

## **Working for Citizenship and Inclusion in Secondary School. Practices of Active Learning and Methodological Innovation**

*By Carla Podda\**

*This contribution aims to investigate how critical pedagogy provides a framework for understanding the contemporary crisis of democracy and supporting transformative practices capable of fostering civic participation in the exercise of public governance. This constitutes the overarching theme of the study, which began by questioning how to counter democratic decline while guaranteeing every citizen's engagement in governance. Civic participation is examined as a radical, emancipatory vehicle for redistribution of sovereignty. Moving from macro-theoretical critiques of institutional imbalances to micro-pedagogical practices, this study explores how active learning methodologies function as a primary catalyst for democratic empowerment. Specifically, it evaluates a cross-border Erasmus+ mobility project conducted between November 2024 and February 2025. The project involved fourteen teachers and twenty students from an Italian High School (located in Decimomannu) and a Polish Special School (located in Rzeszów). Grounded in Participatory Action Research and case study strategy, the initiative operationalized structured seminars, experiential job-shadowing, and collaborative tasks. The study triangulates qualitative and quantitative data collected through institutional document analysis, preparatory online focus groups, and fieldwork observations. The empirical findings substantiate significant growth across the cognitive, affective, and skills-based domains of citizenship, enabling learners, also with Special Educational Needs, to cultivate transformative agency and intercultural dialogue alongside their mainstream peers, while simultaneously expanding the professional inclusive competencies of teachers.*

**Keywords:** *Democracy; Citizenship Education; Participation; Active Methodologies.*

### **Introduction**

This study explores how pedagogy provides a meaningful framework to rethink and renew citizenship education, thereby supporting a transformation that fosters full civic participation in the exercise of public governance. Such participation encompasses actions undertaken by citizens and organizations to induce policy change. Ultimately, these initiatives aim to influence decision-making processes across multiple levels of governance (De Rivera & Mahoney, 2018). Given the current democratic crisis, this study proposes an ambitious scope. It examines how to ensure active civic engagement amidst systemic democratic decline. Specifically, the research examines how to ensure active civic engagement. It aims to foster citizen responsibility in both local and global governance. The general research question is therefore defined. How can we counter democratic crises while ensuring active citizen engagement in institutional decision-making?

More precisely, this paper examines the intersection of democracy, citizenship

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\*PhD Student, University of Palermo and University of Cagliari, Italy.

education, and human development. It analyzes how a specific Erasmus+ project cultivates participatory skills through active learning approaches.

Questioning the current state of citizenship education may appear anachronistic or rhetorical. This perception arises when considering the widespread disregard for human rights and deepening social inequalities, furthermore, intensifying violence and devastating conflicts directly impact neighboring regions (Jessop, 2020). This situation raises critical questions regarding the scope of pedagogical intervention. How can educational frameworks counter such forces, when dealing with actors whose stated aim is the destruction of opponents, whom they portray as devoid of humanity? It is essential to engage younger generations in dialogue regarding systematically perpetrated, unprecedented atrocities. This approach openly condemns the silence of the global minority (Fadda, 2009). Ultimately, it promotes participatory processes designed to stop recent humanitarian catastrophes. The research identifies active participation, critical discussion, and dialogue as vital pedagogical instruments. These tools foster personal growth and international solidarity. This approach directly counters the ongoing erosion of human and moral rights. Consequently, it mitigates widespread feelings of dismay and powerlessness.

The contemporary era is characterized by significant societal transformations. These shifts have exacerbated pre-existing structural imbalances. They have also engendered fluid, unstable identity bonds (Latouche, 2005). Consequently, these changes give rise to pervasive and widespread conflicts. Furthermore, globalization has driven a profound decoupling of economic and political dimensions. This shift is accelerated by growing economic and technological interdependence. It is widely acknowledged, as previously analyzed and anticipated by Antonio Gramsci (1975, pp. 1492-1493), that the economic domain operates on a global and supranational scale, no longer aligned with political rationality, which remains rooted in national and local contexts. Over the past two centuries, powerful multinational enterprises have significantly expanded. This growth intensified international economic and commercial exchanges. Simultaneously, it precipitated a rapid proliferation of foreign investments. Remarkably, the expansion of these investments outpaced global economic growth (Latouche, 2005). The consequence of this shift is profound interdependence among national economies across social, cultural, political, technological, and health-related domains. This widening economic disparity between countries coupled with the increasingly unequal distribution of resources, is aptly underscored by Umberto Curi (2016, p. 10) as follows: *“Four-fifths of the world’s population possess one-fifth of its resources, while the remaining one-fifth of the global population benefits from four-fifths of the economic, monetary, energy, food, and available resources”*.

Considering these dynamics, it is essential to consider the complex dynamics of global migration flows, which are heavily driven by systemic poverty and structural underdevelopment (Silva, 2015). These dynamics demand immediate intervention, given that such migratory flows are the direct consequences of deliberate political and economic policies enacted by Western governments (Santerini, 2017). As fluid and precarious identity bonds are generated, proximity to others fails to foster acceptance and mutual understanding, instead it gives rise to divergences and conflicts, triggering pervasive outbreaks of violence. These structural asymmetries are not merely unjust; in themselves, they constitute a proclamation of a continuous state of belligerence (Cera, 2019). Furthermore, the legitimacy of governments depends upon their capacity to effectively engage communities and

strengthen their ability to meaningfully respond to challenges. Such an endeavor, however, fails in the absence of citizens' trust and constructive critical dialogue on a local and global scale (Osborne, et al., 2021). Indeed, the diminished levels of public trust in governments foster disillusionment with democratic processes, reducing citizens' willingness to participate in political life.

These phenomena are deeply interconnected. They must be interpreted as components of an organic totality, without falling into reductionist interpretations, since they originate from the same structural imbalances. Moreover, they express the underlying causes of the profound crisis currently undermining democratic systems.

It is perhaps superfluous to underline that civil and political rights are complementary to economic and social rights. Consequently, access to essential goods remains the prerequisite for the substantive, rather than merely formal, realization of citizenship rights. A truly enduring peace necessitates a more equitable distribution of resources, alongside a substantive reduction in the disparity between the opulence of the few and the absolute poverty experienced by the many (Curi, 2016). In this perspective, peace should not be conceived merely as the absence of conflict, but rather as the deliberate and collective construction of a social order grounded in justice and equity (Conforti, 2019).

This complex situation highlights the intensified crisis of democracy, insofar as it undermines the foundational principles of equality. This erosion gives rise to distortions and anomalies that adversely affect opportunities for political and cultural participation. Consequently, specific segments of the population are excluded from economic, social, and political processes. Social transformations, deeply rooted in history, are unfolding at an accelerated rate, prompting renewed theoretical reflections and fostering the implementation of innovative practices in citizenship education (Nuzzaci & Rizzi, 2020; Chierichetti, Mourtos & Zartoshty, 2025).

The phenomena, here briefly outlined, must be understood as components of an organic whole that demand timely intervention. Attention will be focused on the pedagogical dimensions capable of countering the democratic crisis through the promotion of active citizenship education. To address these systemic challenges, this study moves from macro-theoretical critiques to micro-pedagogical practices, examining the role of a specific cross-border Erasmus+ project as a catalyst for processes of social emancipation and civic participation.

## **Literature Review**

An examination of national and international pedagogical literature on citizenship education highlights the need to broaden its scope (Mortari, 2008; Baldacci, 2020; Sirignano & Maddalena, 2019; Brooks & Holford, 2009). The central role of inclusive pedagogies as prerequisites for fostering civic participation and intercultural dialogue supports this expansion (Santerini, 2017; Pastori, 2022; Alviar-Martin, 2010; Banks, 2007). Together, these studies provide the theoretical and empirical frameworks necessary to address the contemporary democratic crisis. This line of inquiry must be examined in depth and continually cultivated. Indeed, further investigation is essential for a multifaceted phenomenon that presents a genuine educational challenge. Drawing upon the frameworks of critical pedagogy (Granese, 1993; Fadda, 2009), this study engages with the radical significance of citizenship education, developing a deeper understanding of its theoretical and historical roots. It seeks to articulate the connection

between individual dimensions and broader systemic dynamics in pursuit of collaborative and participative solutions. Critical pedagogy provides an indispensable framework to analyze education. It fosters emancipatory, radical access to knowledge while highlighting the transformative power of teaching and learning (Fadda, 2002). Education and civic participation hold an emancipatory role and foster radical access to both knowledge and democratic participation.

Democracy, education, and citizenship are so strictly interconnected that the education of the individual has historically been, and continues to be, identified with the education of the citizen (Cambi, et al., 1999). Both individual development and citizenship require the recognition of legal and political rights. Furthermore, these dimensions entail a shared responsibility to deliberate and build a highly equitable society. As Morin (2012, p. 4401) observes: *“the reform of ways of life is inseparable from an ethical regeneration, itself inseparable from a renewal of civic consciousness, which in turn is inseparable from a democratic regeneration”*. These elements are intrinsically linked to a global process, a human, social, political, and historical transformation, that shapes both the environment and education.

Democracy, before being the most accomplished form of government, is fundamentally a mode of community life. Its present crisis finds a meaningful response in the principles and practices of citizenship education. Moreover, citizenship education provides a clear orientation for active methodologies. It guides individual development within a horizon of belonging and co-participation, which defines the concept of *“citizenship”* (Mortari, 2008). The socio-ethical dimension places these elements into sharper focus across pedagogical and political domains (Secci, 2012). Within a democratic framework, education is not grounded upon a tension between social and individual aims; instead, it directly enhances each citizen. The citizen simultaneously holds both duties and rights, which are established through the norms of coexistence defining individual freedom. Foremost among these duties is the responsible exercise of freedom within the legal framework, through which citizens are entrusted with both the designation and oversight of those who hold power. Citizenship is, thus, oriented toward individual autonomy, rendering citizens aware of their responsibility in monitoring public authority. Furthermore, citizenship cannot be reduced to passive obedience aimed merely at legal compliance and social order, as though these were inherently just (Portera, 2000). Instead, it guides the planning, choices, and decisions involved in community life, directing action toward the pursuit of the common good. In this manner, power becomes the true emanation of free and equal citizens. Ultimately, both citizenship and citizens exist only within democratic contexts, where the equality and dignity of each citizen are fully respected.

Citizenship education is conceived both as a critical reflection upon civic rights and as the cultivation of individual and collective responsibility, binding together citizens and democratic institutions (Sartori, 1993). It promotes an awareness of our mutual interdependence as human beings, illustrating how individual agency entails consequences for the wider community (Valbusa & Mortari, 2017). It involves identifying the spaces and instruments that foster an awareness of social belonging, thereby enabling citizens to comprehend both the community they inhabit and their role in shaping or sustaining it. Furthermore, it cultivates an understanding of personal and collective rights to participate in political and social decision-making, while guiding individuals to assume leadership within deliberative processes (Santerini, 2010). In this regard, participation assumes an emancipatory function. It is inherently radical, because it bridges the chasm between those who govern and those who are

governed. It connects decision-makers with those who bear the consequences of their choices. Ultimately, civic participation presupposes a redistribution of power and sovereignty.

Citizenship education possesses both ancient and contemporary origins.

Historically, the concept traces back to the *paideia* of ancient Greece. As Jaeger (2003) articulates, this notion is pivotal for grasping the intrinsic connection between education, individual formation, and citizenship. Hellenic culture conceptualized *paideia* not as a mere accumulation of knowledge, but as a formative educational process. It aimed to model the individual in accordance with a normative ideal, enabling full participation as an active member of the *polis*. Thus, the term *paideia* gradually acquired a rich and nuanced meaning. It suggested the ideal of human development, conceived not as preparation for culture in a technical sense, but as the qualitative and personal cultivation of virtue. *Paideia* encompassed the ethical, cultural, and social development required to shape the child into a citizen, or *polites*. This educational ideal was entrusted with the task of educating the individual to transcend their primary condition, thereby enabling them to embody the highest values of the community.

*Paideia* evolved over time, aiming at the internalization of those universal values that defined the *ethos* of people. The *ethos* encompassed the shared civic space, individual and collective identities, institutional norms, and a profound sense of citizenship. Thus, it distinguished the human being as an agent capable of self-accountability and moral responsibility. Within the public life of the *polis*, decisions were reached through deliberative discourse rather than through force or coercion (Mortari, 2008). Through politics, citizens realized their potential; rather than being subjected to authority. Citizens entirely experienced themselves, engaging with others in freely chosen actions and collective enterprises.

*Paideia* is predicated upon a profound connection between the cultivation of the self, at both intellectual and moral levels, and active engagement in the life of the *polis*. As such, it constitutes the core of Western culture (Jaeger, 2003). It conceptualizes citizenship not as a mere accident of birth, but rather as the outcome of a cultural formation process, which enables the individual to participate in community life.

In this epistemological framework, the structured seminars and collaborative tasks implemented within the cross-border Erasmus+ project between Italy and Poland represent a contemporary, workshop-based reconfiguration of the ancient *polis's* deliberative discourse, translating classical philosophical ideals into active, inclusive pedagogical practices.

In recent history, the emergence of citizenship education can be traced back to the establishment of UNESCO in 1945 and the adoption of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* in 1948. Within this document, education is framed as a vehicle for fostering full development of human personality. It aims at promoting understanding, tolerance, and friendship among nations. In 1974, UNESCO's *Recommendation on Education for International Understanding* articulated the notion of 'global citizenship', cultivating individuals' communicative capacities, their engagement with community issues, and propensity for mutual respect. By 2014, the formation of global citizens was explicitly recognized by the organization as a pivotal educational objective. More recently, UNESCO's *Reimagining Our Futures Together* (2021) and the revised *Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights, and Sustainable Development* (2023) influenced educational policy. Both documents foreground global citizenship education as a transformative, cross-cutting paradigm aligned with the broader

framework of the *2030 Agenda*.

Historically, citizenship has been defined in connection with a specific national territory. While this belonging was traditionally anchored within individual nation-states, a contemporary and pronounced shift is now broadening this framework geographically, socially, and culturally. Citizenship is increasingly conceived as a prerequisite for active participation in global community life. In this regard, Edgar Morin extends the notion to what he defines as “*planetary citizenship*” (Morin, 2000). As Morin (2000, p. 50) observes: “*We must learn to ‘be present’ on this planet. To learn to be present means to learn how to live, to share, to communicate, and to be in communion; this is what was once learned only within and through a particular culture*”. From this perspective, citizenship education must be oriented towards cultivating a global consciousness and planetary responsibility. This approach is grounded in a reconfigured mode of political belonging to the planet and the wider human community. Within the practice of citizenship, cultural and cosmopolitan dimensions take precedence over strictly juridical considerations. As argued by Secci (2012, p. 145) “*it is not one’s ‘documents in order’ that make a citizen, but rather the disposition to contribute, as a worker, parent, or volunteer, to the functioning of the place or community in which one lives*”.

The broadening of citizenship also entails considerations regarding its qualitative content. Consequently, no aspect of social life can be regarded as extraneous to citizenship education. Citizenship, therefore, is concerned with belonging and encompasses all dimensions of communal life. In this sense, it develops not only within the individual sphere but extends its scope to other domains, such as the family and institutional frameworks. These environments in turn shape the life of the wider community, including matters of sustainability and responsible environmental stewardship. Indeed, while citizens hold membership at the local level within their city and nation-state, they simultaneously function as planetary citizens who require attentiveness and active engagement with the wider world.

In citizenship education, reflection and action are intrinsically interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Theory and practice enrich one another; indeed, within this field, theory constitutes a dimension of action and vice versa (Chistolini, 2006). The active engagement of citizens in public debate and collective planning is of fundamental importance. Citizenship education, therefore, forges a crucial link with practical realities. It cultivates awareness of others, lived experiences, and the surrounding environment. It effectively bridges the divide between theory and practice, local and global perspectives, and economic and political spheres. Citizenship education is highly adaptable to diverse contexts. It remains indispensable not only for formal schooling, but also for the holistic development of individuals across all communal life dimensions.

### **Citizenship Education at School**

Owing to its strong adaptability across diverse contexts, citizenship education remains essential within school systems. Schools function as formative institutions. They contribute not only to teaching and learning processes, but also to cultivating ethical attitudes and internalizing democratic values. Dewey (1916/1992) conceives the school as a democratic community, in which decisions are made through dialogue, mutual respect, and active participation.

Contemporary schools face a profound crisis. In isolation, they can hardly meet

the educational needs of new generations. Nevertheless, they remain central to fostering community development (Özgenel, Yağan, & Baydar, 2026). Strengthening students' understanding of democratic processes is insufficient. It is equally imperative to engage them with a wide range of issues in a problem-oriented manner. This approach encourages learning through the intrinsic value of inquiry and discovery. Such active engagement enhances students' ability to plan collectively. Accordingly, it improves their ability to respond to challenges both as individuals and as community participants. For this reason, citizenship education is embedded across the entire curriculum, functioning as a transversal framework that permeates all school disciplines.

There are three primary dimensions of citizenship that can be cultivated within the school context:

- The *cognitive dimension*: citizenship education fosters a deep understanding of democracy, encouraging its application within the framework of the norms that govern communal life.
- The *affective dimension*: it involves the cultivation of independent thinking, active listening, participation, and dialogue, whilst promoting awareness and responsibility.
- The *skills-based dimension*: citizenship education cultivates the capacity to critically examine the world, solve problems, and assess the most suitable courses of action. It encompasses the ability to reflect upon and revise decisions and behaviors. Furthermore, it encourages effective collaboration to pursue intercultural and collective goals. This dimension is intrinsically linked to conflict resolution through dialogue, negotiation, and mediation. Ultimately, it embraces active listening, responsibility, and the promotion of equality.

To implement these three domains, it is essential to prioritize a planetary perspective within education. This approach serves as a vehicle to support students in recognizing and embracing the *ethos* of planetary citizenship.

Citizenship education, therefore, assumes a transversal role. It provides individuals with a renewed framework to understand and engage with the world. Indeed, it enhances citizens' awareness of global challenges, fosters a sense of collective responsibility, and nurtures a commitment to equality and social justice (Santerini, 2001). From this perspective, citizenship education promotes active participation, and it redefines intercultural practices to foster meaningful cross-cultural dialogue (Nigris, 2015).

At both theoretical and practical levels, linking citizenship and interculturality raises critical questions regarding how to create participatory opportunities. It also requires examining the conditions to foster meaningful encounters and dialogue, through active methodologies. In this regard, Pinto Minerva (2002) conceptualizes intercultural practices as a multiplicity of pedagogical and relational experiences, which lead to the understanding of, and engagement with, other cultures. This approach directs knowledge toward constructing genuine citizenship, intercultural dialogue, and cooperation through the continuous discovery of similarities and differences (Pinto Minerva, 2002). In this manner, reciprocal enrichment is fostered, grounded upon the initial recognition and comprehension of otherness. Several studies conducted in Europe (Llurda et al., 2016; Mitchell, 2015) have demonstrated a correlation between transnational mobility, citizenship education, and intercultural

engagement. It is noteworthy that transnational mobility contributes to a sense of belonging that transcends national borders (Recchi, 2015; Ercan, 2017). The global perspective is fundamental to citizenship education. It requires a deep understanding of international human rights norms and active engagement with local and global socio-political issues. Within the school environment, an emphasis on youth participation and deliberation enhances the democratic process. This approach empowers all community members while fostering democratic principles. Consequently, there is a clear need for exchange and mobility initiatives. These projects must be designed to cultivate authentic interaction and dialogical communication within heterogeneous educational contexts.

Over the last decade, the literature on citizenship education has increasingly evolved to address global crises, such as systemic inequities, forced migration, and democratic backsliding, by transitioning from abstract civic notions toward a critical framework of planetary interdependence and resilience. This paradigm shift directly operationalizes the epistemological insights of Morin (2012), who advocates for a '*planetary consciousness*' rooted in the shared human condition, and Fadda (2009), who positions education as a dialogical space for relational ethics and democratic responsibility. Within this framework, active, cooperative, and task-based methodologies of Erasmus+ initiatives are experimentally effective for including students with special educational needs because they dismantle traditional cognitive and linguistic barriers. By anchoring abstract global concepts into localized, structured, and collaborative tasks, these student-centered practices maximize peer-to-peer mediation and experiential learning, thereby transforming inclusion from an ideal into an active, democratic practice.

## Methodology and Materials

This study adopts a qualitative research design to investigate the role of education in shaping citizenship and participation. It seeks to achieve an in-depth understanding of these processes within the school context. Specifically, the research investigates how involvement in an international exchange project promotes responsible and participatory citizenship skills through active methodologies.

Framed within critical pedagogy, the methodology adopts Participatory Action Research (Orefice, 2006), with a case study strategy, identified in line with Luigina Mortari (2007). The research is grounded in a qualitative approach that combines document analysis, focus groups, and a case study. In this regard, the present article examines one phase of a broader Erasmus+ project (2023-1-IT02-KA121-SCH-000123536). Although the project extended over the period 2023–2025, the present study focuses on the phase conducted between November 2024 and February 2025 (2024-1-IT02-KA121-SCH-000225588). The project aimed at promoting interculturality, inclusion and citizenship among students from two schools. The first is the Meucci-Mattei High School, located in Decimomannu (Sardinia, Italy). The second is the Zespół Szkół Specjalnych im. UNICEF w Rzeszowie Special School, located in Rzeszów, Poland. The Erasmus+ project encompassed several mobility initiatives, connecting teachers and students from both schools.

This section analyzed three key areas:

- The *document analysis*: this phase examined the institutional development plans, application forms, and evaluation questionnaires developed by both participating schools. The overarching goal of the initiative was to rethink

citizenship education. Simultaneously, it promoted intercultural dialogue and inclusion among diverse students, including those with special educational needs. Furthermore, the initiative promoted active teaching methodologies to enhance students' citizenship skills. Content analysis was employed as the primary method of data interpretation. This process involved systematic coding and categorization of textual data to identify recurring themes, patterns, and meanings. The evaluation questionnaire gathered quantitative data and qualitative feedback from the participants involved in the mobility experience. The instrument comprised sixteen items, each rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 “*never/not at all*” to 4 “*always/completely*”. For each question, participants had the opportunity to provide additional comments.

- The *focus groups*: these sessions explored the forms of institutional support and alignment between teaching and learning methodologies to promote student engagement. Specific attention was dedicated to developing and enriching professional competencies, within broader cultural and social frameworks. These sessions also investigated strategies for promoting intercultural dialogue, inclusion, and citizenship education. Conducted on November 22, 2024, via the Microsoft Teams platform, the preparatory sessions engaged fourteen participating teachers from both institutions. Two mixed focus groups were conducted with the participants, each group consisting of seven teachers (four Italian and three Polish educators per group), to guarantee a balanced cross-national perspective.
- The *case study*: this approach focused on identifying the key success factors for the recognition and sustainability of active teaching and learning practices. The investigation involved fourteen teachers and twenty students from the two secondary schools. The educational pathway could not evolve in isolation. It aimed at strengthening intercultural and citizenship competencies across the cognitive, affective, and skills-based domains. Its effective implementation relied on appropriate educational practices embedded within the school environment. Consequently, these practices fostered broader processes of cultural transformation. The learning experience was conducted utilizing equity-oriented design, active methodologies, and structured collaboration. These elements functioned not simply as teaching techniques, but as educational environments that cultivated reflexivity, dialogue, participation, agency, and responsibility (Kitsantas, 2004).  
The case study, which was conducted over a one-week period from December 9 to 15, 2024, involved both teachers and students. During this period, learning extended beyond the classroom. The activities promoted inclusive engagement and fostered transformative agency grounded in comparative, participatory, and intercultural perspectives.

The detailed schedule of the activities carried out and analyzed for the case study is outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1.** *Table of the Activities*

	<b>Focus</b>	<b>Key Activities</b>	<b>Target</b>
<b>Day 1</b>	<i>Intercultural dialogue Inclusion</i>	Institutional Welcome: <i>School Presentation</i>	All participants
		Debate meeting: <i>Fostering Inclusion within the Italian Educational System</i>	Teachers
		Ice-breaking sessions: <i>The Integration Cake</i>	Students
<b>Day 2</b>	<i>Intercultural dialogue</i>	Guided School tour / <i>Vocational Training</i>	All participants
	<i>Inclusion</i>	Discussion: <i>Picasso Method</i>	Students
	<i>Citizenship education</i>	Workshop: <i>Citizenship education</i>	All participants
	<i>Discussion, professional competencies</i>	Session <i>Inclusion of SEN learners and active teaching methods</i>	Teachers
<b>Day 3</b>	<i>Participation and collaborative learning</i>	Workshop - Reflective writing: <i>Writing a letter to...</i>	Students
	<i>Discussion on focus groups' outcomes of November sessions</i>	Session: <i>Implementation of Active Methodologies (based on November preparatory focus groups) Discussion on Citizenship Education.</i>	Teachers
<b>Day 4</b>	<i>Cultural Engagement</i>	<i>Educational Excursion to Cagliari</i>	All participants
<b>Day 5</b>	<i>Responsibility Participation</i>	Workshop: <i>Comparative analysis of Italian and Polish school regulations</i>	Teachers
	<i>Inclusion Participation</i>	Workshop <i>Music and dance as Instruments of Inclusion</i>	All participants
	<i>Reflection Evaluation</i>	Evaluation questionnaire	All participants

Source: ERASMUS+ KA121- 2024-1-IT02-KA121-SCH-000225588

Citizenship education was presented as an essential dimension of student preparation, which encouraged a shared sense of responsibility for promoting community development.

## Results of the Study

The *document analysis* focused on the institutional development plans, application forms, and evaluation questionnaires produced by the two schools within the framework of the Erasmus+ project. The overarching aim of the project was to reconceptualize citizenship education, fostering participation, intercultural understanding, dialogue, and inclusion among students. The documents centered on designing and implementing strategies aimed at promoting engagement with citizenship and inclusion-related issues, thereby offering valuable insights into this complex relationship. The positive organizational framework established by the institutions emerged as one of the most significant aspects of the content analysis.

The effectiveness of the schools' European Projects Commission in coordinating the mobility project through careful planning, administrative support, and clear communication was widely recognized by 61.8% of participants. The analysis highlighted how procedural requirements, agreements, and preparatory meetings effectively contributed to enhancing teaching competencies. Specifically, the mobility initiatives combined formal training courses (71.4% of teachers) with job-shadowing experiences (involving 28.6% of teachers). These approaches fostered the development of students' competencies. This growth included Polish learners with special educational needs who accompanied their teachers during the mobility school visits.

The evaluation questionnaires provided significant insights into the educational, organizational, linguistic, and intercultural dimensions of the mobility project. The management of the experience was described by 85.7% of the participants as well-structured, efficient, and supportive, thereby demonstrating a strong institutional commitment to its success. These findings underscored the critical relevance of meticulous pedagogical planning in international mobility frameworks, especially when promoting meaningful participation and engagement. Furthermore, the assessment demonstrated the pedagogical value of mobility in fostering professional development (75.6% of respondents), intercultural awareness (85.7% of participants), collaborative learning (84.9% of respondents), and active participation within learning communities (76.4% of participants). At the same time, teachers' feedback emphasized the relevance of active methodologies (92.8%) and student-centered educational approaches grounded in international cooperation (77.9%). According to all respondents, mobility practice significantly encouraged socially oriented engagement. This approach fostered participation, inclusion, and citizenship education.

The *focus groups* aimed to explore institutional support and the alignment of teaching and learning methodologies with the institutional strategy for promoting intercultural understanding, inclusion, and citizenship education. This early-stage qualitative inquiry allowed teachers to associate pedagogical objectives prior to the physical mobility phase. For the subsequent empirical analysis, the study specifically centers on the operationalization of these strategies, conducted in November 2024, ahead of the mobility experience at the Italian host school in December 2024. Two distinct focus groups were conducted with the participating teachers, each consisting of seven individuals, to ensure a balanced cross-national dialogue.

The main findings underscored how mobility experiences can significantly contribute to achieving citizenship-related goals within the classroom. Participants emphasized that citizenship education can be revitalized through the introduction of active teaching methods. Furthermore, teachers stressed the need to implement activities that align student participation with social justice-oriented educational outcomes, and professional competencies. This approach broadens horizons across ethical, cultural, social, and inclusive dimensions, while demanding that teachers adopt a critical global perspective to foster an inclusive ethos among learners. According to the respondents, transnational experiences enhance *"open-mindedness and tolerance toward diversity, relevant values in a democratic society, because they promote mutual respect and recognition of others as human beings"* (Participant Communication, 2024).

The pivotal role of inclusion was strongly emphasized. This dimension can be fostered by developing an understanding of, and respect for, all cultures and perspectives. Ultimately, this process contributes to a more equitable society where differences are recognized, valued, and respected. This sentiment was echoed by the participants: *"Immersion in an international environment created multiple opportunities*

for authentic inclusion and recognition” (Participant Communication, 2024). From the teachers' perspective, inclusive education models recognize diversity, ensuring equal access to learning opportunities for all students. A clear need emerged to innovate educational methods, with particular attention to individual differences and collaborative work between teachers and students. Teachers emphasized the need to explore new strategies and actively experiment with forms of collaboration. This process involved developing approaches that “integrated different perspectives into a transversal vision of citizenship, while still valuing single disciplines” (Participant Communication, 2024).

The case study which constitutes the primary focus of this analysis, was conducted at the Meucci-Mattei High School in Decimomannu, Italy, with the participation of visiting teachers and students from Rzeszów, Poland. Framed within the two-year Erasmus+ project, the initiative engaged fourteen teachers and twenty students across both schools and took place from December 9 to 15, 2024. The initiative sought to identify the key success factors associated with citizenship education and active teaching and learning practices (Table 1).

Designed to enhance intercultural and citizenship competencies, this educational pathway did not develop in isolation. Instead, its successful implementation depended upon meticulously planned educational activities anchored in the school environment. This progression effectively drove broader transformation. Reflecting on the mobility project at the Meucci-Mattei School, observations of learning activities underscored the necessity of intentionally embedding intercultural and citizenship competencies within core learning objectives.

In line with the scientific literature (Chierichetti, Mourtos, & Zartoshty, 2025), citizenship education increasingly incorporated planetary perspectives, emphasizing the importance of encouraging students to consider different dimensions of their work. Rather than conceiving global citizenship as a supplementary curricular component, the learning experience advanced a comprehensive institutional framework. Within this structure, responsibility, participation, agency, and opportunities for intercultural dialogue were intrinsically embedded within pedagogical practices, co-curricular design, and learning outcomes.

The case study extended learning beyond the classroom. This approach promoted inclusive encounters and transformative leadership development grounded in cooperative, participatory, and intercultural perspectives. The learning experience was conducted through active methodologies, collaborative practices, and equity-oriented design. These elements were considered not merely as teaching methods, but as educational environments that fostered reflexivity, dialogue, agency, and responsibility.

Citizenship education was framed as an essential asset for both students and teachers. This framework fostered a shared sense of responsibility to promote intercultural dialogue and inclusion as catalysts for development within the school community.

The activities observed and implemented during the mobility phase were structured across three distinct levels:

1. *Teacher-oriented experiences.* These experiences aimed to discuss frameworks, ideas, and attitudes within diverse school contexts, enhancing the teaching practices of educators from both institutions. Notably, the visiting teachers highly appreciated the dialogical approach designed to illustrate citizenship education and inclusive practices within Italian schools. This framework successfully involved sharing objectives and learning among all participants.

2. *Student-oriented experiences.* The implementation of knowledge-building and dialogical experiences between students was framed within a structured, project-based, and transdisciplinary perspective. The proposed activities were carried out both inside the classroom and in external educational settings. Students were encouraged to recognize one another's competencies, participate and collaborate on co-constructing shared projects. Significantly, the Polish cohort, entirely composed of learners with special educational needs, successfully showcased their abilities. This group demonstrated high engagement in cooperating with a heterogeneous Italian group, which comprised both learners with and without special needs.
3. *Shared teacher-and-student experiences.* Designed for all participants, the educational visits sought deepening knowledge of the local context. Simultaneously, these initiatives facilitated critical reflection on learning and citizenship education. As professionals engaged in lifelong learning, teachers and students acted as agents of change, addressing complex challenges through diverse citizenship and intercultural practices. These practices demanded robust decision-making capacity, alongside well-developed theoretical and operational competencies.

The pedagogical intervention successfully achieved its primary objective: Both participating teachers and students—including Polish learners with Special Educational Needs— demonstrated a robust development of participation and engagement in intercultural and global citizenship competencies. This target was not reached through abstract or top-down instruction, but rather through the strategic implementation of experiential and active methodologies. The case study can thus be regarded as a transferable framework. This model facilitates the transition from rhetorical commitments to the effective operationalization of intercultural and citizenship education.

The operationalization of these competencies within the project can be analyzed through three dimensions.

#### 1. *Student Agency and Cross-National Inclusion*

Rather than treating global citizenship as a supplementary, passive curricular component, the one-week immersive case study established what can be theoretically defined as an equity-oriented educational system. The active, project-based design proved highly effective for the Polish cohort. By engaging in collaborative, transdisciplinary tasks (such as the comparative analysis of school procedures and non-verbal workshops like *Music and Dance as Instruments of Inclusion*), these students demonstrated high levels of engagement and transformative agency. The peer-to-peer interaction with Italian students catalyzed a shift from mere rhetorical commitments to authentic, localized practices of social justice. The data gathered from the evaluation questionnaires confirmed that this socially oriented engagement directly enhanced students' mutual respect, open-mindedness, and recognition of diversity as a fundamental democratic asset.

#### 2. *Professional and Pedagogical Competencies for Educators*

For the fourteen participating teachers, mobility combined formal training with job-shadowing, shifting their roles from traditional instructors to agents of educational transformation. The two focus groups revealed that immersion in an international environment provided educators with actionable frameworks to revitalize citizenship

education within their own classrooms. Teachers reported a heightened capacity to integrate diverse cultural perspectives into a transversal, cross-curricular vision of citizenship, successfully bridging the gap between single disciplinary boundaries and holistic inclusive models.

### *3. Institutional Synergy as a Catalyst*

A crucial success factor highlighted in the study's results is the alignment between institutional infrastructure and active teaching practices. The efficiency of the European Projects Commission at the Meucci-Mattei High School provided a supportive administrative and organizational framework. This structural backing ensured that active methodologies could function effectively as environments of reflexivity, dialogue, and shared community responsibility.

## **Conclusions**

The initial hypothesis sought to reflect on citizenship education and analyze how international exchange projects could promote participatory processes. Ultimately, the study revealed a more complex and analytically nuanced perspective on how citizenship education could be practiced at school. The results demonstrated that the intercultural exchange project promoted active engagement and citizenship education. Consequently, the initiative fostered dialogue and a deep sense of responsibility toward diverse political, social, and cultural belongings at both local and global levels.

The experience enhanced teachers' and students' participation while cultivating a broader sense of belonging to a planetary community. This success was achieved through developing a holistic and intentional approach capable of combining curriculum design, inclusive pedagogy, and experiential learning opportunities.

While the research offers valuable insights, certain limitations must be acknowledged. A primary constraint of the study concerns its context-dependent nature, as the findings are closely linked to the specific characteristics, practices, and organizational dynamics of the participating institutions. Consequently, caution should be exercised when generalizing the results to other educational contexts.

The qualitative focus was compounded by a relatively small sample size concentrated on a specific group of participants across two schools. Therefore, the findings cannot be statistically generalized to broader educational contexts but are instead regarded as transferable frameworks. Moreover, the data collected via questionnaires relied on self-reported measures. This approach might introduce a degree of social desirability bias, as participants potentially overemphasized positive outcomes due to their personal investment in the Erasmus+ project.

Finally, a notable limitation of this case study concerns the brief duration of the fieldwork. Both participating teachers and students indicated that a mobility period extending beyond a single week would have been preferred to further consolidate learning and intercultural exchange.

To address these limitations, future research should adopt longitudinal designs to evaluate the long-term competencies acquired through international mobility. It would also be highly beneficial to expand the sample size by including a wider network of schools. This expansion will enable comparative analyses across different geographical and socioeconomic contexts. Furthermore, integrating mixed-methods approaches can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the field. Combining

self-reported questionnaires with structured observations will clarify how inclusive pedagogy and global citizenship education are concretely operationalized in educational practice

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