than one third of participants stayed in touch with their peers from the "other" country since the end of the virtual exchanges while at least a half considered staying in touch in the future. In addition, nine out of 21 respondents are determined to visit the "other" country after the end of the Covid-19 crisis with an extra ten considering doing so.

In general, the exchanges seemed to have a considerable impact in the self-development of the participants with almost half claiming to have broadened their horizons and more than half feeling that they improved their intercultural communication skills due to their participation. It should be noted that the number of students who placed themselves on the C1-C2 English language proficiency level increased. That cannot be attributed solely to the participation in the exchanges given the distance between the pre- and post survey but as one participant mentioned in the post-survey evaluation "(Through my participation) *I've learned that I'm not so bad at English*".

The overall impact of the exchanges becomes more obvious when students were asked (in the post-survey) to reflect on what they learned from their virtual exchange experience. Among other students mentioned:

"*That we're not that different even if we grew up in other countries and other cultures. We all have the same kind of students all over the world.*"

"*That despite being from two different countries, we have a lot in common*"

"*I learned that I loved participating in this project, I made new friends and I knew I want to make friends all over the world. This is a great start.*"

4.2.2 BULGARIA

Participants Profile

The students were 15 - 16 years old at the time of their selection. Vast majority were born between 2004-2005 and about 2/3 of the sample are girls and the rest are boys. Most of the respondents claimed their nationality to be Bulgarian while 16 identified themselves with a minority ethnic group. The majority of the students place their family in the middle (25) or upper-middle (8) class with only one participant stating to belong to a working class family. In

accordance with the findings of the previous question most students stated that family/families make ends meet each month easily or very easily.

Pre-exchange: Students attitudes and beliefs the intercultural exchanges

Self -perception

The majority of the respondents (40) strongly identify with the "National Group-Bulgarian" while 37 identify with the "European" identity and 34 with the "World citizen" identity. On the other hand, fewer students identify with a subnational group with most being negative or neutral towards that category.

Social life and overall life satisfaction

A total of 41 students declare that they are either completely, very or fairly satisfied with their lives. It is not uncommon for Bulgarian students to make new friends or acquaintances while they are out with friends. It seems that respondents are quite open to meeting new people and developing new relationships. Few claimed to have never done that. On a typical weekday (outside of the classroom) nine out 45 of the students come in contact with somewhere between 10 and 19 persons, while 15 are coming in contact with a higher number than that and seven coming in contact with less than ten people.

Attitudes on Culture

The survey participants in Bulgaria accept to a large extent the statement that a country can indeed have several cultures. Though a sizable number of eight students disagrees with that statement.

Two statements are almost equally accepted as definitions of culture: "A collection of practices: food, language, clothing style, religion, type of family, etc." and "A way of living, thinking, acting and feeling". On the other hand, more than half of the respondents disagree or completely disagree with the third statement "Different ways people look, their external appearance".

Perception of the "other"

When asked in the pre-survey about the acceptance of the culture of the "other", the Bulgarian students show respect and acceptance of cultural differences. Thirty students "strongly agree" or "agree" with the statement "I respect the values and customs of other cultures", 28 with the statement "People in my culture could learn a lot from people in other cultures" and 30 with the statement "Lifestyles in other cultures are just as valid as those in my culture". It is noteworthy that when asked to attribute specific characteristics in specific groups (countries), the majority of the students choose not to name a specific country with the exception of the most trustworthy category where Germany took the lead.
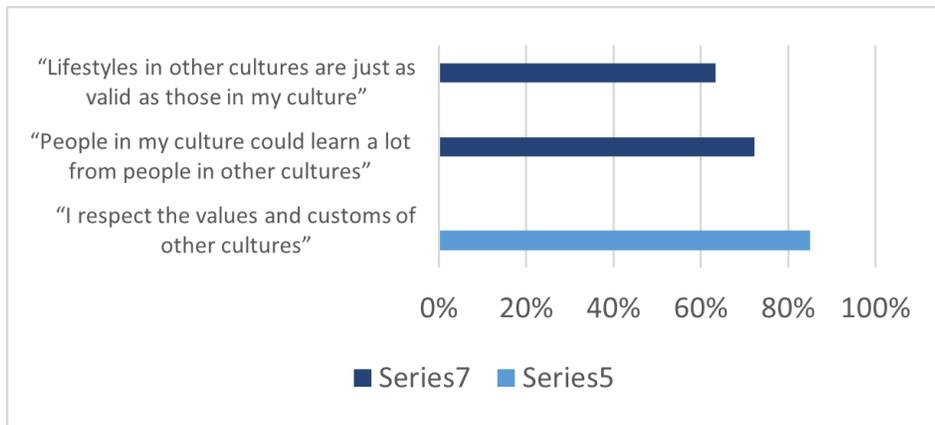
Figure 5: Bulgarian student evaluation on items related to the culture of the "other" (n=45).

On-Exchange: Activity impact and Engagement/Interaction

During the exchanges Bulgarian students were actively engaged, asked questions, and made comparisons with their own (Bulgarian) context. Bulgarian students compared their personal environment with those of the "other" for certain criteria (e.g Food, Entertainment, Covid measures, street art). Students from both host and guest groups were equally engaged and involved. They have both prepared to showcase their talents related to the topic of dance/music. For example, after the Greek video with the cheese pie, Bulgarian students reacted by presenting a video with Banica (a related recipe) and the similarities were discussed. Students from Greece and Bulgaria also made original videos to present to their peers. A discussion on stereotypes of both sides was made. Greek and Bulgarian students discussed some common stereotypes (incl. traditions and historical relations) and showed their willingness to understand each other's point of view.

Nine out of ten students evaluated the main activities during the virtual trips as "very interesting". The students evaluated the communication with Greek students "very much" easy and the communication with Belgian students "somewhat" easy. The language of communication during the activities was English. The least enjoyable part of the experience during the exchange activities were at the beginning when they were still confused and shy and the - sometimes - bad connection.

Post-exchange: Student attitudes and beliefs after the intercultural exchanges (how they changed over time)

Impact of the exchanges on self –perception

Of the respondents, 32 chose to identify with the National Group (Bulgarian) identity while 34 identify with the "European" identity and 31 with the "World citizen" identity. Numbers are lower in comparison with the pre-survey. This could be attributed to the frustration caused by the pandemic and the restrictive measures taken.

Impact on the perception of the "other"

As with the results of the presurvey, the positive perception of "other" cultures and the interest in them is reflected in the postsurvey. Students learned a lot about the Greek culture and traditions and the many similarities between Bulgarian and Greek traditions. "*Stereotypes don't exist-just different types of people!*" one participant stated.

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Intergroup Contact and overall experience impact

It is an indisputable fact that communication in an intercultural environment is extremely important for the development of social skills. The impact of the exchange and the desire for self-development and improvement of communication skills and language skills is reflected in the post-survey. Students met new friends and through the cultural exchange experience with 42 respondents stated that they are at least considering remaining in touch with their peers from the "other" country (Q.12). Moreover 34 are determined to visit the "other" country when possible. Four out of ten stated that they have learned a lot about the "other" country and its culture, broadened cultural horizons and improved intercultural communication skills.

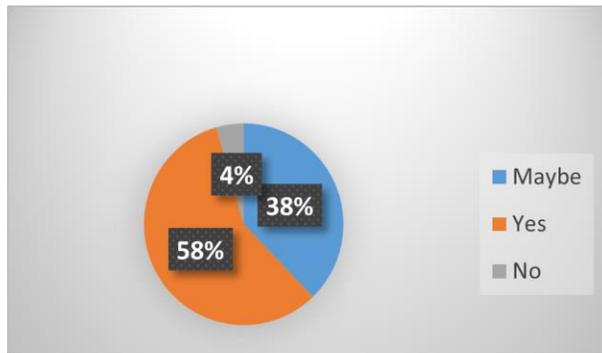Q12. Are you planning to stay in touch with your peers from the "other" country in the future?

Figure 6: Participants who are willing to stay in touch with their exchange partners (n=44).

4.2.3 GREECE

Participants Profile

In total the group consisted of 29 secondary education students, aged between 17 to 18. Two thirds were girls and the rest identified as boys. All the participants were born in Greece and hold Greek nationality. Regarding their family background 16 declared that they come from a middle-class family with only four coming from a working-class background. When it comes to the economic situation of their families nine out of ten claimed that they make ends meet easily. As for the educational background of their parents' participants claimed that more than a third hold a bachelor's- or higher educational attainment (master, Phd). Regarding their own educational aspirations, 17 of the respondents are aiming at pursuing a master's degree with an additional 10 aiming at a Phd. Six out of ten participants declared to have at least an advanced level of English proficiency (C1, C2).

Pre-exchange: Student attitudes and beliefs before the intercultural exchanges

Self-perception

In the pre-survey Greek students choose to strongly identify as World citizens (25) and with the European identity (23). The identification with the National group (Greek) was still high but considerably lower (19) to the above. A bit more than two thirds consider the city of Athens as a part of their identity.

Social life and overall Life satisfaction

Participants showed relatively high levels of satisfaction with their lives with two thirds falling in the upper part of the ladder (completely satisfied, very satisfied, fairly satisfied). No respondent expressed any level of dissatisfaction. Students seemed to lead an active social life with 21 claiming to have contact with at least ten people during a typical weekday. A similar number declared that they do make new friends at least once a month. Participants frequently meet friends outside the classroom and daily communicate through social media, while two thirds are active in a sports club.

Attitudes on Culture

Aiming at gaining an insight of participants' attitudes on culture, they were asked to respond to "What is culture, in your view" and "Do you think that a country can have several cultures?". For the first question students were asked to evaluate some proposed definitions of culture. Out of those students strongly agreed with perceiving culture as "a way of living, thinking, acting and feeling" as well as "a collection of practices: food, language, clothing style, religion, type of family, etc.". On the contrary most disagree with seeing culture as "different ways people look, external appearance differences". When responding to the second question students almost unanimously (27 out of 29) agreed on the possibility of existence of several cultures within a country.

Perception of the "other"

Later in the survey, participants were asked to express their level of agreement on items related to the culture of different parts of the world. Statements like "Lifestyles in other cultures are just as valid as those in my culture." and "I am very interested in the values and customs of other cultures" gather the highest levels of approval while on the other side statements like "Most other cultures are backwards compared to mine." are met with disapproval (22 out of 28 respondents disagree). When asked to ascribe specific features (arrogant, compassionate, trustworthy etc.) to people from specific European countries most participants by a large margin they chose not to do so, claiming that those features can apply to people from all countries. This trend was also detected in the post-survey where the question was repeated. There was a tendency though among those who named countries to give their own country (Greece) a favourable evaluation.

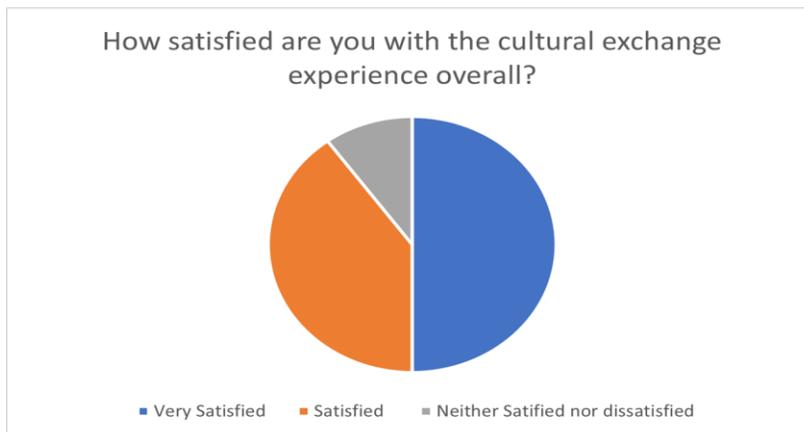**On-Exchange: Activity impact and Engagement/Interaction**

Figure 7: Level of satisfaction with virtual exchange experience.

Greek students participated in two intercultural exchanges, as mentioned before. The exchanges included a range of activities including presentations of school, city and neighbourhood, quiz sessions, cooking classes, art sessions and language exchanges. Most of all students were provided with the chance to discuss and exchange experiences.

In general, participating students seemed content with the virtual intercultural exchange experience

with 15 stating that they are "very satisfied" and 12 "satisfied". It is important that no participant stated any level of dissatisfaction. When it comes to the evaluation of the activities some seem to have a bigger impact on the students while other activities suffered from either language or technical problems.

The Greek students showed high levels of engagement in the virtual activities. The engagement levels were somehow higher in the exchange between Greek and Bulgarian students, something that can be attributed to the communication limitations between the Greek and Spanish group. However, accompanying teacher support along with the non-verbal communication kept students fairly engaged.

As one student mentioned in the post-exchange feedback "*I learned that communication among people of different nationalities isn't affected by the language barrier between them since there are many other ways to communicate, for example through body language, music, arts, etc*.".

In general, the activities related to the presentation of the local culture and tradition (dance, music, youth culture), which were followed by discussions between the students, worked better and achieved high levels of engagement. As one participant mentioned in the post-survey "*The most enjoyable part of the whole experience were the endless conversations with the students from Bulgaria*". It can be noted here that the constant verbal interaction between the two groups (host/guest) during the Greek-Bulgarian exchange played a major role in the maintenance of student engagement at higher levels in comparison with the Spanish-Greek exchange where verbal communication was more limited. The opening activity of the first day (Presentation of School/neighbourhood/city) was engaging based on ESM results while Kahoot quizzes were also highly appreciated by students and were named as the most enjoyable part of the experience by a third of the participants in the post-survey.

Post-exchange: Impact of the Intercultural Exchanges*Intergroup contact*One of the most important aspects of the impact of the intercultural exchanges is that of the intergroup contact established between the group of students (hosts and guests) participating in each trip.

Half of the Greek participants claimed that they kept contact with their peers after the end of the activities. The contact was maintained through social media (Instagram, Facebook/messenger). The most important is that 12 participants are determined to retain their contact with their peers in the future with an additional 15 considering doing so. Moreover 24 of the respondents wish to visit the partner country once the Covid-19 crisis will be over.
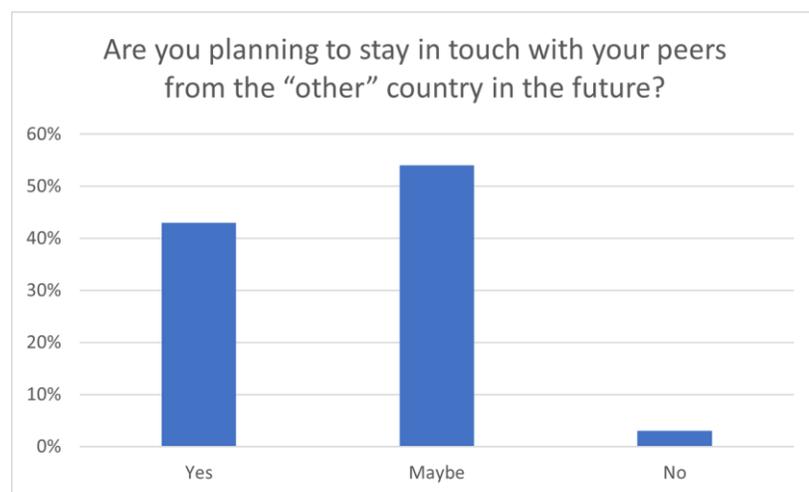
The findings above are very encouraging as it seems that many participants are willing to further cultivate their relationships with their peers from the "other" country and thus expand the impact of the BAS experience.

Figure 8: Participants willing to remain in contact with their peers (n=28).

Impact on culture attitudes

In the post-survey, the percentage of students who think that a country can have several cultures slightly increased (by one) in comparison with the previous results. This time only one respondent expressed disagreement with the statement.

Impact on Self-perception and Perception of the "other"

When it comes to self-perception, the identification with the different identities (European, Word Citizen, City) remains roughly the same while the levels of overall satisfaction with life have dropped. It should be noted that three participants expressed this time a level of dissatisfaction (something that was not tracked in the pre-survey). Evaluating those results, we should consider the mental and emotional impact of the Covid-19 crisis confirmed by the focus-groups. One participant mentioned "*None of us was prepared, we never thought it would spread like that. We weren't prepared*" while another expressed dissatisfaction and concern about the fact that school staff was not included in the "high priority" groups for vaccination. On the other hand, there was a marginal increase in participants who declared to have at least an advanced level of English proficiency (C1, C2).

Following up the related question from the pre-survey (Q42) students asked to express their level of agreement on items related to the culture of different parts of the world. The evaluation of the items confirms the fact that students tend to give positively evaluation to items which shed a positive light on the "other" and the opposite. In the post-survey this existing trend is getting stronger. For example, when evaluating the statement "I am not interested in the values and customs of other cultures" the number of those "strongly disagreeing" increased from 15 (pre-survey) to 21 (post-survey). Most important, there is an increased number of students (from 13 to 16) who now agree with the statement "I have many friends from different cultures", which could possibly mirror the BAS role in building relationships between the participating groups, given the fact that half of students are in touch with their peers from the "other" country. In line with the findings of the focus groups, students seemed strongly against stereotyping groups of people based on the performance of their countries during the crisis. They disagreed with the racist treatment of people from countries with high Covid-19 rates as it was expressed, for example, towards people of East Asian descent at the initial stages of Covid-19 outbreak.

On a socio-cultural side, Greek students believe that youngsters tend to have less prejudice than their parents and believe that women and men have similar prejudice towards other cultures and nationalities. In addition, the plurality of the students (11) believe that the economic situation is more important than language or nationality when considering the similarity of people in different countries.

Lessons learned.

Greek students seem to have benefited a lot from the virtual exchanges and thoroughly enjoyed the process of getting to know another culture and youngsters from another country. This can be ratified by the fact that 22 out of 29 participants would have been happy to go again through the virtual exchange experience.

All the participants agree to a degree that they have learned a lot about the "other" country and culture and that they have broadened their horizons. Nine out of ten participants claimed to have improved their intercultural communication skills through the exchange while two thirds claimed to have increased their language skills.

Through the cultural exchange experience, I (pick the appropriate answer):		
I learned about the "other" country and its culture	Completely Agree, Agree	100%
I broadened my cultural horizons	Completely Agree, Agree	100%
I improved my intercultural communication skills	Completely Agree, Agree	93%
I increased my language skills	Completely Agree, Agree	60%
I become better at collaborating with my classmates	Completely Agree, Agree	79%

Table 5: Self-development gains through the virtual intercultural exchange experience (n=28).

Reflecting on what they have learned, Greek students gave some valuable insight, which highlights the positive impact of the BAS experience. Responding to "What did you learn about yourself and others through this activity/project?" students mentioned, among other:

"That our countries have a lot in common."

"I learned about unity and I broadened my cultural horizons."

"I was detached from the remnants of prejudices and worries that society has wrongly passed on to us and the value was strengthened in me that all people, despite their beautiful variety, always seek love, joy, people to have a good time, the needs of all of us are one and the same."

4.2.4 SPAIN

Participants Profile

Altogether, the exchange group consisted of 25 secondary school students, aged between 15 and 16 years, in 4th grade of Compulsory Secondary Education (ESO). Of the participants, 19 were boys and six were girls. Seventeen were born in Spain. The participating students were of different nationalities, with 20 being Spanish. Of the respondents, 15 stated that they were part of a minority group, and a third did not know how to answer the question.

The students speak different languages at home, such as Arabic, Urdu and Panjabi, although Spanish is the most spoken language at home by 18 participants. As for their educational aspirations, only four of the participants aim to obtain a master's degree while the rest said they aspired to obtain a lower degree (5 post-secondary and 5 non-tertiary education degrees). Most of the participants (16) reported having a beginner and elementary level of English.

Pre-exchange: Student attitudes and beliefs before the intercultural exchanges

Self-perception

Spanish students chose to strongly identify with that of the national group (Spanish), with 19 respondents doing so. Only nine identified themselves with their city, while 12 identified as Europeans and only four identified with the subnational Catalan identity.

Social life and overall life satisfaction

Levels of satisfaction with life among Spanish participants where medium-high at the time of the pre-survey with 15 claiming to be satisfied, fairly satisfied or completely satisfied with their lives and five being neutral (neither satisfied nor dissatisfied). Only one student claimed a level of dissatisfaction. One part of the participants seems to lead an active social life. More than half of them meet friends outside the classroom several times a week. Most of their friends come from the same school or neighbourhood and are more likely to be of the same ethnic background.

Attitudes on Culture

When asked to evaluate a set of proposed definitions of culture Spanish participants unanimously choose to identify culture as "A way of living, thinking, acting and feeling.". Conversely seven disagreed with identity culture as "A collection of practices: food, language, clothing style, religion, type of family, etc. Almost all participants agreed with the statement that a country can indeed have several cultures.

Perception of the "other"

In one of the pre-survey questions we explored the perception of other cultures. Spanish students evaluated a series of items related to this issue. Those that obtained the highest levels of approval were statements such as "Lifestyles in other cultures are as valid as those of my culture" and "I am very interested in the values and customs of other cultures". When students were asked to attribute specific characteristics (arrogant, compassionate, trustworthy, etc.) to people from various European countries, participants on many occasions answered, "I don't know," and on other occasions said that these characteristics can be applied to people from all countries. This lack of trends also occurred in the post-survey when the question was repeated.

On-Exchange: Activity impact and Engagement/Interaction

As the other students, Spanish students participated in two intercultural exchanges. These exchanges included a series of activities that were developed throughout one week, including presentations of school, city and neighbourhood, quiz sessions, cooking classes, art sessions and language exchanges.

Students were asked to provide an evaluation of the activities carried out during the week. Six of the respondents claimed that they were satisfied or very satisfied with the virtual intercultural exchange experience, while the

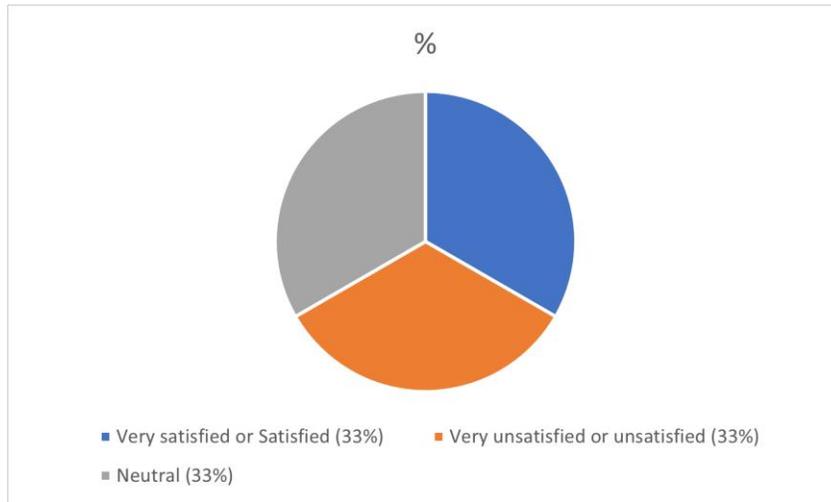same number expressed some level of dissatisfaction, the rest were neutral.Regarding the evaluation of the activities themselves, some were more highly rated than others. The Spanish students were at school during the sessions and the virtual sessions took place via Google Meet.

The Spanish students showed good levels of participation in some virtual activities, while in others, due to communication limitations, their participation was lower. However, the guidance and support of the teachers along with the non-verbal communication kept the students quite engaged. One student stated that they learned that *"although they do not speak the same language, we can communicate very easily*".

Figure 9: Level of satisfaction with the virtual intercultural exchange experience (n=18).

The most valued activities were the kahoot session and the video presentation of the neighbourhood. On the other hand, students mentioned that there were technical problems and communication problems with English. Several students who were dissatisfied with the experience stated that the virtual aspect influenced their dissatisfaction. Only eight said they would be happy to go through a virtual exchange experience again.

The Spanish students stated that what they would highlight most from their experience would be: "*make new friends*", "*speak English*", "*talk to new people*", "*talk to other countries*" and "*the attitudes of the Greek students: they are very friendly*".

Post-exchange: Student attitudes and beliefs after the intercultural exchanges (how they changed over time)

Intergroup contact

One of the most important aspects of the exchanges is the contact between the groups of students (hosts and guests) that might be established after the experience.

In the case of the Spanish students, their poor proficiency of English has limited the impact of the experience. Even so, 11 respondents said that they had been in touch with their foreign peers for only a limited period after the exchange. These contacts, which in their case were exceptional, were carried out through social networks, mostly through Instagram.

Along these lines, 14 Spanish students say that they are at least considering staying in touch with their peers from the "other" country in the future. In addition, eight and five students, claimed respectively, that they "maybe" or "yes" wish to visit the partner country once the Covid-19 crisis is over.

Impact on culture attitudes

In both, the pre-s and the post-survey, the majority of the students (all but one student), considered that a country can have several cultures. Although eight out of ten considered that most cultures are not inferior to their own, only seven considered that the lifestyles of other cultures are as valid as those of their own culture.

Impact on Self-perception and Perception of the "other"

In terms of self-perception, identification with the different identities (Spanish, European, their city, citizen of the world) remained approximately the same. In both, the pre-and post-survey, the greatest identification was "being Spanish" with around half of the students considering themselves Europeans and citizens of the world, and to a minor extent identifying with their city. Only the identification with the sub-national Catalan identity was modified, which increased considerably, from four to ten participants.

When Spanish students were asked to express their agreement/disagreement with items related to socio-economic aspects of life they remained neutral (003) in their evaluation in most of the cases. Those item included:

"People in different countries have a lot in common if they live under similar economic situations in spite of their different languages or cultures", "People have more in common with their country co-nationals in spite of living in different economic situations rather than with peope from other countries in economic situations similar to their own", "Young people from different countries have more prejudices than their parents' towards other cultures or nationalities",

"Young people from different countries have less prejucides than their parents' towards other cultures or nationalities",

"Men and women have similar prejudices towards other cultures or nationalities", "Men have more prejudices than women towards other cultures or nationalities" and "Women have more prejucides than man towards other cultures or nationalities."
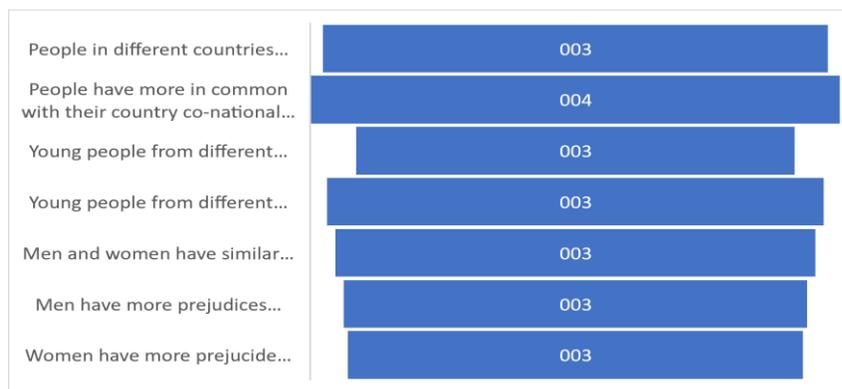

Figure 10: Prejudices towards other cultures or nationalities

Students who participated in the Covid-19 focus groups were against stereotyping of immigrants from countries with high rates of Covid-19. However, two students expressed that "*the COVID virus has been created in China, in a laboratory, with the support of the United States*" and that the press exaggerates the information because they want "*people to be afraid and stay at home*". They were also critical of the overly authoritarian actions of the states although one student considered that "*The countries that have managed the pandemic best are those that have closed their borders early, giving Morocco as an example of good management".*

Lessons learned.

Spanish students benefited from the virtual exchanges and enjoyed getting to know young people from another country. Only eight stated that they would not repeat the virtual exchange experience. When the students were asked if they would make any changes/ adaptations to the program/activities if they had to repeat the virtual sessions, most responded that "We would not change anything" or "this is fine", one even said: "I would travel to Greece".

Most of the participants agree that they have learned a lot during the exchange. For example, 13 stated that they have learned about other countries and their culture. And half of the students consider that they have broadened their cultural horizons.

However, only eight of Spanish students said they had improved their intercultural communication skills and ten stated that they increased their language skills.
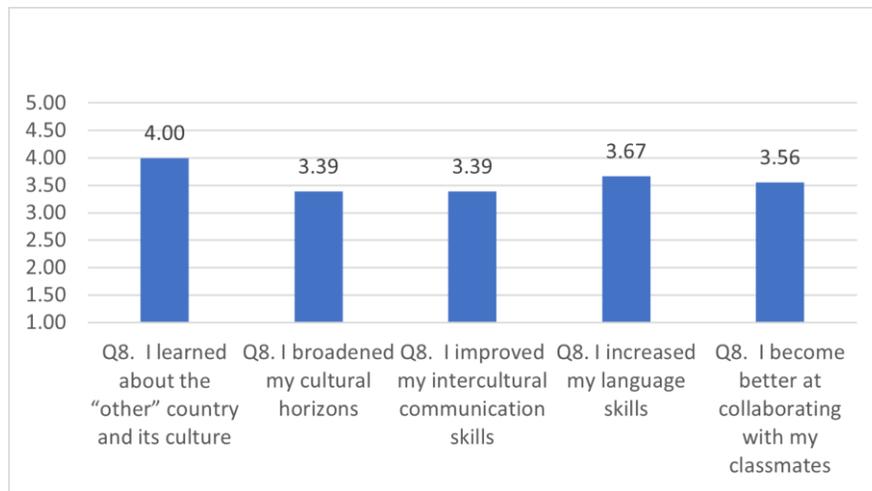

Figure 11: Self-development gains through the virtual intercultural exchange experience

Reflecting on what they have learned, the Spanish students provided valuable information highlighting the positive impact of the BAS experience. Responding to "What did you learn about yourself and others through this activity/project?" one of the students mentioned "*I have learned a lot of things*" and another, says "*I have learned that we are all equal*".

4.3 CROSS-COUNTRY ANALYSIS

The cross-country analysis reflects critically on the outcomes of the surveys and compares the participating countries.

Focus of program: mental maps of culture (what did participants select to represent themselves to others)

As mentioned in the previous sections the activity programmes, drafted by students and teachers of the participating schools, included a variety of activities. Although many of the activities, like presentations of local life and culture, language exchanges and quizzes, were common among the different programmes, there were some significant differences in the parts, aspects of their culture that each host group chose to present to their guests.

One major point of distinction between the programmes of the exchange organised by the Spanish group and the rest is that the Spanish programme was concentrated almost wholly on the local aspect, presenting the life and culture of the La Mina school neighbourhood rather than presenting Barcelona or Spain as a whole. Elements of national culture (paella cooking session for example) were presented but were not the core of the programme. This choice could be explained by the very special socio-economic reality of the La Mina area and its distinct local culture. On the other side, the Bulgarian and Greek groups chose to focus on the national level presenting elements of their national cultures (dance, food, habits etc.). In both cases, aspects of local life (school, neighbourhood) and city life (Athens, Sofia) were presented but the focus was put on the wider national (Bulgarian, Greek) context. Finally, the Belgian groups seemed to follow a more mixed method. Apart from the local aspects (school, Brussels city), some of organised activities, such as the Dutch language courses, included aspects of the regional identity (Flemish) while the final session ("Brussels at the heart of Europe") was concentrated on the European rather than the national identity. This can be explained by the status of Brussels as the capital of the European Union. Some aspects related to the national (Belgian) culture were also present in the activities, though not prominent.

In general, it can be seen that the Spanish, and to a lesser degree, the Belgian groups tend to focus more on the local/regional level while Greek and Bulgarian groups put more emphasis on the national context. The special socioeconomic status of La Mina (the neighbourhood of the Spanish school) and the political division of Belgium into different regions and communities, with specific multi-capital function for Brussels can explain these choices.

Successful instruments/tools used

Of the various instruments and tools used for the implementation of the activities some seemed to have worked better than others, collecting high levels of approval from students and positively impacting the engagement and enjoyment of participants.

One of those tools that was used in all the four exchanges was "kahoot". The application was used in Quiz sessions where students were mainly reviewing what was presented and discussed the culture of the host and guest country as well as similarities and differences between the two.

Based on the ESM results, the Quizz sessions were among the most enjoyable among all groups. This kind of session enabled even participants with lower levels of English proficiency to actively participate. This is confirmed by the teachers. Reflecting on the most effective activities, one teacher mentioned in the feedback survey "*Kahoot-quizzes : everyone is involved in the activity*". It is notable that among the Spanish group (most of them at beginner level when it comes to English language proficiency) the Kahoot (quiz) sessions were the most impactful and enjoyed ones. It should be noted though that the use of Kahoot was not independent but was used complementary to the cultural exchange activities (language exchanges, presentations of local culture, etc.). In particular, the language exchange activities were also highly enjoyed by the students and provided a fertile ground for intergroup contact (language similarities, vocabulary of common origin).

Finally, the free discussions of students around their cultures and topics of interest (youth culture) were largely appreciated among groups. The importance of the non-facilitated discussion can be backed by the fact that in the post-survey, when asked for the most enjoyed part of the exchange, many of the participants stated that the discussion with their peers was the most enjoyable aspect of the whole experience:

"*Talking with them (peers) and getting to know new things*" (Spanish student).

" *Talking to young and cool people.*" (Bulgarian student)

"*The most enjoyable part of the whole experience was the conversations with the students from Bulgaria*" (Greek Student)

Role of language: bridge and barrier?

Language and verbal communication played a significant role in the engagement of the students and the activities. As English was the main language used for the implementation of the activities, participants' fluency played a major role in the engagement and enjoyment levels. It should be noted that English language proficiency varied among the groups with the majority of Greek students placing their proficiency at C1-C2 level, Bulgarians at B2-C1, Belgians at B1-B2 and Spanish at A1-A2. The difference of level was translated in the engagement levels among the groups with Spanish students, for example, showing lower levels of engagement (overall dissatisfaction lies at over 30% the highest among all groups) largely because of the language barrier caused by lower English proficiency level. On the contrary, students participating in the exchange between Sofia and Athens showed higher engagement levels facilitated by their English language proficiency. It should be noted though that non-verbal communication and use of games (kahoot) helped in increasing the engagement of those on beginner level.

Accordingly, when evaluating the communication with their peers, students from Greece and Bulgaria give a more positive evaluation while students from Belgium and Spain. Students that place the communication (verbal and non) on the lower half of the 1-10 ladder account for 1 out of 10 or less for Bulgaria and Greece while the same percentage form Belgium and Spain stands at around one third. Participating students in the post-survey mentioned communication difficulties as one of the elements that halted them from enjoying the activities. As some participant characteristically stated when asked on the least enjoyable part of the exchange:

"*That I had to speak in English.*" (Spanish student)

Based on research findings as well as on the observation of the activities by the academics and teachers, it seems that English language proficiency formed either a bridge or a barrier depending on the proficiency levels of the participating groups. The findings confirm the significance of the intergroup contact and the importance of communication and sustainable interaction between participants in successful exchanges. As already mentioned in the literature review, when interactions between group members are successful, members are likely to feel happy, jovial, or satisfied (Esses et al, 1993, p.63).

Timing and process: short burst or protracted contact?

The contact between the participating groups was not only restricted to the week of the programmed activities but extended to the periods before and after the actual exchanges. Participating students met during a series of "getting to know each other" workshops[8] that took place in advance of the originally planned trips and some had since retained contact with their peers.

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[8] That is true for the Belgian, Bulgarian and Greek groups, the Spanish group composition largely changed by the time the virtual exchanges were implemented. The workshops took place in the winter of 2019-20 just before the originally planned physica trips.

One of the most important outcomes though of the whole BAS experience is that many of the participants remained in contact well after the end of the activities with many wishing to continue doing so and planning to visit the country of their peers in the future. As stated in the post-survey 100% of the Bulgarian, 97% of the Greek, 83% of the Belgian and 78% of the Spanish students are at least considering in staying in touch with their peers while 86% of the Greek, 77% of the Bulgarian, 45% of the Belgian and 27% of the Spanish students are determined to visit the "other" country when possible.

Stereotypes

A series of items in the pre- and post exchange surveys aimed at exploring students' attitudes towards the culture of the "other" independently or in comparison with their own cultural context.

One example of this is question 42[9] of the pre-questionnaire (which was re-tested in the post survey after the end of the exchanges). There students were asked on their agreement or disagreement of several items related to the cultures and lifestyle of "other" as well as their own countries. A common finding across the four groups, as can be seen in the country reports, is the fact that students tend to have higher levels of agreement with the positively charged items and higher levels of disagreement with the negatively charged items. However, this cannot diminish the fact that a sizable percentage of participants showed signs of negative evaluation of the culture of the "other". It should be noted though that when re-tested in the post-survey the tendency of the positive evaluation of the culture of the "other" showed signs of further increase and vice versa. This probably has something to say about the impact of the exchanges and the role of school as a socialisation factor that can play an important part in the process of socialization, social inclusion and in the building of representation of others. As mentioned by Diekmann et al, 2019 (p.163) Encountering another culture through social interaction can contribute significantly to cross-cultural understanding.

Similarly, when students were asked to attribute certain characteristics to specific groups of people (countries) they chose for the most part, regardless of origin, not to name specific countries (with few exceptions). It could be noted though that students were more willing to attribute positive characteristics to their own country. When choosing to attribute negative characteristics, they usually name a country other than their own, supporting in a way the literature assumption that there is a tendency for more positive emotional response to in-group members (Dovidio et al, 2005, p. 224).

It becomes clear from the above that students entered the project with an openness to the "other" which was enhanced throughout the BAS experience; some findings, however, showed that stereotypes indeed exist in participants' minds. That became apparent as a result of the Covid-19 focus groups when asked on how different countries handled the crisis. Many showed some level of preoccupation with countries severely affected by the first wave of the crisis like Italy. Although students do not explicitly name countries in a negative manner, they express their opinion that lifestyle in southern European countries has affected their exposure to the Covid-19 crisis. This tendency can be attributed to the coverage of the outbreak by the media, especially during the initial stages. As relevant literature shows, mass media provide a source of indirect, often negative information on some groups, thus promoting stereotyping and racial prejudice (Fuochi et al, 2020, p.195). However, it is really encouraging when looking at the impact of the project, that many of the participants claimed that as a result of their participation they have broadened their horizons and developed their intercultural communication skills. This openness to cultural

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[9] Q42. Below are items that relate to the cultures of different parts of the world. Work quickly and record the first reaction to each item. There are no right or wrong answers. Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with each item using the following five-point scale: 5 strongly agree, 4 agree, 3 neither agree or disagree, 2 disagree, 1 strongly disagree.

otherness and to other beliefs, world views and practices is considered one of the 20 competences included in the model of competences for democratic culture published by the Council of Europe (Council of Europe, 2016, p.11). Those are some of the key competences that need to be acquired by learners if they are to become effectively engaged citizens and live peacefully with others as equals in culturally diverse democratic societies (Council of Europe, 2016, p.57).

In any case the intergroup contact built between participants as a result of the exchanges, and the high numbers of participants remaining in touch after the end of the activities, constitute a concrete response to the impact that an intercultural exchange can have on stereotypes. As a teacher mentioned after the end of the exchanges reflecting on the issue "*The experience for students has been very limited however they have for sure broken some stereotypes and achieved some new knowledge*.".

Openness in function of class

It has been said before that field trips, here adapted in virtual form, offer an opportunity to increase a student's knowledge foundation while promoting further learning and higher-level thinking strategies. (Behrendt & Franklin, 2014, p. 242). In the BAS exchanges students took a leading/central role in the preparation and delivery of the activities. As the academic observation of the activities shows that the teachers, for the most part, stay in the background and they take the role as a facilitator only when needed. Students are encouraged to discuss with their peers, asking questions and interacting in not a strictly facilitated manner. In general, Belgian, Bulgarian and Greek groups were acting more independently (especially the two latter groups) than their Spanish counterparts mainly due to language barriers, already mentioned above. Still even that group was encouraged to develop independence in their contact with their peers.

Frustration of non-physicality

Although general satisfaction levels with the virtual exchanges were relatively high, an accountable number of participating students expressed some level of dissatisfaction (ranging from 0% among Greek students to over 30% among Spanish students). Although other limitations caused by communication and technical issues played their role in these results, the finding can be also linked to a series of concerns students expressed regarding the virtual approach and the absence of physicality in their contact with their peers.

In line with current literature on Virtual field trips, it becomes obvious, from students' reaction to the virtual activities and their post-exchange feedback, that a virtual exchange can be an alternative or complimentary to field trips (Seifan et al, 2020, p.2) but cannot be considered equivalent to real life experiences (Ho, 2020, p.24). In general, the absence of physical contact with their peers and the change of direction for the exchanges (from physical to virtual) was a source of frustration among some of the participants. More specifically when asked on what they would have changed in the exchanges (Q17 Post-survey)[10] in case of a repeat of the virtual activities many students stated their frustration of non-physicality:

"*I would love to see this people in person*." (Student from Bulgaria)

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[10] Reflecting on your experiences, would you suggest any changes/adaptations to the programme/activities if we had to repeat the virtual sessions?

"*I would have travelled to Greece*" (Student from Spain)

"*Actually do the trip to Bulgaria and not virtually (although I know it's no-one's fault)*." (Student from Belgium)

Accordingly asked to mention the least enjoyable part of the activities (Q15 Post-survey)[11] students from the different countries mentioned:

"*That it was digital and not in real life.*" (Student from Belgium)

"*Not being able to meet all my peers in real life and learn more about them*" (Student from Greece)

Similarly, teachers involved in the exchanges seem to share similar thoughts when reflection on the experience of virtual exchanges:

"*Effective but not sufficient to meet fully the aims of the project.*"

Teachers' Perspective

A aforementioned teachers were asked to provide a short feed-back of their experience.

All of them were involved in the organisation and the implementation of the exchanges. Their general appreciation is in line with the students' evaluation.

First of all, teachers positively evaluated the virtual exchanges experience but highlighted its inability to replace the physical exchange experience. Characteristically teacher from Greece and Spain respectively stated:

"*Effective but not sufficient to meet fully the aims of the project*".

"*Somehow positive although its a different experience than a trip*."

In the same line a Belgian teacher elaborated on the impact of the lack of physical contact

"*I do find it a pity not being able to talk and meet in real life. For the students, the contacts with the guests/hosts did not have the same intensity as a real meeting, no friends for life*."

When it comes to the activities, teachers claimed that Kahoot quizzes and live discussions on culture and everyday life attracted most of the students' attention. That comes in accordance with students' evaluation. Greek and Bulgarian teacher stated respectively, when commenting on the most effective activities:

"*Exchange of ideas concerning culture and experiences in everyday life.*"

"*For the cultural exchange with the students from Greece, the most enjoyable part was the lively discussions. Students could not get enough. Everybody was keen to share something.*"

Teachers expressed the barriers in the smooth implementation due to technical issues. A Belgian teacher stated:

"*First of all stressy because of the uncertainty of the technical issues.*"

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[11] Mention the least enjoyable part of your experience during the exchange activities. Reply briefly.

The evaluation ended on a positive note with most of the teachers claiming their will to reimplement such virtual exchanges in the future though once more they declared that those could not be considered as a replacement of a physical exchange:

"Yes. I believe the students enjoyed it, they met their foreign peers and learned about another culture. But it can't replace a real cultural exchange". (Bulgarian teacher)

The detailed teacher feedback will be used for the projects third outputs the Toolkit which will include practical guidelines for the organisation and implementation of school intercultural exchanges.

5. CONCLUSION

Stereotypes as beliefs about the characteristics, attributes, and behaviours of members of certain groups have always been a feature of societies. The BAS project wished therefore to go beyond cultural general representations and provide students with a deeper insight on cultural characteristics, such as lifestyle, cultural heritage and social habits and understand the underlying reasons. This is achieved with the help of a transnational approach and the encounter with the 'other' through a series of intercultural exchanges. Encountering another culture through social interaction can contribute significantly to cross-cultural understanding (Diekmann et al, 2019, p. 163) as intercultural dialogue between individuals or groups of people from different cultural affiliations, facilitated on such occasions, is of great significance for fostering tolerance and social cohesion in culturally diverse societies (Council of Europe, 2016).

A travelling experience as a source that offers fertile ground for experiential learning was initially chosen for the exchanges. Yet, when it became clear that travelling was no option throughout the period of the project, due to the Covid-19 outbreak in March of 2020, partners had to shift from physical trips to virtual trips. In general, the absence of physical contact with their peers and the change of direction for the exchanges (from physical to virtual) was a source of frustration among participants and project partners. However, the partners, and particularly the teachers of the participating schools managed to motivate students and to prepare a week of virtual exchange by paying special attention to the original objectives and spirit of the BAS project.

The programmes, organised by the participant students and schoolteachers, stayed close to the project's aims and were rich in activities. Presentations of local and national culture, discussions on lifestyle and youth culture, quiz sessions and language exchanges were included, among others. Some of the programmes focused more on the national level (Greece, Bulgaria) while others concentrated more on the local level of the city (Belgium) or the neighbourhood (Spain). Most students were actively involved and had the opportunity to discuss and exchange experience with their peers, something that was, in the words of the students themselves, one of the biggest successes of the project.

There were few barriers that affected the process. Apart from some technical issues in the virtual sessions, one of the major limitations of the exchanges was the language barrier that existed in some cases. Based on research findings as well as on the observation of the activities , English language proficiency formed a bridge as well as a barrier and affected the enjoyment levels. The findings confirm the significance of the intergroup contact and the importance of communication and interaction between participants in successful exchanges.

Despite those setbacks the BAS research highlighted the overall positive impact of the project when it comes to the openness to cultural otherness. A series of items in the pre- and post exchange surveys aimed at exploring students' attitudes towards the culture of the "other" independently or in comparison with their own cultural context. Although students showed already in the pre-survey that they tend to be open to the "other" cultures it turned out that their interest in those increased after their participation in the project. Accordingly, a common finding among the groups was that many of the participants stated that due to their participation, they have broadened their horizons and developed their intercultural communication skills. Openness as an attitude towards people from different cultural affiliations involving sensitivity towards, curiosity about and willingness to engage with other people and other perspectives on the world, is considered one of the main competences which enable an individual to participate effectively and appropriately in a culture of democracy (Council of Europe, 2016, p.12). Other such competences such as "Linguistic, communicative skills" and "Co-operation skills" were undoubtedly developed through students' journey with BAS.

In conclusion, the BAS experience with all its limitations, changes and setbacks has proven to be a highly enriching experience for the participating students. Participants were able to come in direct contact with the otherness and gain a deeper understanding of the other through the reflection of the differences and similarities with their peers. One of the biggest achievements of the project itself, that can be tracked in the results of the post-survey, is the intergroup contact built among students from the different countries.

The fact that many students are in touch (or intending to stay in touch) with their peers even after the exchanges, and the fact that many among them are determined (or at least considering) to visit the "other" country when possible, are indicators of the impact that the exchanges and the BAS project had on the participants. It would be interesting to follow the students for a longer period and see how these exchanges might shape future behaviour towards other cultures.

While the virtual exchanges have proven to be a step towards better understanding and openness towards other cultures, it would be highly worthwhile to implement the physical school trips as initially planned. The would not only allow to respond to the original objectives of the research related to stereotypes, but also to compare the impact of virtual vs impact of physical trips on the perception of the other.

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