

# International Social Interaction and Intercultural Perception of Pre-school Children in the Context of Four European Countries

*Mihaela Brumen<sup>1</sup> & Erika Hvala<sup>2</sup>*

## Abstract

The paper presents pre-school children's learning about other cultural communities in their classrooms together with opportunities for 'virtual contact' through online platforms. An introduced qualitative study explores how pre-school children, involved in the Erasmus+ project, perceive and cope with children who speak another language and live in other countries. Using semi-structured interviews, 136 children (5–6 years old) from four European countries were interviewed. Participating children would invite a friend home who speaks a foreign language, would invite them to a birthday party, accept their invitation to a party, lend them a toy, or would be sad at anyone making fun of them. The results indicate that 5–6-year-olds reflect a fairly high degree of intercultural awareness and positive social perceptions. The children, regardless of the country, expressed their concern about not understanding the language or coming from a faraway country more often than any negative characteristics. Furthermore, the findings indicate that friendship relations have been beginning to develop between children in different countries due to the joint Erasmus+ activities. The findings should enhance 'virtual contacts' through online platforms in early childhood education and thus contribute to better social interaction and understanding between and among countries.

## Keywords

pre-school children's perception, multilingual and intercultural interaction, Erasmus+ project

---

1 Department of Elementary Education, University of Maribor, Faculty of Education, Slovenia

2 Prežihov Voranc Bistrica Primary School, Kindergarten Unit Bistrica, Slovenia



## 1 Introduction

The importance of intercultural education, enhancing social cohesion and interaction in a pluralist society, and developing human and social capital, through internationalisation at the national/sector/institutional levels of education (Knight, 2004), is becoming acknowledged as a basis for high quality learning, starting at pre-school.

Sikorskaya (2017), in her report on *Intercultural education policies across Europe as responses to cultural diversity* (2006–2016), points out that schools are the central place to nurture social skills and abilities in order to live together within a cultural diversity. Studies (Mistry et al., 2004; Reid & Lynn Kagan, 2015) show the positive impact of early childhood education and care on children's development (language, social and cognitive skills), especially for children at risk (e.g. lower socioeconomic status, disadvantaged groups). Considering this, McGuirk and Kehoe (2013, p. 12) point out that children develop moral principles of fairness and equality from an early age, while they also develop, even as young as 3 years of age, implicit and explicit prejudice toward others from different social groups (Keenan et al., 2016). Keenan, Connolly and Stevenson (2016) suggest that children who exclude others based on prejudicial views are more likely to become adults with similar embedded ideologies based on those biases and unfair stereotypes acquired during childhood. The potential negative impacts of children being a victim/target of prejudice and discrimination include low academic achievement, anxiety, decreased motivation to interact with peers, social exclusion, and low self-esteem (McGuirk & Kehoe, 2013, p. 14).

Therefore, programmes and initiatives that address positive attitudes to promote diversity and understanding have an appropriate place in the area of pre-schools and community activities to equip children with the knowledge and skills that will enable them to operate effectively within a globalised and culturally diverse world. They should provide them with the opportunity to learn about other cultural communities in their classrooms, together with opportunities for 'virtual contact' through online platforms (as suggested in the Erasmus+ project described below).

Sikorskaya (2017) adds that the scope of intercultural competences is much wider than formal education. Intercultural education should not be limited to schools and curricula. It should also concern all society (e.g. family, local community, media). This is manifested through the production of joint communications, guidelines and frameworks (e.g. *Education policies to foster tolerance in children/and young people in the EU*, 2016).

Foreign language education research has progressively shifted its focus to the intercultural aspects of learning (Alonso Belmonte & Fernández Agüero, 2015). As a result, an increased amount of research was published in the field, focusing mostly on secondary and higher education (Byram & Phipps, 2005); a great number of projects were launched

with the focus on intercultural teaching and learning (Lázár, 2015), and the practice of internationalisation in education was initiated (Doiz et al., 2013).

A review of literature shows that there is a lack of research about intercultural competence and education in the realm of foreign language learning and internationalisation in early childhood education. A few papers that do exist (Adriany, 2017; Róg, 2015; White, 2011) focus mainly on the inclusion of intercultural education in the early childhood national curricula, gender justice or programmes for teaching English as a foreign language in kindergartens. The present study should offer a new insight into the international, social interaction, foreign language and intercultural education of pre-school children and their educators, and may help shape 'virtual contact' societies and prepare very young learners for functioning in diverse conditions.

## 2 The Erasmus+ project

The European Commission supports language education and intercultural understanding through programmes such as Erasmus+, also in the pre-school setting. A two-year Erasmus+ project entitled *Developing Social Competences of Children with Early Childhood Language Learning* (No. 2017-1-SI01-KA219-035506\_4) included pre-school institutions from Bulgaria, Estonia, Italy, and Slovenia. Its main objective was to promote multiculturalism, diversity, tolerance and acceptance with exposure to foreign languages and early childhood language learning.

The project enhanced the development of social skills and language interaction of pre-school children in an indirect way with their peers from the mentioned EU countries. In this way, children faced a linguistically, culturally, and geographically diverse world and were provided with the scaffolding for language learning at higher levels.

Pre-school institutions participated in the project on several levels – country coordinators (using various electronic media, like e-Twinning, Skype video conferences, Facebook, and exchanging e-mails), foreign language teachers, early childhood educators, and children in the kindergartens involved. The e-Twinning environment, in the form of an online platform, allowed safe publishing of all the materials, photographs, and videos. Early childhood educators jointly planned their work, shared experiences, and exchanged good teaching practices. Cooperation was determined with monthly timesheets. One of the Italian early childhood educators stated at one of the interviews at the common meetings in Slovenia (see also Brumen & Hvala, 2018): *“Team teaching helps me in searching and finding new pedagogical methods in pre-school. I constantly reflect on my work. We use new resources, introduce innovations in our planning and lessons are based on the exchange of experience with other educators from the involved European countries.”*

The following topics were introduced in the project: the shape, location and national symbols of the four countries, Christmas customs in Europe and in the countries involved, traditional children's stories, fairy tales, songs and food from the participating countries. Some topics were presented in children's English (as a foreign language) lessons, some in everyday kindergarten activities in the language of instruction. English lessons were introduced systematically and spontaneously through everyday pre-school activities, where children learned age-appropriate, simple, frequent English structures (e.g. songs, dances, role play). They were performed by teachers of English. Furthermore, at the video conferences, where children virtually met, saw and heard groups of children from other countries, some basic vocabulary and structures of the language of instruction (e.g. Bulgarian, Italian, Estonian, Slovenian) were introduced (e.g. greetings, numbers, giving thanks), and some activities (e.g. social games, songs, drama performances) in English were presented. It is important that this virtual cooperation was carried out on a concrete level so that each participant could feel the involvement and importance of international cooperation.

Early childhood educators noted that this kind of digital social networking, (foreign) language exposure and multiculturalism improved their pedagogical competences, changed their traditional teaching to a more global, international education, and their reflective thinking made reference to the processes of analysing and making judgments about what had occurred in their teaching.

The Erasmus+ projects' contents were also presented to children's parents and grandparents. At pre-school institutions, events and workshops, traditional customs and characteristics (e.g. songs, dances, puppet performances) from the involved countries were introduced. This kind of inter-generational cooperation increased overall knowledge about the involved countries.

The Erasmus+ project also fostered global sustainability issues and European collaboration, as noticed by one of the Bulgarian early childhood educators: *"This project brings greater social connections of all members in the kindergarten and of other project partners, and consequently, develops a real sense of belonging to Europe. It improves our multicultural understanding, develops an interest of the families about European countries, and brings great European cooperation."*

The proposed project can be of interest to experts in early educational context. It can help them to build systematic and professional 'virtual' experience, and foster inclusive language and intercultural education in a pre-school setting.

### 3 Materials and Methods

This paper attempts to broaden our understanding of how preschool-aged children perceive, understand, and cope with children who speak another language and live in other countries, matching the principles of social inclusion, diversity, tolerance and multi-culturalism (European Commission, 2014).

#### *Study questions*

This qualitative study set itself the objective of exploring children's knowledge and perception of cultural diversity. The research questions of the present study, where the pre-school children were interviewed, were:

1. Do the pre-school children express a willingness to socialise with children speaking another language and living in another country?
2. What is the pre-school children's attitude to people who come from other countries?

The findings should contribute to 'internationalisation' in early childhood education and enhance 'virtual contacts' through online platforms, and thus contribute to better social interaction, understanding and appreciation between countries, cultures and nations.

#### *Participants*

The data was collected from a non-random sample of children (total  $n=136$ ) from public pre-school institutions from Bulgaria ( $n=28$ ), Estonia ( $n=15$ ), Italy ( $n=78$ ) and Slovenia ( $n=15$ ), participating in the Erasmus+ project, aged 5–6. Children from all four countries, enrolled in public pre-schools, came from different socio-economic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The number of children included in the study is dispersed due to the total number of 5–6-year-old children involved in each pre-school institution, in each country. Four pre-school institutions in each country participated in the Erasmus+ project and all of the 5–6-year-olds per pre-school institution were interviewed.

#### *Data Collection Procedure and Instrument*

The data was collected via a semi-structured interview for children, constructed around the goal and questions of the study, developed by Brumen, Čagran and Fras-Berro (2014). The original semi-structured interview in the cited study consisted of nine closed and nine open-ended questions. The original study focused on multilingualism and interculturalism among pre-school children in Slovenia. However, for the purpose of this study, only six closed and open-ended questions, pertaining to children's perception of cultural diversity and willingness to socialise with children speaking another language, coming from another country, and belonging to no specific national group, were used.

The authors of this paper did not ask children about specific national groups but were interested in how they perceive an outside group child who speaks another language and comes from other countries in general.

At one of the common Erasmus+ project meetings, the authors met with the pre-school teachers from the four countries, who were involved in the project and to interview the children, and presented the objectives and purpose of the research. The interviewers were trained in advance in how to encourage children to interact, to prevent silence or potential embarrassment of the children, and to remain neutral, not to influence their answers in the data collection stage (for this reason, independent interviewers from the four countries were not involved). Then, the semi-structured interview was sent to the participants in all four countries involved, at the same time.

The pre-school educators interviewed each child who gave their own opinions. The semi-structured interview was used, asking questions which took into consideration the interests and verbalising abilities of the 5 to 6-year-old children. Some pre-school educators interviewed each child in their institution in the “computer” corner where they regularly kept a record of the answers on their computer (Brumen et al., 2014). Computers motivated children crucially. Other pre-school educators acted as journalists with a microphone and camera or scribed a letter to a child’s pen-friend. No images of children were used. These data were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. Children in the survey associated the children from other countries with their *own personal experiences*, e.g. meeting children in the Erasmus+ project, while on holiday, other children from their kindergarten, home or local playground. Children often project their ideas of proper behaviour onto the political scene, defining an unfamiliar role or describing an unfamiliar person in terms they have learned in their own lives (Hess & Torney, 2006, p. 2).

The authors collated the children’s answers from the four countries involved in the project and looked for similarities and differences in what the children had expressed.

Ethical principles were communicated to all participants at the start of the research. The children, in agreement with their parents who had given their written consent, voluntarily participated in the research. All children between 5–6 years that were present the day that the interview took place and that were involved in the Erasmus’ project were interviewed. Pre-school educators introduced the themes, kept the discussion focused on those themes, listened and encouraged but did not attempt to influence the children in their answers (Krueger, 1998). The instruments were adapted to the children’s needs, abilities, age and culture. By means of a number of short role plays, the children were able to think about their prior experience regarding socialising with children from other national groups and to answer the questions from a trusted pre-school educator. Objectivity, reliability, validity and transparency of the data were considered (Social Research Association, 2003), in line with theory. One should emphasise that the children expressed their opinions completely independently, without any outside suggestions at the point of

the interview. Children's answers were then classified into individual areas or categories. Some children did not provide reasons for their "Yes" or "No" or "I don't know" answers.

The tables below present some illustrative answers received from the children.

### *Data-Processing Analysis*

The authors used frequency distribution (f, f%). Due to a dispersed number of sub-samples (between 15 and 78) the non-parametric test  $\chi^2$ -test (Chi-Square Tests) and statistical differences between the countries were not used. Answers to closed and open-ended questions were structured so that content-related responses were classified into the same category.

## 4 Findings

The aim of this study was to examine the preschool-aged children's perception and attitude towards cultural diversity and a willingness to socialise with children who speak another language. The findings reported here refer only to children who participated in the Erasmus+ programme.

### *Pre-school children's willingness to socialise with children speaking another language and coming from another country*

The authors analysed the following questions (see Table 1):

1. Would a child invite another child (who comes from another country and whom they know) who speaks a foreign language to their home?
2. Would a child lend their toy to a child (who comes from another country and whom they know) who speaks a foreign language?
3. Would a child invite a child (who comes from another country and whom they know), who speaks a foreign language to their birthday party?
4. Would a child go to the birthday party of a child (who comes from another country and whom they know) who speaks a foreign language?
5. Would they feel sad if other kids made fun of a child who speaks a foreign language?

The samples in the four countries involved in the Erasmus+ project are as noted rather small and dispersed. This limits the use of proportions in results interpretation. The numbers and percentages of the sample are presented in Table 1. However, its description is integrated in the results text and reflects the pre-school children's voices regarding these issues.

Table 1: Number (f) and percentage (f%) of children in the indicators of willingness to socialise, with regard to the country participating in the Erasmus+ project

Indicator	Countries																							
	SLO						IT						BG						EST					
	Yes	No	I don't know	Yes	No	I don't know	Yes	No	I don't know	Yes	No	I don't know	Yes	No	I don't know	Yes	No	I don't know						
Q1 – Invitation home	13	86,6	1	6,7	65	83,3	12	15,4	1	1,3	25	89,3	2	7,1	1	3,6	15	100	0	0	0			
Q2 – Lending a toy	13	86,6	2	13,4	0	39	50	22	28,2	17	21,8	24	85,7	3	10,7	1	3,6	15	100	0	0	0		
Q3 – Invitation to a birthday party	13	86,6	2	13,4	0	57	73,1	19	24,3	2	2,6	25	89,3	2	7,1	1	3,6	15	100	0	0	0		
Q4 – Acceptance of invitation to a party	13	86,6	2	13,4	0	54	69,6	24	30,8	0	0	24	85,7	3	10,7	1	3,6	15	100	0	0	0		
Q5 – Sadness in making fun	11	73,3	4	26,7	0	69	88,5	6	7,7	3	3,8	28	100	0	0	0	14	93,3	1	6,7	0	0		



Irrespective of the country involved in the Erasmus+ project, participating children in all four countries would invite a friend home who speaks a foreign language, would invite them to a birthday party, accept their invitation to a party, lend them a toy, or would be sad at anyone making fun of them (Table 1). Five-to-six-year-olds, therefore, reflect a fairly high degree of willingness to socialise with children who speak a foreign language.

The results show that the level of preparedness to socialise with a child who speaks a foreign language (FL) and comes from another country, is higher in Estonian and Bulgarian children. They answered all five questions most frequently with “Yes”. They would invite the child who speaks an FL to their home and accept his invitation to a party more often. They would lend them their toy and sympathise with them in the event of teasing. Slovenian children most frequently answered “yes” to the first four questions, except for the last one. Italian children reflect a positive perception to socialise with children who speak a foreign language in all five questions. However, they are more reserved to a child who speaks another language. They were the most frequent to answer with a “no” or “I don’t know”.

Some children did not provide reasons for their “Yes” or “No” or “I don’t know” answers. Some selective answers from children who did are presented in Tables 2 and 3.

The children in all four countries stated that they would invite a child home or lend them a toy (see Table 2) because of friendship (*e.g. I would invite the children from Slovenia, Bulgaria, Estonia and also from Portugal and Spain*), and, if it is connected with playful activities (*e.g. Yes, so we can play together; I will show him my room, lend toys, books and we will play together*). Some of them would invite this child to introduce their family to them (*Yes, we’d like to invite them and introduce to them my cousins and relatives*), to get to know their country (*Yes, because I would like to see their country*), or to get to know this individual (*Yes, to get to know each other better*). Some children stated that they would invite a child home or lend them a toy but expressed their concern about their parent’s permission (*Yes, but if my mother allows it because you cannot talk to strangers*). Some of them also expressed concern about this person’s feelings and emotions (*Yes, but he would be bored and would feel alone*).

Table 2: Children's perception of cultural diversity and their willingness to socialise with a child who speaks another language

<b>Willingness to socialise</b>	<b>Children's Answers</b>
Friendship	<i>I would invite the children from Slovenia, Bulgaria, Estonia and also from Portugal and Spain (12 children from Italy, 2 from Slovenia); I have a friend from Italy and I will invite him to my home to play together (1 child from Bulgaria)</i>
Playful activities	<i>Yes, so we can play together (12 children from Italy, 5 from Slovenia, 1 from Bulgaria); I have a friend from the Czech Republic and we play in the summer (1 child from Bulgaria); I will give him a toy but if he returns it to me. (1 from Bulgaria)</i>
Relatives	<i>Yes, we'd like to invite them and introduce to them my cousins and relatives (4 children from Italy)</i>
To get acquaintance	<i>Yes, to get to know each other better (1 from Slovenia)</i>
Country	<i>Yes, because I would like to see their country (1 from Slovenia)</i>
Parents	<i>Yes, but if my mother allows it because you cannot talk to strangers (1 child from Estonia); Yes, only if my parents would allow me to (2 from Slovenia)</i>
Empathy	<i>Yes, but he would be bored and would feel alone (1 from Italy)</i>
<b>No Willingness to socialise</b>	<b>Children's Answers</b>
Not understanding the language	<i>No, because I don't know his language (4 children from Italy); No, because he doesn't speak our language and he doesn't understand us (1 from Italy)</i>
Coming from a different country	<i>No, because he is not from our country, and we would not understand his language (1 from Slovenia).</i>
Parents	<i>No, because my mom would not allow me to (1 from Slovenia)</i>
Concern about the toys	<i>No, because he would make a mess with my toys in a room and he would think it is his birthday and that the birthday presents belong to him (1 from Slovenia); No, because the toys are mine (1 from Bulgaria)</i>

Five-to-six-year-olds, therefore, reflect a lot of positive perceptions, empathy and mutual understanding (*To get to know each other better*) to socialise with children who speak a foreign language. The children's answers coincide with the Proposal for key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (European Commission, 2014) and the European Commission's proposal for a Council recommendation on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care System (European Commission, 2018), which includes the role of play, relationships and interactions, respects the beliefs and needs of children and others, values acceptance of cultural identity and language, and strengthens social inclusion and embraces diversity.

However, some children, regardless of the country, were not willing to invite or accept an invitation or lend a toy to children from other countries. The main reasons were not understanding the language (*No, because he doesn't speak our language and he doesn't understand us*), coming from a different country (*No, because he is not from our country*); and the parents (*No, because my mom would not allow me to*). Some children expressed their concern about sharing their belongings (*No, because he might damage my toys; he would make a mess with my toys in my room*).

Some children, regardless of the country, would feel sad if other kids made fun of a child who speaks a FL because of bad behaviour (see Table 3) and express empathy with him (e.g. *I would tell them it is not nice and we would play together*) and offer help (*I will tell them that we have to help him and teach him to talk like us*), some would be sad or angry (*I will be very sad!*; *I will be angry!*; *He would also be sad*); and some would even protect this child (*I wouldn't be sad because I would protect him*). However, one child from Slovenia would not feel sad because of not knowing the person (*No, because I don't know him and I don't know his name*).

Table 3: Children's perception of cultural diversity and their feelings about making fun of outgroups

Feelings	Children's answers
Express empathy	<i>I would tell them it is not nice and we would play together</i> (4 from Slovenia); <i>I will tell them that we have to help him and teach him to talk like us</i> (1 from Bulgaria)
Sadness	<i>I will be very sad!</i> (2 from Bulgaria) <i>I will be angry!</i> (1 from Bulgaria); <i>He would also be sad</i> (1 from Italy)
Protect	<i>I wouldn't be sad because I would protect him</i> (1 from Estonia)
Not knowing the person	<i>No, because I don't know him, and I don't know his name</i> (1 from Slovenia)

The results indicate that the children expressed their positive social understanding, sympathy, feelings and thoughts towards out-group children.

### ***Pre-school Children's Attitude towards People who Come from other Countries***

With the purpose of examining how pre-school children perceive a child who speaks another language and comes from another country, the authors asked the children to describe this child. Some children, irrespective of the country, described the child (Table 4) with a positive manner (*good, nice, beautiful, tall, my friend*), used descriptive statements and noticed the language difference (*This child doesn't speak like me, he lives in a different,*

far city; He doesn't understand our language, he has to learn it). Some children even noticed some similarities (*This child is like me, he just comes from another country*).

Table 4: Pre-school children's attitude to people who come from other countries

Children's Description	Children's Answers
Positive manner	<i>This child is good, a good friend</i> (2 from Estonia); <i>This child is my friend and he comes from another country; he is nice, beautiful</i> (2 from Slovenia), <i>tall, good, even if he is a stranger he is not different from me; He plays like me and he eats different food</i> (10 from Italy)
Language	<i>This child doesn't speak like me, he lives in a different, far city; He doesn't understand our language, he has to learn it</i> (3 from Italy, 1 from Slovenia)
Similarity	<i>This child is like me, he just comes from another country</i> (3 from Bulgaria); <i>He looks like me and speaks Italian. I would play with him</i> (1 from Slovenia)

The results may indicate that participating children began to see their peers in other countries as their friends coming from another country. They also indicate that some children are aware of language differences and geographical spaces. Probably because they have been explained by the pre-school educators involved in the Erasmus+ project, and perceive them as similar but distant and from another country.

## 5 Discussion

This study yielded new insights regarding how preschool-aged children involved in the international, experiential cooperation of four EU countries perceive, understand, and cope with children who speak another language and live in other countries. It seems obvious that the Erasmus+ programme has some positive implications on the children's perception of their peers in other countries. The findings reflect a fairly high degree of positive perceptions, feelings and experiences of the children in terms of children's intercultural perception and willingness to socialise with children who speak another language. This can be reinforced by the observations that friendship relations have been beginning to develop between children in the 4 countries. 5–6-year-old children's responses, in all involved countries, perceived out-group children as positive and displayed positive feelings towards them (*This child is my friend and he comes from another country*). The results indicate no intolerance among children, only some apprehension (*No, because I don't know him and I don't know his name*). The children, regardless of the country, expressed their concern about not understanding the language or coming from a faraway country more often than any negative characteristics. Although other findings (Aboud & Amato, 2001; Barret, 2007; Brumen et al., 2014; McGuirk & Kehoe, 2013) stated that 4-to-6-year-olds do not always describe and perceive out-group children in positive terms and hold ste-

reotypes of some national and state groups (e.g. *little wicked, not friendly; not clever and dirty because he is black, naughty, boring, or foreign*). These results could indicate that this kind of international cooperation, personal encounters and concrete experience through computer-mediated interaction, promoted friendship relations between children in different countries. Through personal contacts (e.g. Skype meetings introducing storytelling performances, songs, games, common “kindergarten sleepover”), without travelling abroad, pre-school educators offered an insight into the heritage, geography, values, attitudes and culture of the target nation to pre-school children, and teachers felt that they had been rewarded with more active, communicative and interested children. With the active involvement of individuals, such as the Erasmus+ project, the children might see the world from another person’s perspective (Nelson, 2009), have the benefit of cognitively understanding the diversity of human languages and cultures, identify similarities and differences (Keenan et al., 2016), and develop underlying qualities such as meta-linguistic awareness and intercultural sensitivity, as well as their social, cognitive and affective self/identity (Barrett, 2007; Keenan et al., 2016). Byram (2008, p. 82) supports “experiential learning”, where children are immersed in direct social experience, followed by reflection upon it, under the guidance of a (pre-school) educator. In the present study, a child might feel more positive and confident about some countries as a direct consequence of virtual interaction, concrete experience and getting to know a lot about the out-groups.

Different research has suggested that modifying children’s intercultural perception can work, but it is not an easy task (Cristol & Gimbert, 2006).

## 6 Conclusions

Systematic, planned, and cooperative pre-school instruction, in the sense of using international (Erasmus) projects and involving pre-school educators and children through socio-interactional (computer-mediated) learning and teaching, is a unique opportunity to broaden children’s minds, enhance their perspective and belief, to gain an insight into different languages and cultures, and to promote friendship relations between children in different countries. Pre-school classrooms as social contexts shape fair intercultural behaviour, understanding, and construct the way of learning languages (Ellis, 2012) through talk, discussions, exchange of views and ideas. Perhaps the most significant contribution of this study to the literature on intercultural education, language learning and internalisation in the pre-school setting is the fact that it is possible to integrate ‘virtual contact’ authentic intercultural communication into the pre-school context and to lay the groundwork for children’s future education towards multilingual and intercultural communication competence in adulthood. By such effective personal interaction through digitally mediated communication (Graham, 2019) with people from other (EU) countries, sharing of contents, collaborative presentations, structured activities/tasks, and relevant feedback, (pre-school) children can try to understand linguistic diversity, differences and

similarities among languages, people and cultures, although there is still a long way to go before acquisition processes and perceptions are fully resolved.

We acknowledge that the sample of our qualitative research was not fully representative because it represents only pre-school institutions and the children involved in the Erasmus+ project, and hence the results reveal trends and not generalisations. However, the study may point to some children's perceptions and understanding of out-groups. Thus, further studies should involve enlarging the sample, examining children's perceptions, beliefs and understanding of other nations and outside groups in different (EU) countries. It should also be noted that potential bias and social desirability challenges in children's answers to their pre-school teachers might influence the results. Clearly, it was better to have familiar actors (children's teachers rather than independent ones) interview such young children. However, the results might express pre-school children's positive perceptions because all actors were involved in the project.

In spite of these limitations, it is hoped that the data provided in this study may help to inform pre-school practitioners about guidelines for sensitising children to different languages and cultures, with direct (international), virtual experiential and interpersonal contacts, in order to develop individual social values, culture and norms already present in children, for their potential ethical behaviour into adulthood.

## References

- About, F. E. & Amato, M. (2001). Developmental and socialisation influences on intergroup bias. In R. Brown & S. Gaertner (eds.), *Blackwell's handbook of social psychology: Intergroup processes* (pp. 65–85). Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Adriany, V. (2017). The internationalisation of early childhood education: Case study from selected kindergartens in Bandung, Indonesia. *Policy Futures in Education*, 16(1), 92–107.
- Alonso Belmonte, M. I. & Fernández Agüero, M. (2015). Practical proposals for the development of intercultural communicative competence in EFL: what textbooks won't tell you. In M. B. Paradowski (ed.), *Productive Foreign Language Skills for an intercultural World. A Guide (not only) for Teachers* (pp. 163–178). Bern: Peter Lang.
- Barrett, M. (2007). *Children's Knowledge, Beliefs and Feelings about Nations and National Groups*. East Sussex: Psychology Press.
- Brumen, M. & Hvala, E. (2018). Developing international sociolinguistic competence of pre-school children and their educators. In P. M. Rabensteiner (ed.), *Teacher education, sustainability and development: challenges, issues, solutions for teaching in the 21st century* (Erziehungswissenschaft, Bd. 86) (pp. 53–64). Zürich: LIT Verlag GmbH & Co.
- Brumen, M., Cagran, B. & Fras-Berro, F. (2014). More social responsibility by learning foreign language and culture: case of Slovenian pre-primary education. In M. Mulej & R. G. Dyck (eds.), *Social Responsibility Beyond Neoliberalism and Charity: Social Responsibility – Methods, Dilemmas and Hopes*, Vol. 3 (pp. 117–150). Bentham eBooks: Bentham Science Publishers.
- Byram, M. & Phipps, A. (2005). *Foreign Language Teachers and Intercultural Competence. An International Investigation*. Clevedon, Buffalo, Toronto: Multilingual Matters Ltd.

- Byram, M. (2008). *From Foreign Language Education to Education for intercultural Citizenship*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Cristol, D. S. & Gimbert, B. G. (2006). *Racial Prejudice Development: Implications for Educating Young Children*. Columbus, Ohio USA: The Ohio State University.
- Doiz, A., Lasagabaster, D. & Sierra, J. (2013). Globalisation, internationalisation, multilingualism and linguistic strains in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 38(9), 1407–1421.
- Ellis, R. (2012). *Language Teaching Research and Language Pedagogy*. Chichester: Wiley and Sons.
- European Commission. (2014). *Proposal for key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care. Report of the Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care under the auspices of the European Commission*. Brussels: Key principles of a Quality Framework.
- European Commission. (2016). *Education policies to foster tolerance in children/and young people in the EU*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
- European Commission. (2018). *Proposal for a Council Recommendation on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care System*. COM (2018) 271. SWD 173 final. Brussels: European Commission.
- Graham, S. (2019). *Innovations in Education. Remote teaching*. London: British Council.
- Hess, R. D. & Torney, J. V. (2006). *The Development of Political Attitudes in Children*. New Jersey: Transaction Publishers.
- Keenan, C., Connolly, P. & Stevenson, C. (2016). *The Effects of Universal Preschool- and School-based Education Programmes for Reducing Ethnic Prejudice and Promoting Respect for Diversity Among Children Aged 3–11: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis (Protocol)*. Campbell Library.
- Knight, J. (2004). Internationalisation Remodelled: Definition, Approaches, and Rationales. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 8, 5–31.
- Krueger, R. A. (1998). *Moderating Focus Groups, Focus Group Kit Vol. 4*. Thousand Oaks, USA: SAGE Publications Inc.
- Lázár, I. (2015). EFL Learners' intercultural Competence Development in an International Web Collaboration Project. *Language Learning Journal*, 43(2), 208–221.
- McGuirk, N. & Kehoe, S. (2013). *Prevention and Early Intervention in Children and Young People's Services: Promoting inclusion*. Dublin: Centre for Effective Services.
- Mistry, R., Biesanz, J., Taylor, L., Burchinal, M. & Cox, M. (2004). Family income and its relation to preschool children's adjustment for families in the NICHD study of early childcare. *Developmental Psychology*, 40(5), 727–745.
- Nelson, T. D. (2009). *Handbook of Prejudice, Stereotyping and Discrimination*. New York: Psychology Press Taylor & Francis Group.
- Reid, J. L. & Lynn Kagan, S. (2015). *A Better Start: Why Classroom Diversity Matters in Early Education*. Columbia: The Century Foundation and the Poverty & Race Research Action Council.
- Róg, T. (2015). Intercultural education at a pre-school level in the context of Polish kindergarten curriculum changes. *Journal of Linguistic Intercultural Education*, 8, 179–201.
- Sikorskaya, I. (2017). *Intercultural education policies across Europe as responses to cultural diversity (2006–2016)*. Salerno: Working Papers del Centro Studi Europei.
- Social Research Association. (2003). *Ethical Guidelines*. [https://sp.mahidol.ac.th/pdf/ref/10\\_Social%20Research%20Association.pdf](https://sp.mahidol.ac.th/pdf/ref/10_Social%20Research%20Association.pdf) [26.6.2021].
- White, L. (2011). The Internationalisation of Early Childhood Education and Care Issues: Framing Gender Justice and Child Well Being. *An International Journal of Policy, Administration, and Institutions*, 24(2), 285–309.