

The Bilingual and Intercultural Border Schools Project (PEBIF) as a Strategy for Linguistic Integration and Cross-Border Cooperation: An Example of Educational Action between Northern Portugal and Galicia

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Abstract

This article analyses the experience of the Bilingual and Intercultural Border Schools Programme (PEBIF) as a policy for linguistic integration and cross-border cooperation, situated on the border between Northern Portugal and Galicia. It discusses its contributions to promoting plurilingualism, interculturality, and cross-border citizenship. Based on a qualitative approach—combining participant observation, interviews with teachers, and document analysis—the study describes collaborative pedagogical practices developed between mirror schools in Salvaterra de Miño (Galicia) and Monção (Portugal). By understanding border regions not merely as geopolitical boundaries, but as territories traversed by flows, tensions, and social ties, the article helps fill an empirical gap in studies on European integration by giving visibility to the voices and concrete actions of teachers who, in their daily school routines, implement strategies of intercomprehension and appreciation of local languages. The analysis proposes a critical reflection on the factors that foster or hinder cross-border integration, highlighting the role of language policies, identity pressures, and regional authorities in constructing a plurilingual education that is sensitive to border realities and to the individuals who inhabit them.

Keywords: PEBIF, language policy, cross-border cooperation, plurilingualism, intercomprehension

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Introduction

*“Realmente creo que la educación debería romper esas [barreras mentales y sociales]. Podemos hacer más que simplemente ir allí, usar la piscina, volver, secarnos y no interactuar con los niños. Y decir ‘Ah, me hablan en portugués, no entiendo’, o ‘no podemos comunicarnos’. Entonces, esa parte social. Vamos allí, pero no hay un vínculo social, y al final estamos muy cerca. Muy, muy cerca. Es una frontera extremadamente próxima.”*² (Statement by a participating teacher)

The testimony of a teacher from Salvaterra do Minho, Spain, interviewed within the scope of the Bilingual and Intercultural Border Schools Programme (PEBIF), reveals the persistence of what she refers to as ‘mental barriers’ between the residents of Salvaterra and Monção, Portugal—two towns that, although they form a Eurocity and share services and formal cooperation policies, still face challenges in building social and cultural ties. This perception expresses the paradox of border regions in the European Union: despite geographical proximity, everyday circulation, and institutional cooperation frameworks, symbolic, affective, and historical divisions persist, complicating integration.

In recent decades, border regions have increasingly been understood not merely as fixed lines delimiting state sovereignties, but

as concrete, multiple, and dynamic cross-border zones and regions, characterised by economic, social, cultural, and political heterogeneity. This shift in perspective has fostered the development of a polyphonic approach to borders, recognising them as spaces of flows and exchanges as well as territories of control, symbolic negotiation, and identity construction (Anzaldúa, 2012; Grimson, 2000; Zárate, 2008). Various lines of analysis have converged in this discussion: the circulation of people and goods, security and control policies, social imaginaries and symbolic representations of borders as marginal or dangerous places, historical territorial tensions, processes of local integration, the emergence of cross-border cultures and sociabilities, among others (Albuquerque, 2018; Balibar, 2005; Cardin, 2012).

Faced with this complexity, European Union institutions have promoted the notion that such regions function as ‘living laboratories’ of European integration (European Commission, 2021), i.e., privileged spaces for experimenting with policies and solutions aimed at territorial cohesion and European citizenship. In this context, cross-border integration is conceived as a multidimensional process—political, economic, social, and cultural—through which citizens’ practices and expectations begin to align around new forms of shared governance and common institutions (Kramsch & Hooper, 2004; Setti, 2024). Education stands out in this scenario as a strategic vector for

2 Translation from Spanish by the authors: “I truly believe that education should break down those [mental and social barriers]. We can do more than simply go there, use the pool, return, dry ourselves, and not interact with the children. And say ‘Ah, they speak to me in Portuguese, I don’t understand’, or ‘we cannot communicate’. So, there is that social part. We go there, but there is no social connection, and in the end, we are very close. Very, very close. It is an extremely nearby border”

transformation, capable of promoting mutual recognition, plurilingualism, and intercultural coexistence in territories historically marked by separations.

The dimensions highlighted here do not exhaust the diversity of contemporary research, nor should they be seen as isolated approaches. It is within this horizon of integrated perspectives that the Bilingual and Intercultural Border Schools Project (PEBIF) is situated. Coordinated by the Organization of Ibero-American States (OEI), in partnership with the Ministries of Education of Portugal and Spain, and with scientific coordination by the University of Aveiro and the Complutense University of Madrid, the programme has, since 2021, strengthened cross-border cooperation through the creation of school networks organised into pairs of 'mirror schools', currently involving 48 schools—25 in Portugal and 23 in Spain (OEI, 2025). These schools develop joint curricular projects with a bilingual and intercultural focus. The methodology adopted is that of action research, understood as a form of teacher-led research (Rosiek & Atkinson, 2005, p. 422; Thiollent, 1998), directly involving the participating teachers and combining teacher education, co-production of learning projects, and active engagement from schools and communities.

As a cross-border education policy, PEBIF operates directly along the Portugal-Spain border (the *Raia*³), mobilizing diverse linguistic repertoires—such as European Portuguese, Castilian, Galician, Mirandese, Brazilian Portuguese, and other heritage languages—through

a critical and glottopolitical approach. Its pillars—bi/plurilingualism, interculturality, and intercomprehension—guide a situated pedagogy that recognises students' languages as cultural mediation resources and promotes practices of listening, recognition, and appreciation of differences. Thus, the project moves away from normative models, proposing the construction of more open, democratic school spaces that are responsive to local realities.

The initiative is directly aligned with the Common Strategy for Cross-Border Development (Governo da Espanha & Governo de Portugal, 2020), particularly in the areas involving joint management of education, cultural appreciation, and social cohesion in regions affected by depopulation and ageing. More than a language policy, PEBIF may be understood as a proposal for sustainable regional development, with schools as key agents of transformation and citizenship.

This article aims to analyse the Bilingual and Intercultural Border Schools Programme (PEBIF) as a catalyst in building integration in border territories, by fostering direct connections between schools, teachers, students, families, and local communities—often at the margins of central state bodies or European institutions. Focusing on the collaborative practices developed between two mirror schools in Galicia and Portugal, the article examines how shared educational action can trigger symbolic and emotional transformations.

3 The Portugal-Spain border, known by the epithet *A Raia* (in Spanish: *La Raya*), is the line that divides the territories of the Portuguese Republic and the Kingdom of Spain.

More concretely, based on the case study of the project 'Poetry at the Border', we seek to understand how situated pedagogical practices—built through the engagement of teachers, students, and communities—can help overcome symbolic barriers and contribute to strengthening a still-contested cross-border citizenship. By giving visibility to these experiences, this work seeks to contribute to debates on the role of schools as catalysts of bonds, belonging, and shared learning, sensitive to the languages and individuals who inhabit these border spaces.

Cross-Border Cooperation and Integration between Portugal and Spain

Since its inception, the European integration project has sought to articulate unity and diversity among Member States by promoting territorial cohesion that transcends national borders. However, in border regions, this ideal finds both its most privileged laboratories and its most evident contradictions. The border between Portugal and Spain represents a paradigmatic case of this process. Historically marked by dynamics of separation and asymmetry, the region has, in recent decades, been reconfigured as a space of encounter and collaboration. Scholars from various disciplines—from political geography to border sociology—have examined the emergence of cross-border governance arrangements, often driven by subnational actors such as municipalities, which aim to respond to the concrete demands of local populations, not always addressed by supranational structures.

An emblematic example of this reconfiguration is the establishment of the Eurocity Monção (Portugal) – Salvaterra de Miño (Galicia), which formalises cooperation between the two municipalities and adopts joint strategies for territorial development (Jurado-Almonte et al. 2020; Perkmann, 2003). Nevertheless, the effectiveness of such mechanisms depends on multiple factors—including the capacity to overcome legal, administrative, and symbolic barriers that persist even in contexts of geographical proximity. The Eurocity, like other similar initiatives, reveals both the potential and the limits of integration when not accompanied by structuring policies that recognise differences and promote territorial and linguistic justice.

The concept of 'cross-border cooperation', as defined by De Sousa (2013, p. 673), refers to "any kind of concerted action between public and/or private institutions from the border regions of two (or more) States [...] with the aim of strengthening good neighbourly relations, solving common problems or jointly managing resources between communities through any available cooperation mechanism." Perkmann (2003, p. 156) describes such practices as more or less institutionalised forms of collaboration between contiguous subnational authorities, organised into arrangements not necessarily based on intense trade exchange, but rather on low-intensity local political dynamics involving public, private, and third sector institutions in coordinated problem-solving schemes. Such initiatives, as shown by Setti (2024) and Jurado-Almonte, Pazos-García & Castanho (2020), result from a combination of factors such as linguistic

proximity, cultural affinities, local political leadership, and above all, the existence of institutional support frameworks—such as the Interreg programmes⁴ and the European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation⁵ (EGTCs), regulated by the European Union in 2006 and advanced in the Iberian context following the Valencia Treaty (2002). The creation of Eurocities such as Chaves–Verín and Monção–Salvaterra exemplifies the consolidation of these arrangements, operating as local platforms of multi-level governance aimed at the joint management of public services, mobility, tourism, and sustainable development in the cross-border space.

Nonetheless, the implementation of these cooperation principles in border territories still faces challenges. As Bourdieu (1996) argues, the political border not only reflects but also produces cultural and linguistic differences, functioning as a structuring principle of symbolic distinctions between groups. In a similar line, Calvet (2007) asserts that state borders reconfigure linguistic ecosystems, altering their internal balances and the systems of forces governing the circulation and prestige of languages. The relationship between Galician and Portuguese exemplifies this phenomenon: despite sharing a common origin, the political separation between Galicia and Portugal has contributed to distinct normative and ideological trajectories, feeding perceptions of strangeness between two neighbouring—and largely

intercomprehensible—languages, as noted in the teacher’s statement at the start of this article, when reflecting on the social and communicative barriers still present in interactions between students on both sides of the border.

Despite these symbolic and institutional barriers, experiences such as that of the Monção–Salvaterra de Miño Eurocity demonstrate the potential of local initiatives in promoting practices of cultural and social reconnection. Formalised in 2013, this partnership between the border municipalities consolidates a rapprochement process initiated with the construction of the International Bridge over the River Minho in 1995—a physical and symbolic milestone in overcoming previous circulation difficulties. Since then, the Eurocity has promoted integrated actions in the fields of culture, tourism, sport, entrepreneurship, and the sharing of public facilities (Jurado-Almonte et al. 2020).

These local practices align with the objectives of the Common Strategy for Cross-Border Development⁶ (ECDT), signed in 2020 by the governments of Portugal and Spain. The ECDT outlines a long-term vision for the revitalisation of border zones, proposing five lines of intervention: (1) mobility and elimination of administrative barriers; (2) physical and digital infrastructure; (3) joint management of basic services; (4) economic

4 Information available at: <https://interreg.eu/>.

5 Information available at: [European groupings of territorial cooperation \(EGTCs\) | Fact Sheets on the European Union | European Parliament](#)

6 The ECDT document can be found: <https://www.portugal.gov.pt/download-ficheiros/ficheiro.aspx?v=%3d%3dBQAAAB%2bLCAAAAAABAAzNDAsAAAxYnqfQUAAAA%3d>

development and innovation; and (5) environmental sustainability, culture, and shared identity.

In the field of education, the ECDT recognises schools as central pillars in building cross-border citizenship. It proposes the creation of bilingual and intercultural school networks, the development of joint curricular projects, the joint training of teachers, and the appreciation of local and heritage languages. These directives are materialised in the Bilingual and Intercultural Border Schools Programme (PEBIF), which will be analysed in the following section. The Galician Border Schools Network, established by a resolution in February 2024 (Dirección Xeral de Ordenación e Innovación Educativa, 2024), is another example of this strategic alignment. It represents an advance in the institutionalization of pilot experiences that promote student and teacher mobility, the co-production of teaching resources, and the recognition of local languages as elements of identity, social cohesion, and cross-border citizenship.

In summary, cross-border cooperation between Portugal and Spain—especially between Galicia and Northern Portugal—should be understood as an unfinished and contested process, driven by a complex combination of policies and local agendas. On the one hand, this cooperation points to more inclusive and plural forms of integration; on the other, it reveals the limits of decentralised action in the face of state structures and the normative rigidity of the European Union. Furthermore, it is important to recognise that many of the most significant integration processes do

not occur solely through institutional or programmatic channels, but emerge from the daily practices of people who live their lives across borders—families that circulate on both sides, cross-border workers, local traders, and students who cross linguistic, cultural, and political borders every day.

These ways of life, often invisible to official policies, generate silent yet powerful forms of cooperation that reshape the meanings of belonging, mobility, and language use. It is precisely at this point—where integration is manifested in daily life, not merely through formal mechanisms—that this article seeks to focus. By giving visibility to the concrete actions of teachers who, in border schools, implement strategies of intercomprehension and appreciation of local languages, we illuminate their transgressive and transformative power.

PEBIF as a Cross-Border Education Policy

The Bilingual and Intercultural Border Schools Programme (PEBIF) is a public policy initiative within the framework of Iberian cooperation, aimed at promoting plurilingualism, interculturality, and European citizenship in border contexts. Developed since 2021 through collaboration between the Ministries of Education of Portugal and Spain, the programme is coordinated by the Organization of Ibero-American States (OEI), with scientific support from the University of Aveiro and the Complutense University of Madrid, and with active participation of regional and municipal administrations (OEI, 2025).

Inspired by the experiences of the Bilingual Intercultural Border Schools Programme (PEIBF), conducted from 2005 to 2016 along Brazil's borders with Mercosur countries (Oliveira & Morello, 2019), the European PEBIF recognises the school as a space for social, cultural, and linguistic mediation. The project

is implemented through the formation of mirror schools—cross-border pairs composed of one Portuguese and one Spanish school—that collaboratively develop integrated pedagogical projects. In 2024, the programme brought together 48 schools (Figure 1): 25 in Portugal and 23 in Spain (OEI, 2025).

Figure 1. Network of participating schools.



Source: Organização de Estados Ibero-Americanos – OEI. <https://oei.int/pt/escritorios/secretaria-geral/programa/escolas-de-fronteira-portugal-espanha/> (OEI, 2025)

This territorial arrangement allows the programme to act as a catalyst for decentralised cooperation, promoting coordination between schools and local communities in regions where symbolic, emotional, and regulatory barriers still persist. As acknowledged by the OEI, PEBIF is embedded in a culture of cooperation that seeks to foster the educational, social, and economic development of border territories through linguistic diversity and the recognition of the Other as a constitutive part of the cross-border community (OEI, 2025).

At the same time, PEBIF responds to a social demand that goes beyond the institutional management of European funds. According to OEI, cross-border education promoted by the project must be socially driven—that is, rooted in the experiences, needs, and potential of local communities (OEI, 2025). In this regard, the programme acts as a bridge between the normative frameworks of European integration and the everyday realities of schools along the Iberian border.

PEBIF's development is organised in four main phases, structuring its operational logic as described by Matesanz del Barrio, Ferreira & Araújo e Sá (2023):

1. Identification and mobilization of schools: selection of participating schools and constitution of mirror school pairs, based on geographical proximity and mutual interest in developing joint pedagogical projects.
2. Continuous teacher education: educators engage in structured training around three axes—plurilingualism, intercomprehension, and interculturality—through in-person sessions, live online meetings, and asynchronous activities. This phase is essential to establish a shared theoretical-methodological foundation.
3. Development and implementation of educational projects: mirror schools conduct joint pedagogical activities such as producing bilingual materials, poetry workshops, school assemblies, cultural tours, linguistic biographies, and community listening initiatives.
4. Systematization, evaluation, and dissemination: outcomes are documented, shared, and evaluated across the network, supporting a culture of pedagogical innovation and promoting practices that can be replicated in other border contexts.

The pedagogical proposal of PEBIF is guided by three fundamental pillars: bi/plurilingualism, interculturality, and intercomprehension—articulated through a critical approach (Matesanz del Barrio, Ferreira & Araújo e Sá, 2023; Ulhôa & Araújo e Sá, 2024). More than teaching the language of the other, the programme

promotes the recognition and mobilization of linguistic repertoires present in school communities as both educational and affective resources.

This pedagogical approach reflects a conception of cross-border education rooted in the principles of the Common Strategy for Cross-Border Development (Governo de Portugal & Governo da Espanha, 2020) and in the valorization of local languages and cultures as essential resources for integration and regional development. By recognising the schools along the Iberian border as spaces for social transformation, PEBIF promotes plurilingualism and intercultural dialogue as structuring axes of an educational practice anchored in the recognition of diversity and in the overcoming of symbolic boundaries (Matesanz del Barrio, Ferreira & Araújo e Sá, 2023).

In this context, interculturality is not conceived as a static objective, but as a dialogic and relational process through which teachers and students co-construct meanings, knowledge, and practices in contact with the other. This approach allows them to learn not only about but also with the other, reframing their linguistic and cultural identities through encounters with diversity (Lourenço-Simões, Araújo e Sá & Matesanz del Barrio, 2025). Far from being instrumentalised as a policy of assimilation or control, interculturality in PEBIF is lived as an everyday experience, permeating school relationships, didactic projects, and formative exchanges—both in-person and virtual—among participating schools. This approach fosters active listening, co-authorship of knowledge, and the re-signification of linguistic and cultural

identities, aligning with the notion of the 'third space' (Bhabha, 1994), in which differences are not erased but reconfigured as creative potentials.

The project's bi/plurilingual perspective is based on the idea that languages in contact in border regions do not merely coexist but are interwoven in dynamic practices that are often rendered invisible by traditional curricula (Matesanz del Barrio, Ferreira & Araújo e Sá, 2023). In PEBIF, plurilingualism is understood as a repertoire of constantly mobilised linguistic resources—including Portuguese, Spanish, regional varieties, and migrant languages—whose valorization is essential for the development of contextualised and inclusive pedagogical practices. In this sense, plurilingualism goes beyond the logic of the 'second language' and asserts itself as a pedagogical and social competence, essential for active citizenship in multilingual contexts (Council of Europe, 2020).

More than teaching or learning the neighbouring country's language, the project encourages awareness of the languages present through meaningful oral and written experiences shared between Portuguese and Spanish mirror schools. These experiences reinforce students' linguistic awareness, intercultural communicative competence, and intercomprehension (Araújo e Sá, 2019).

Intercomprehension stands out as one of the programme's fundamental pillars, particularly relevant in border contexts between typologically related languages such as Portuguese and Spanish. Unlike approaches based on language substitution or normative L2 teaching,

intercomprehension values the use of the mother tongue as a starting point for understanding the other. It privileges intuitive, cognitive, and pragmatic strategies that promote communicative autonomy (Araújo e Sá, 2019; Escudé & Olmo, 2019; Matesanz del Barrio, 2017). In the PEBIF, intercomprehension is experienced in real exchange situations, in which pupils express themselves in their own language and learn to listen to the other's, activating their plurilingual and intercultural competences in a situated and relational way (Matesanz del Barrio, Ferreira & Araújo e Sá, 2023).

This approach fosters the development of multiple dimensions of plurilingual and intercultural communicative competence: the cognitive (understanding and interpreting discourse), the strategic (using linguistic and extralinguistic cues), the socio-relational (valuing otherness and empathy), and the instrumental (using tools to mediate communication) (Council of Europe, 2020). More than a teaching method, intercomprehension within the PEBIF constitutes an ethical-political horizon of coexistence, anchored in the idea that language can be a bridge rather than a barrier (Matesanz del Barrio, Ferreira & Araújo e Sá, 2023).

In a European context marked by political uncertainties, territorial reconfigurations, and challenges to mobility — such as those observed during the COVID-19 pandemic, restrictions to the Schengen Area, and migratory tensions — the PEBIF reaffirms the centrality of education as a space of resistance, solidarity, and innovation. By reinforcing the idea that there is more that unites us than separates us (OEI, 2025), the PEBIF

transforms the border into a place of encounter, where the plurality of languages and cultures is experienced as a strength rather than an obstacle. In this way, teachers and pupils become protagonists of a formative process that, while breaking with homogeneous models of schooling, points towards the construction of a more just, critical, and plural cross-border education.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach with ethnographic inspiration, focusing on the practices and perceptions of teachers involved in the PEBIF (Merriam, 2002). The empirical field is centred on the experience of the project 'Poetry at the Border', carried out between 2024 and 2025 by two mirror schools located in the north of Portugal and in Galicia.

The following data collection instruments were used:

- Participant observation during training sessions, meetings and inter-school activities;
- A focus group with teachers from both schools, held in person in 2025 and lasting approximately one and a half hours;
- Document analysis of pedagogical plans, materials produced by pupils and institutional records.

The interviews, conducted in Galician, Portuguese and Spanish, were fully transcribed with close attention to preserving the linguistic features and distinctive expressions of each context, ensuring fidelity to the participants' voices. Participating teachers signed an Informed

Consent Form, in line with ethical principles of research involving human subjects, guaranteeing privacy, anonymity and voluntary participation, and validated the transcriptions.

To ensure interpretive validity, methodological triangulation was employed, combining various data sources (interviews, observations, school documents) and perspectives (teachers, institutional records, field diary). The field diary, kept by the researcher throughout the fieldwork, served as a reflective and contextualizing resource, allowing the contrast of impressions, the observation of analytical silences and a deeper understanding of the meanings participants attributed to educational practices in border contexts.

The school in Salvaterra de Miño (Galicia) serves approximately 453 pupils across Early Years and Primary education, with a significant presence of pupils with family ties to Portuguese speakers. It adopts a plurilingual approach, integrating Galician, Spanish and English.

Across the Minho river, the Portuguese school, located in the district of Viana do Castelo, encompasses all levels of education and is marked by considerable linguistic diversity. Although European Portuguese is the language of schooling, there is a growing number of students from immigrant families, especially from Brazil, Galicia and various African countries. This creates unique opportunities for working with multilingual repertoires. The school's participation in the PEBIF has therefore consolidated pre-existing practices of intercultural and multilingual education in both schools.

Separated by just 2.5 km and connected by the International Bridge, the two schools share not only geographical proximity, but also a long history of exchanges of various kinds, including commercial and cultural. Their partnership reconfigures the geography of the border as a space for dialogue and educational cooperation, reaffirming the school as a place of encounter, listening and collective meaning-making.

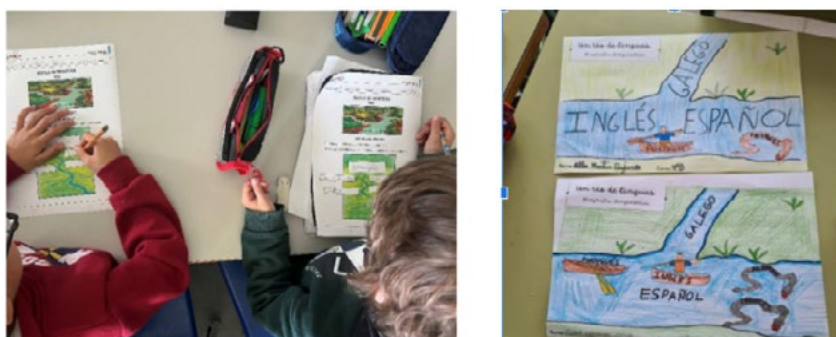
Pedagogical Practices and the Construction of Bonds: The 'Poetry at the Border' Project

The 'Poetry at the Border' project constituted a cross-border educational experience designed by teachers from the mirror schools of Monção (Portugal) and Salvaterra de Miño (Galicia), within the framework of the PEBIF. It aimed to foster encounters between pupils from both sides of the Minho River, by valuing territorial proximity, cultural sharing, and the students' linguistic and emotional repertoires.

Structured around teacher education sessions and centred on collective creation, the project promoted activities geared towards intercomprehension between Portuguese and Galician, the strengthening of emotional bonds, and the recognition of linguistic diversity as a core element of conviviality and shared learning.

The first stage consisted of the elaboration of 'Linguistic Biographies' based on a fluvial metaphor: pupils represented their mother tongue as the main river, other known languages as tributaries, desired languages as lampreys, and partially understood languages as canoes (see Figure 2). This symbolic representation enabled both individual and collective reflection on pupils' linguistic repertoires and the recognition of heritage languages. The activity, inspired by the teacher education phase of the project, sought to map students' linguistic repertoires and raise awareness about their trajectories and affiliations, while valuing local and heritage languages.

Figure 2. Stages in the construction of linguistic biographies in the mirror schools.



Source: Pedagogical Project 'Poetry at the Border'. <https://escoladefronteira.blogspot.com/>

The river metaphor was used to visually represent the pupils' linguistic experience: the river signified the mother tongue; the

tributaries, other languages spoken or understood; the lampreys, languages the pupils wished to learn; and the canoes,

languages with which they were familiar but not fluent. The River Minho, which symbolically connects the two school territories, served as the central thread of the activity.

The activity revealed a remarkable degree of linguistic diversity (Galician, Spanish, European and Brazilian Portuguese, French, Arabic, Catalan, German, Basque, and English), but also exposed sociolinguistic tensions, such as the predominance of Spanish as the 'school language', even among children from Galician-speaking families. As one Galician teacher explained when referring to her own son, who was undergoing the process of schooling and participating in the project: "*Si, el falaba galego. Foi empezar a ir á escola infantil e agora fala castelán. El traduce todo (...) Eu chamo o poder dos iguais.*"⁷ (Statement by a participating teacher).

Despite the existence of an official policy to promote Galician—particularly since the Law of Linguistic Normalization of 1983⁸—and its status as the native language of Galicia, the most recent data indicate that school practices have contributed to the weakening of Galician use among the younger generations (Freixanes, 2020).

This phenomenon reveals the persistence of a historical diglossia that marginalises Galician. The teacher's statement confirms what Bourdieu (1996) described as the symbolic effect of the dominant language, which imposes its legitimacy and silences linguistic forms considered inferior. More than an individual choice, the abandonment of Galician as a primary language reflects

the power struggles inscribed within school practices (Freixanes, 2020). In this sense, the linguistic biography became not only an instrument of recognition and reflection for the pupils in Salvaterra, but also a form of denunciation—highlighting the imprint of Galician castilianization and the normative pressures imposed on emerging linguistic subjects.

Beyond the tensions between Galician and Spanish, the presence of Portuguese—both European and Brazilian—emerged as a significant element. The mapping of 40 analysed linguistic biographies revealed that only 4 pupils reported speaking Portuguese, 18 demonstrated some comprehension, and 4 expressed interest in learning it. These figures point to the ambiguous position of Portuguese within Galician schools located along the border: it is a neighbouring and mutually intelligible language, yet it is not always perceived as such, nor recognised as relevant by many pupils.

The intercomprehension between Galician, Spanish and Portuguese—which the PEBIF aims to explore pedagogically—still encounters resistance rooted in linguistic hierarchies and prejudices shaped by political separation and the asymmetrical standardisation of languages. As Xoán Lagares (2011) reminds us, Galician and Portuguese share deep historical roots, but the effects of language nationalization—marked by the imposition of Spanish as the normative standard and the marginalization of Galician—have created a symbolic border that cannot be undone solely through lexical proximity.

7 Translation from Galician by the authors: "Yes, he used to speak Galician. But once he started nursery school, he now speaks Spanish. He translates everything (...) I call it the power of peers."

8 Source: Lei 3/1983, do 15 de xuño, de normalización lingüística

The activity concluded with the creation of collective murals depicting 'linguistic rivers', which were shared between the schools and with the broader

community. This fostered the recognition of linguistic diversity as shared heritage and helped to strengthen school and family bonds (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Collective mural of linguistic biographies in the mirror schools (Salvaterra and Monção).



Source: Pedagogical Project 'Poetry at the Border'. <https://escoladefronteira.blogspot.com/>

Next, the classes were mobilised to create a collective poem inspired by the works of João Verde and Saavedra—poets whose verses pay tribute to the River Minho. Each class composed one stanza, which was then brought together into a single cross-border poem.

In the second stage of the 'Poetry at the Border' project, pupils created a bilingual collective poem inspired by texts from João Verde and Amador Saavedra. The idea stemmed from the teachers' intention to work with "*something close to the pupils of both schools*" (Statement by a participating teacher), building on cultural symbols already embedded in the territory.

The poem selected was 'Vendo-os assim tão pertinho'⁹ by João Verde, which poetically expresses the longing for union between Galicia and the Minho:

*"A Galiza mail'o Minho
São como dois namorados
Que o rio traz separados
Quasi desde o nascimento."*¹⁰

(Source: <https://concelho.moncao.pt/pt/1069/joao-verde.aspx>)

Amador Saavedra responded to this poem with verses reinforcing the idea of an inevitable union —"*with or without the parents' consent.*"

⁹ Translation from Galician by the authors: "*Seeing them so very near.*"

¹⁰ Translation from Galician by the authors: "*Galicia and Minho/ Are like two lovers/ Whom the river has kept apart/ Almost since birth.*"

This poetic duo has become a living symbol of the region, represented in murals and even in the name of the international bridge. Inspired by this legacy, each class created four-line stanzas, which were brought together to compose a bilingual

collective poem, later presented during the final joint encounter between the schools (see Figures 4 and 6). The activity embraced linguistic plurality (Galician, Portuguese and Spanish), without imposing uniformity.

Figure 4. Stages in the construction of the collective poem by the mirror schools.



Source: Pedagogical Project 'Poetry at the Border'. <https://escoladefronteira.blogspot.com/>

As one teacher from the project observed:

“Pero si que é certo que en creo que o ano pasado, ao coller as poesías que están aí, que unen moito e que son un símbolo que hai en Salvaterra e en Monção. Se paseas por Monção, tamén están postas, e en Salvaterra tamén. Entón si que foi algo moi de unión, moi do proxecto de aquí.”¹¹

From a pedagogical standpoint, poetic creation functioned as a language of connection, allowing pupils to symbolise the border not as a line of separation,

but as a space for encounter, listening, and creation. From the perspective of language policy, this practice demonstrates the potential to build an aesthetic of intercomprehension, in which the border is not a barrier, but material for artistic expression. This collective creation, as the teacher explained, symbolically materialised the union between the two school communities and highlighted the capacity of poetry to bring closely related languages together in a shared aesthetic gesture.

Another key component of the project was the circulation of so-called ‘Travelling Backpacks’, which contained books in

11 Translation from Galician by the authors: “But it is true that I think that last year, when we worked with those poems—which are really unifying and have become a symbol both in Salvaterra and in Monção—if you walk around Monção, they’re displayed there too, and in Salvaterra as well. So it was something very unifying, very much a project rooted in this place.”

Portuguese, Spanish, and Galician. These backpacks were exchanged between the two schools and taken home by pupils, promoting family reading and bringing school and home contexts closer together through multilingualism.

The proposal involved preparing backpacks with books, school materials, and students' own productions, which

would then be exchanged among pupils from the different schools (see Figure 5). As one of the teachers explained, “*El alumnado seleccionará libros y manuales que se enviarán al centro asociado para que el alumnado del otro país conozca las similitudes entre los sistemas educativos.*”¹²

Figure 5. The Travelling Backpacks: exchange of books and learning materials.



Source: Pedagogical Project 'Poetry at the Border'. <https://escoladefronteira.blogspot.com/>

Beyond the classroom, the backpacks reached pupils' homes, encouraging moments of shared reading with families and strengthening intergenerational bonds. Contact with the materials awakened in pupils both the recognition of differences and the discovery of similarities—in books, games, and storytelling traditions, as described by one teacher, “*Houbo moita*

emoção ao descobrir que tiñan libros iguais, ou que lles gustaban os mesmos xogos. Os nenos viron que non eran tan diferentes.”¹³

With books in Portuguese, Galician and Spanish, the activity highlighted the value of linguistic plurality and intercomprehension. The backpacks acted as emotional and cultural mediators, transforming the book into an object of listening and sharing, rather than a tool for standardization. By circulating between Monção and Salvaterra,

12 Translation from Spanish by the authors: “*The pupils will select books and textbooks to send to the partner school, so that the pupils in the other country can learn about the similarities between the education systems.*”

13 Translation from Galician by the author: “*There was a lot of excitement when they discovered they had the same books, or that they enjoyed the same games. The children realized they were not so different.*”

the books challenged both symbolic and concrete borders, affirming the school as a space of passage and hospitality. The 'Travelling Backpacks' demonstrated that objects too can speak languages—and forge senses of belonging.

In addition, Portuguese and Spanish songs were integrated into the schools' daily routines. Moments such as the collective musical performances during school gatherings helped foster empathetic listening and intercultural coexistence.

The project also saw strong involvement from families, especially those with migrant backgrounds. Parents and grandparents were invited to tell stories, share legends,

and read books in Portuguese in the classroom. These moments provided symbolic recognition of heritage languages and reinforced bonds across generations, cultures, and communities.

The project culminated in a 'Face-to-Face Encounter' between the two schools, held in Monção. The event included performances, poetry readings, and cultural exchanges (see Figure 6). The symbolic exchange of poems between the school communities marked the experience as a gesture of mutual listening and democratic coexistence on the banks of the Minho River.

Figure 6. Final gathering in Monção Park.



Source: Pedagogical Project 'Poetry at the Border'. <https://escoladefronteira.blogspot.com/>

These practices enabled the emergence of a shared educational space in which languages ceased to function as barriers and became communicative and affective resources. The involvement of families—especially those of migrant background—amplified the impact of the project by introducing new voices and memories into the construction of a cross-border school identity.

The teachers' testimonies highlight the educational power of the project, both for the pupils and for the teachers themselves. Many educators revisited their family histories linked to the border and began to perceive the classroom as a space of resistance and symbolic reconfiguration. As one teacher explained, "*Entonces, para mí, el año pasado, cuando llegó el proyecto, fue una de las primeras veces... Me gusta mucho mi trabajo, pero el año pasado, por primera vez, sentí que mi trabajo formaba parte de mi vida.*"¹⁴

14 Translation from Spanish by the authors: "So for me, last year, when the project arrived, it was one of the first times... I really like my job, but last year, for the first time, my job felt like a part of my life."

Teachers' Perceptions and the Symbolic Dimensions of the Project

The accounts of teachers involved in the project reveal that cross-border integration, far from being limited to the institutional sphere, gains meaning at the symbolic, emotional and subjective levels. By becoming agents in the construction of a shared curriculum, teachers were not merely delivering educational activities—they also revisited their own experiences of the border, shifting entrenched meanings and rewriting their memories in new registers of belonging.

Some teachers recalled childhood memories and family stories associated with crossing the border. These memories, in some cases, were marked by historical stigma and prejudice, but also by affective ties and networks of solidarity among border communities—such as those associated with smuggling. In revisiting these memories within the context of the project, teachers experienced a symbolic reconfiguration of the border—from a limit to a bridge, from an obstacle to a space of encounter.

As one Galician teacher recalled her grandmother, who worked as a smuggler—a family story which, through the project, was reinscribed as legitimate knowledge: “*Sempre conto que hai anos a miña*

avoa tiña ultramarinos alí, cambiaba fronteira-fronteira. Traballaba moito con contrabando da fronteira.”¹⁵

By invoking her grandmother, the teacher recovered an emotional sense of belonging to the border—not one shaped by maps or legislation, but by relationships, exchanges and survival.

Another teacher acknowledged that her own trajectory had been shaped by symbolic and social barriers regarding the other side of the border. The project enabled her to resignify this distance:

*“Pero crecí con moitas barreiras mentais sociais de quen estaba do outro lado da fronteira. Parecíame maravilloso que os nenos que viven a ambos lados da fronteira puidesen ter unha relación diferente do que só ir de visita, que fose algo máis significativo.”*¹⁶

One of the most valued aspects of the project, according to teachers, was its organic and collaborative construction with colleagues from Portugal. Rather than being a prescriptive initiative, the PEBIF was experienced by this group as a fluid process, where ideas emerged from conversations, experimentation, and shared emotions, as one teacher noted, “*era todo moito orgánico. Unha idea levaba á outra. E como estábamos en sintonía, fluía naturalmente. Non foi nada imposto, e iso fixo toda a diferenza.*”¹⁷

15 Translation from Galician by the authors: “*I always say that years ago my grandmother had a grocery shop over there, she used to cross the border back and forth. She did a lot of work involving smuggling at the border.*”

16 Translation from Galician by the authors: “*But I grew up with many mental and social barriers regarding those on the other side of the border. I found it wonderful that the children living on both sides could form a relationship that was more than just visiting—that it could be something meaningful.*”

17 Translation from Galician by the authors: “*It was all very organic. One idea led to another. And because we were in tune, it flowed naturally. Nothing was imposed, and that made all the difference.*”

This environment of freedom and trust was reinforced by the school leaderships, who supported the group's autonomy and allowed the team to form its identity in a locally grounded way: "*Non nos meteron noutro proxecto. Deixáronnos formar o equipo de Escolas de Fronteira.*"¹⁸

Furthermore, the teachers highlighted the direct involvement of other institutional actors, such as local councils, police forces, and families, who helped build a support network around the project. These partnerships enabled the activities to develop in extended cooperation with the community.

Nonetheless, the teachers also noted structural limitations that hindered the consolidation of these experiences. For example, the frequent rotation of teaching staff across year groups—on both the Galician and Portuguese sides—compromised the continuity of the work and the preservation of the group's collective memory. As one teacher explained, "*o ano pasado estaba Andrea, que este ano non está no centro. Sergio e Sonia. Os claustros non son fixos. Iso dificulta a continuidade.*"¹⁹

Another challenge mentioned was the lack of prior training and didactic materials for teaching languages in border contexts,

especially for those just beginning their involvement in the project. Teachers reported feeling as if they were starting from scratch: "*Elaboramos materiais coa sensación de facíamos algo novo e non sabemos si hai máis docentes traballando na mesma línea. Precisamos de máis formación en metodoloxía de ensino de linguas estranxeiras.*"²⁰

The very organization of in-person meetings required a major collective effort to navigate legal procedures and bureaucracy, making clear the need for more structured institutional support: "*Coa información que temos agora será moito máis fácil viaxar en futuras excursións.*"²¹

Despite these limitations, the teachers shared a clear perception that the project points towards the future. In their words, through initiatives like this, schools are coming closer to the kind of society they wish to build—more multilingual, more open, and more interconnected, as expressed in the 'Poetry at the Border' project: "*Con este proxecto as nosas escolas se parecen máis a sociedade que queremos construír na fronteira: escolas e sociedades máis plurilingües, que potencian os lazos actuais para comunicarse máis entre si.*"²² (Poetry at the Border, 2024)

18 Translation from Galician by the authors: "*They didn't slot us into another project. They let us form the Border Schools team.*"

19 Translation from Galician by the authors: "*Last year there was Andrea, who's not at the school this year. Sergio and Sonia too. The staff teams aren't stable. That makes continuity difficult.*"

20 Translation from Galician by the authors: "*We created materials with the feeling that we were doing something completely new, and we don't know if other teachers are working in the same direction. We need more training in foreign language teaching methodology.*"

21 Translation from Galician by the authors: "*With the information we now have, it'll be much easier to travel on future excursions.*"

22 Translation from Galician by the authors: "*With this project, our schools look more like the society we want to build at the border: more multilingual schools and societies, strengthening current ties in order to communicate more with each other.*"

These accounts reveal how this group of educators experienced and expressed, in a situated and embodied way, the meanings of European cross-border integration and cooperation. The teachers did not simply teach about borders—they revisited their own. This lived experience gives the PEBIF its transformative potential: it is a form of education rooted in local realities and practices, one that respects and promotes diversity, challenges linguistic hierarchies, and embraces the complexity of the subjects who construct it.

Final Considerations

The 'Poetry at the Border' project, analysed in this article, reveals the potential of place-based educational policies as catalysts for lived processes of cross-border integration—processes forged in the everyday life of schools and rooted in the affective, sociocultural and linguistic experiences of borderland communities. By fostering intercomprehension practices, valuing local languages, and building ties among pupils, families, teachers, and the wider community, the PEBIF reaffirms the role of the school as a strategic space for social transformation in territories historically marked by physical, symbolic, and normative borders.

As the analysis has shown, cross-border integration does not occur solely through institutional mechanisms or formal projects; it often manifests implicitly and organically, in the everyday interactions of school life. When teachers activate border memories—such as smuggling, family gatherings, festivals, shared languages, trade, or service exchanges—they become agents of a broader integration, one that

recognises, dignifies, and brings to the forefront the plural linguistic repertoires of those living in these regions. It is this everyday, affective integration—built on listening, relationships, and spontaneous linguistic practices - that sustains and enhances the objectives of the PEBIF.

Nonetheless, significant challenges to the consolidation and continuity of these actions remain. The research revealed structural limitations, such as the high turnover of teaching staff in schools, which hinders the sustainability of medium- and long-term projects. Furthermore, highly symbolic activities — such as meetings between cross-border schools- required considerable collective effort to overcome bureaucratic barriers, highlighting the urgent need for stronger institutional support from municipalities and regional administrations.

Sociolinguistic tensions were also identified, particularly in Galicia, where Spanish continues to dominate in schools, even among Galician-speaking children. Such asymmetries reflect historical and political language disputes, making it difficult for Galician to be fully recognised as a language of instruction and school life. This scenario calls for heightened attention from public policy, especially in terms of ongoing teacher education and the promotion of minoritised languages in border contexts.

The data from this research reinforce the role of the Bilingual and Intercultural Border Schools Programme (PEBIF) as a catalyst for integration in territories historically shaped by division. Operating at the intersection of languages, territories, memories, and educational experiences,

the programme reveals the border as a site of social experience and intellectual imagination (Albuquerque, 2016) — a privileged space for reflecting on integration: its encounters and blends, but also its disputes, conflicts, asymmetries, and differentiations among peoples and nationalities.

In this context, the PEBIF shows that the border can cease to be a limit and instead become a space of creation, encounter, and mutual transformation—and that schools, through the committed work of teachers, students and communities, can play a central role in the daily construction of a more just, plural, and democratic Europe. In doing so, the programme not only responds to cross-border cooperation policies but also reinvents the very idea of integration—starting from grounded, sensitive, and shared educational practices.

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