

#### Aims and Overview

This newsletter details the *Helping Kids!* Lab's collaboration with the Blue Star Programme in the Republic of Ireland, which aims to promote learning about Europe and the EU in Irish primary schools.

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#### Blue Star Programme (BSP) Annual Reports (2020-21)

The Blue Star Programme (BSP) encourages Irish primary schools to educate pupils about Europe and the European Union through creative activities.

Each year, teachers share annual reports, describing how children learned about Europe and the EU in four key pillars: historical, geographical, cultural and creative, and institutional.

We analysed reports from 2020-21 to understand how BSP is implemented in Irish primary schools, and how it links with children's European identities.

All teachers conveyed lessons about Europe through creative media. Many of these **creative activities emphasised European diversity**.

- 18 teachers reported teaching phrases in **different European languages**, 18 conveyed lessons about Europe through music, and 10 encouraged children to dress up in order to learn about European diversity.
- 38 schools participated in **Europe Day on the 9th May**. Schools tuned in to local MEPs discussing Europe, hosted cultural fairs, and celebrated the diversity within their own classrooms and Europe at large.
- Over 90% of teachers encouraged children to complete projects in order to learn about the different countries within Europe.
- 80% had aspects of Europe and the EU into their **arts and crafts** lessons.
- Children in 33 schools learned about **artists** from different European countries, such as Van Gogh, Matisse, Grigorescu and Monet.
- **Cooking** was also a popular medium to discuss the variety of cultures within Europe, with 28 schools cooking meals from various European countries, and two schools even creating their own **recipe books**.

#### What is European Identity?

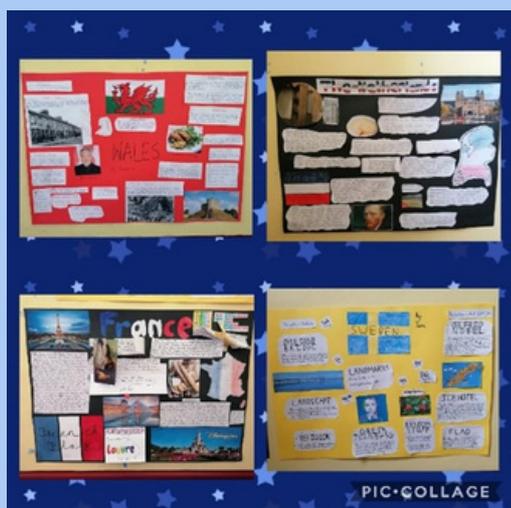
European identity is studied across a range of disciplines. We conducted a Rapid Evidence Assessment of European identity among children and young people. Based on this interdisciplinary review, European identity is:

- A **complex** identity
- Which children can **choose to identify**
- **Unites** Europeans based on their shared culture, history and political system, yet
- Acknowledges the **diversity** among them
- Is associated with a range of **inclusive benefits** due to the sense of belonging that it provides.

Creative activities were also used to accentuate certain domains of BSP teaching. Emphasising the **geographical** dimension of BSP, schools participated in ‘Run Around Europe’, during which pupils run between destinations representing European capital cities, EU orienteering, during which pupils locate ‘European destinations’ around their school, and ‘travelling’ around Europe using a green screen on Zoom.

Illustrating the **historical** backdrop of BSP, 12 schools learned about Europe and European history through reading relevant books, such as ‘the Diary of Anne Frank’, ‘the Boy in the Striped Pyjamas’ and ‘War Horse’.

Many other creative initiatives were common to only a few schools, and exemplified how schools took the message of BSP and made it their own. These included constructing European monuments out of Lego, jigsaws, board games, diary entries, drama, poetry, dancing, gardening, and show and tell.



*Example images from BSP Teacher Reports*



### Learning about Europe through Symbols

Building on *Helping Kids!* Lab research, we investigated the prevalence of European symbols in BSP classrooms.

- Over 70% of teachers noted using European symbols in their discussions. For example, 6 teachers discussed the **Euro** currency with their classes, linking that to the political dimensions of European identification.

Diversity in Europe and across the European Union was salient:

- 28 reports alluded to the **flags** of European countries and 18 to the EU flag, 2 schools discussing the EU motto, ‘United in Diversity’, and 7 listening to, or singing, the **European anthem**, Ode to Joy.
- 6 teachers discussed the perspectives that students from other countries brought to discussions about Europe.

National symbols also prominently featured in the teacher reports:

- Over 25% of teachers rooted their teaching about the EU in the **Irish context**.
- The Irish flag was featured in 6 reports. One school creatively designed their own jerseys for Ireland. Two reports featured the harp, often regarded as Ireland’s emblem, and 2 teachers discussed Irish myths and legends.
- 2 schools explored Irish music and dancing in their classes, and a third listened to a number of Irish rebel songs, grounding their BSP teaching in Irish history.

The prominence of national symbols, along with European symbols, in teachers’ annual BSP reports speaks to how European and national identity are closely intertwined. The *Helping Kids!* Lab will continue to study how these identities relate to one another.

## Promoting Citizenship and Democracy

Given the political nature of European identity, we were also interested in how schools involved in BSP might consider citizenship and democracy, and how they put those values into practice.

- 5 teachers discussed promoting **environmental awareness** in their classrooms, illustrating how schools can foster **responsible citizenship**.
- 1 school hosted a **debate** on EU concepts, while another discussed Ireland's decision to join the EEC, and designed mock **campaign posters** encouraging Irish voters to vote for or against this decision.
- 2 schools hosted **mock elections** in which pupils ran for seats in the European Parliament as MEPs, illustrating the democratic process through the design of manifestos, hosting debates and ultimately voting within class.

## Implications

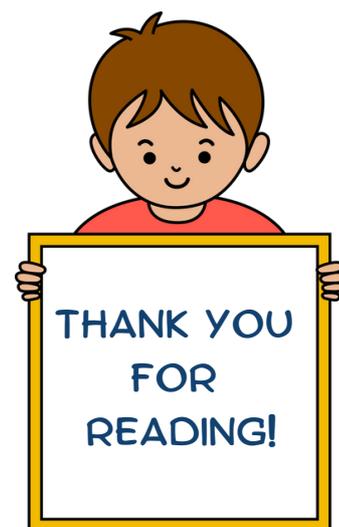
First, analysis of teachers' annual reports speaks to the role that **school-based, curricular interventions** can play in promoting knowledge about Europe and the EU, and European identification.

Second, with regard to **practice**, the annual 'Europe Day' event on May 9th could become an annual touchstone event to share BSP's impact with the wider public.

Third, in relation to **policy**, interest in BSP should be explored beyond the Republic of Ireland, sharing the wonderful teaching practices with other European education ministries.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the incredible staff of the Blue Star Programme ([www.bluestarprogramme.ie/](http://www.bluestarprogramme.ie/)) for collaboration in the conceptualisation of this line of research, and funding from Enterprise Ireland [R23442] and UCD Seed Funding [SF2025] to Laura K. Taylor.



*Images kindly provided by the Blue Star Programme via Twitter (@BlueStarProg)*

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