



POSTCROSSING AT SCHOOL – EDUCATIONAL BENEFITS OF POSTCARDS EXCHANGE

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the research is to analyze the impact of postcrossing activities on students from educational, linguistic, cultural, and emotional perspectives. For this purpose, 10th-grade students of “Gheorghe Șincai” Technological High School from Târgu Mureș participated in an extracurricular activity carried out through a website dedicated to the international exchange of postcards. The students’ perceptions of the activity were identified both through direct observations and through a questionnaire. Although today’s communication context is highly digitalized - dominated by instant messages and online social networks - we believe that postcrossing-type activities bring significant benefits, contributing to the development of students’ transversal skills and to the strengthening of intercultural education.

Keywords: *postcrossing, postcards, transversal skills, intercultural education, interdisciplinarity, extracurricular activity*

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INTRODUCTION

“Postcrossing” is an international initiative that facilitates the exchange of postcards between people from all over the world (postcrossing.com). Launched in 2005 by Portuguese student Paulo Magalhães, the project was born out of his desire to send and receive postcards and from his belief that many others share the same passion for traditional correspondence. The idea of creating a global network dedicated to this hobby quickly took shape, and the platform has enjoyed remarkable success, being recognized not only online but also in the international press (BBC News, 2005; South China Morning Post, 2024; The Times of India, 2022).

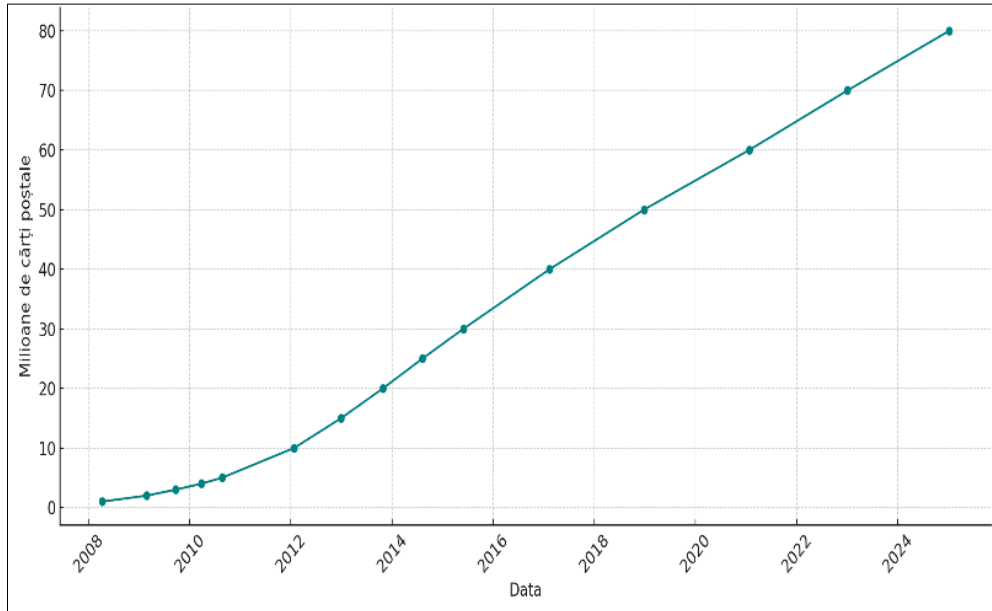
According to the official description on the website, the main objective of the project is to bring people closer through correspondence, with each postcard symbolically contributing to the creation of a “smaller and happier” world. Over time, the project’s webpage has become a virtual space where multiple friendships have formed, it has served as a motivation for learning foreign languages, and it has offered an authentic framework for continuous intercultural exchange among participants from different parts of the world.

According to the statistical information on the project’s website, from the first one million postcards registered in April 2008 to the eighty million recorded in January 2025, the evolution of the number of postcards sent has shown a steady increase over time (Figure 1).



Figure 1

Evolution of the number of postcards recorded on the website

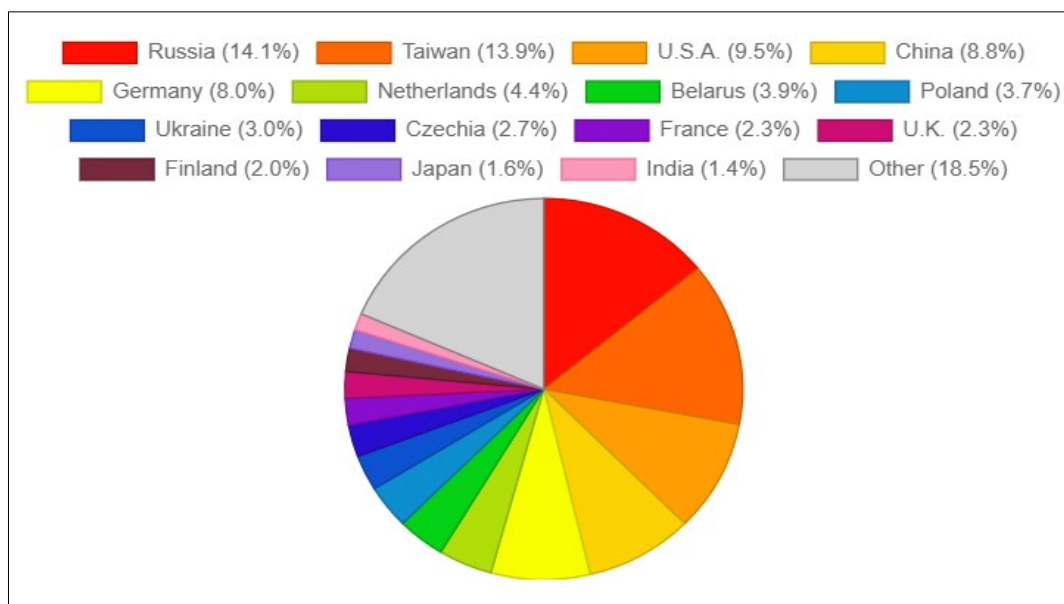


(Source: postcrossing.com)

The website currently has approximately 805,000 members from 209 countries. Women represent the majority, accounting for about 80% of users. The geographical distribution of members by country shows that the largest percentages come from Russia (14.1%), Taiwan (13.9%), the United States (9.5%), China (8.8%), Germany (8%), and others (Figure 2). When divided by country, the country with the highest number of postcards sent is Germany, with 17.8% of all postcards sent through the platform (Figure 3).

Figure 2

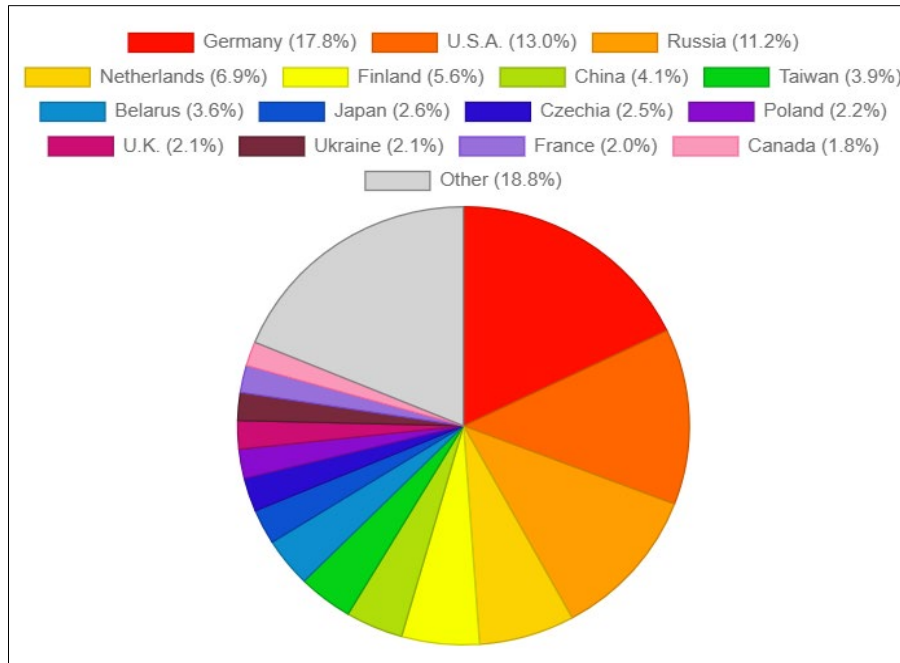
Geographical distribution of members



(Source: postcrossing.com)



Figure 3
Geographic distribution of sent postcards



(Source: postcrossing.com)

Postcrossing is not merely an exchange of postcards, but a practice with educational, social, and humanitarian implications. The exchange of postcards between strangers functions as a modern form of gift-giving, in which the social and symbolic value of the gesture matters more than the material value of the object sent (Salnikov & Salnikova, 2025). The forum page for the project features many school activities that make use of the site. Project members are involved in environmental protection initiatives, such as planting a pine forest in Portugal (to replace a burned forest), or in humanitarian causes, such as assisting the population after the 2008 Sichuan earthquake (through the Red Cross NGO). Additionally, the site features a section dedicated to environmental protection methods, presenting ways for members to reduce their carbon footprint: using postcards made of recycled cardboard, traveling to post offices by bicycle, avoiding envelopes or reusing used envelopes, and more.

In Romania, postcards were widely used in geography lessons during the communist period to introduce students to various locations around the world and to illustrate processes and phenomena. Didactic literature in geography notes some negative aspects of using small illustrations, such as postcards. It was considered ineffective for teachers to present small illustrations in front of the class, as only students in the front rows could observe them properly (Dulamă, 1996). The method in which the illustration, namely the postcard, is passed from one student to another was considered time-consuming (10-15 minutes). In this case, the image is not analyzed and interpreted simultaneously by all students, the lesson is interrupted, and students' attention becomes dispersed (Dulamă, 1996). Didacticians recommended using devices through which images could be projected onto a screen, thereby avoiding the previously mentioned problems (Dulamă, 1996). To prevent loss of student attention, they also suggested using 5-6 images in a single activity and directing students' focus through questions, so that they could understand the essential aspects represented in the image (Dulamă, 1996). Didactic works propose learning activities based on photographs, including: literary description of a landscape (Dulamă, 2008a,b,c); scientific description of a location (deciduous forest, human settlement, fluvial relief) (Dulamă, 2001); landscape analysis (Dulamă, 2010a,b; 2011); identification of photographic planes, environmental components, their arrangement and



characteristics (Dulamă, 2002); identification of variable and invariant elements in the represented space; creating a collection of photographs; making a photo collage on a specific theme (Dulamă, 2001).

This research analyzes a Postcrossing-type activity from the perspective of the educational and formative benefits it brings to students, as well as its contribution to the development of transversal skills and the stimulation of cultural openness. The objective of the study is to investigate the extent to which students, belonging to a generation deeply immersed in the digital environment, show openness toward analog communicative activities – opposite to digital ones – which are less common today, such as writing and sending postcards. Composing and writing short messages, specific to this type of correspondence, is integrated into an extracurricular educational activity with an interdisciplinary character.

Following the actual implementation of the activity – the sending of postcards and the recording of those received – data were collected through continuous direct observation and a final questionnaire. These provided a clear picture of the educational benefits, as well as the difficulties encountered and possible directions for improving the activity in the future

METHODOLOGY

Participants. This study involved 19 students aged 16-17 years (11 girls and 8 boys) from the 10th grade, “Services” profile, specializing in “Banqueting Organizer,” at the “Gheorghe Șincai” Technological High School in Târgu Mureș.

Teaching activity

The activity was carried out over several sessions throughout the 2024–2025 school year, as an extracurricular program, under the guidance of the French and Geography teachers. During a series of meetings between September 2024 and May 2025, students were introduced to the Postcrossing project, activated their accounts on the website, selected postcards, composed messages, and sent the postcards. In the next phase, the arrival of postcards at their destinations was verified, and the received postcards were reported. In the final stages of the activity, meetings were organized with the students to discuss both the postcards they had sent and those they had received. They also located on a map the places to which they had sent and from which they had received postcards, and the activity was analyzed.

The way the website is used is simple and intuitive. To send a postcard, it is necessary to register on the site with a username, a brief personal description, and an address. It should be noted that while the username and description are visible to anyone accessing the site, the address is private and can only be seen by the person assigned to send a postcard. After creating an account, users access the “send a postcard” option, and an address is randomly assigned along with a code. The format of the code consists of two letters corresponding to the country’s acronym followed by a series of four digits (for example, RO-1234). When sending the postcard, the assigned code must be written on it, as this code allows the postcard to be tracked on the site. When the recipient receives the postcard, they will register it on the website (“register a postcard”) using this code. From that moment, the sender’s address becomes eligible for exchange, entering the pool of addresses that will be assigned to receive postcards. In practice, any person who sends a postcard will, in turn, receive a postcard from another user of the site.

Data collection methods and instruments

During the activity, feedback from students was collected through direct observations, discussions, question-and-answer sessions, and an activity evaluation questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of 15 questions (5 open-ended and 10 with two or more possible answers) (Appendix 1). It was administered in written format, and after data collection, the analysis and interpretation of the responses were also discussed with the students. All students involved in the activity responded to the questionnaire, and their answers were recorded anonymously, respecting data confidentiality and research ethics (Magdaș, 2018).

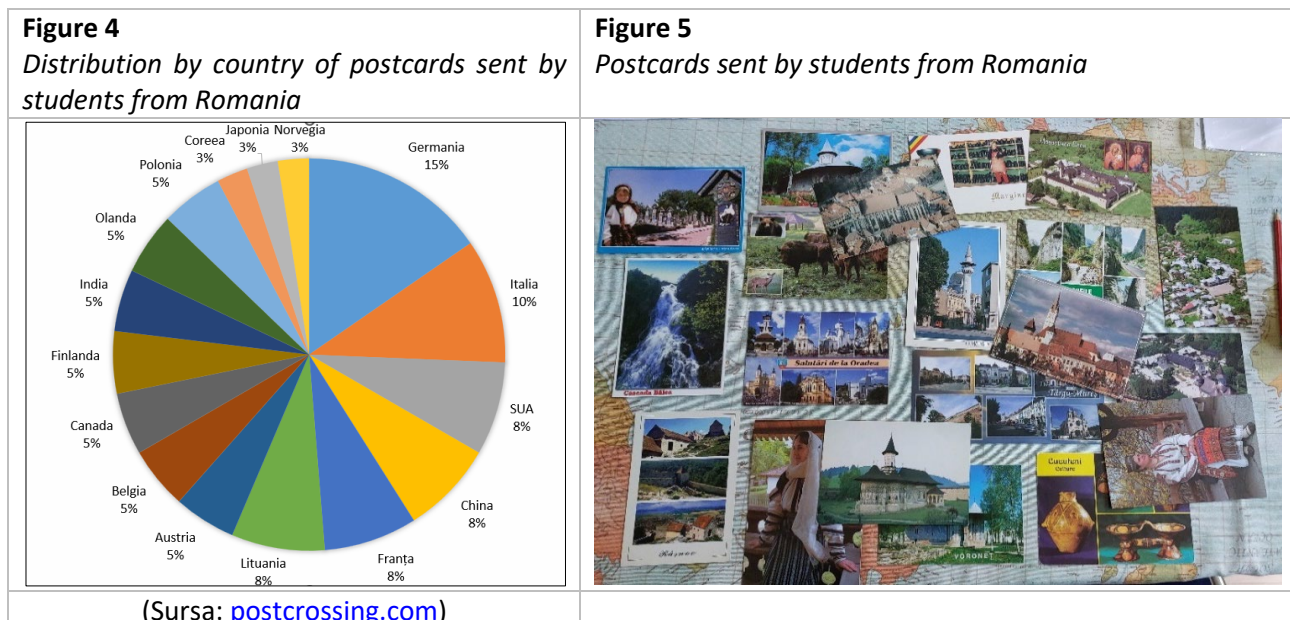
The results of the activity were disseminated on the high school’s Instagram page and its blog (Liceul Tehnologic Șincai, 2025a,b). The activity concluded with the publication of the results on the school’s



Instagram page (<https://www.instagram.com/liceultehnologicsincai/>) and on its blog (<https://liceulsincai.wordpress.com/>).

RESULTS

The recipients of the postcards written by students were from 15 countries. The largest number of postcards were sent to: Germany (15 postcards), the USA (5 postcards), Austria, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, and Japan (4 each), and India, Portugal, France, and Poland (3 each) (Figure 4). Students chose to send postcards featuring images representative of Romania, including both natural tourist attractions (such as Bicz Gorge, Bâlea Waterfall and the Bucegi Mountains) and man-made landmarks (such as the Palace of Culture in Târgu Mureș, the Mosque in Constanța, Râșnov Fortress, and the Merry Cemetery in Săpânța) (Figure 5). They also selected postcards depicting traditional elements, such as folk costumes and ceramics.



Students received postcards from 16 countries: Germany (6 postcards), Italy (4 postcards), USA (from the states of Kansas, Wisconsin, and Hawaii), France, Lithuania, China (3 postcards each), the Netherlands, India, Austria, Finland, Belgium, Poland, Canada (2 postcards each), and one postcard each from Japan, South Korea, and Norway (Figures 6 and 7). The postcards received by students in Romania featured natural tourist attractions (caves, volcanoes) and man-made landmarks (palaces, cathedrals, museums), as well as paintings, natural landscapes, drawings, and messages or quotes.

The messages written by students on the postcards were either general in nature or personalized according to the preferences indicated by their correspondents on the website. Thus, the messages included: traditional recipes (four cases), the last book read (two cases), favorite movie (three cases), a nearby tourist attraction (three cases), a hobby (two cases), the air temperature (four cases), and information about their hometown or local culture (ten cases).

From the postcards they received, students learned specific information about the senders' locations (in most cases), their lifestyles (two cases), depicted landmarks (six cases), hobbies (five cases), weather (five cases), favorite books (three cases), and spoken languages (one case).

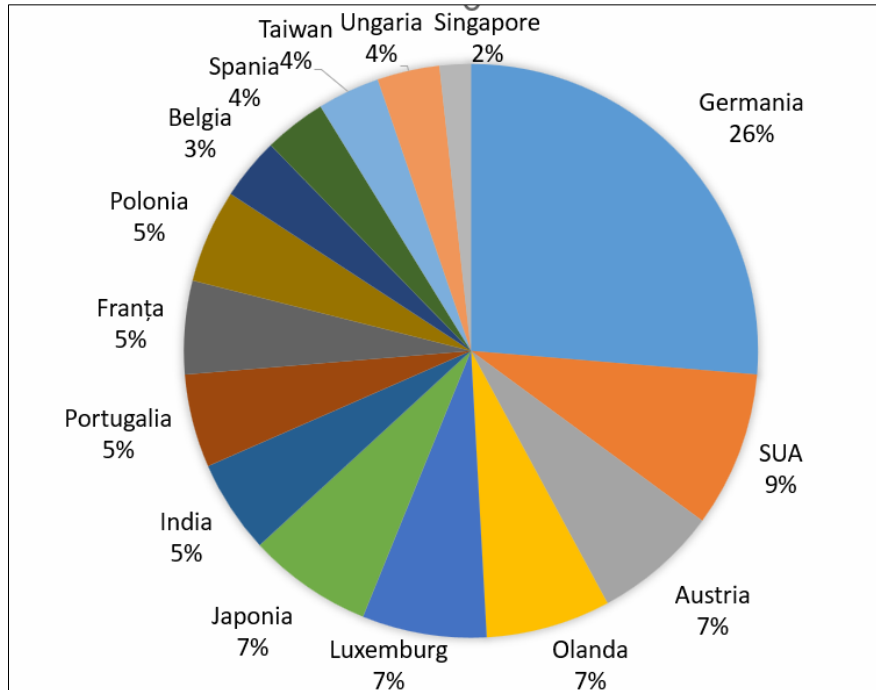
Students' responses to the questionnaire showed that the majority (67%) had never sent postcards before this project (Question 1). Regarding the attractiveness of the activity, 80% found it "interesting", while 10% said it was "very interesting" (Question 2).



The components of the activity that students mentioned as their favorites were writing messages to people from other countries and receiving postcards. Some also highlighted the element of surprise or curiosity related to the messages received and the design of the postcards (Question 3).

Figure 6

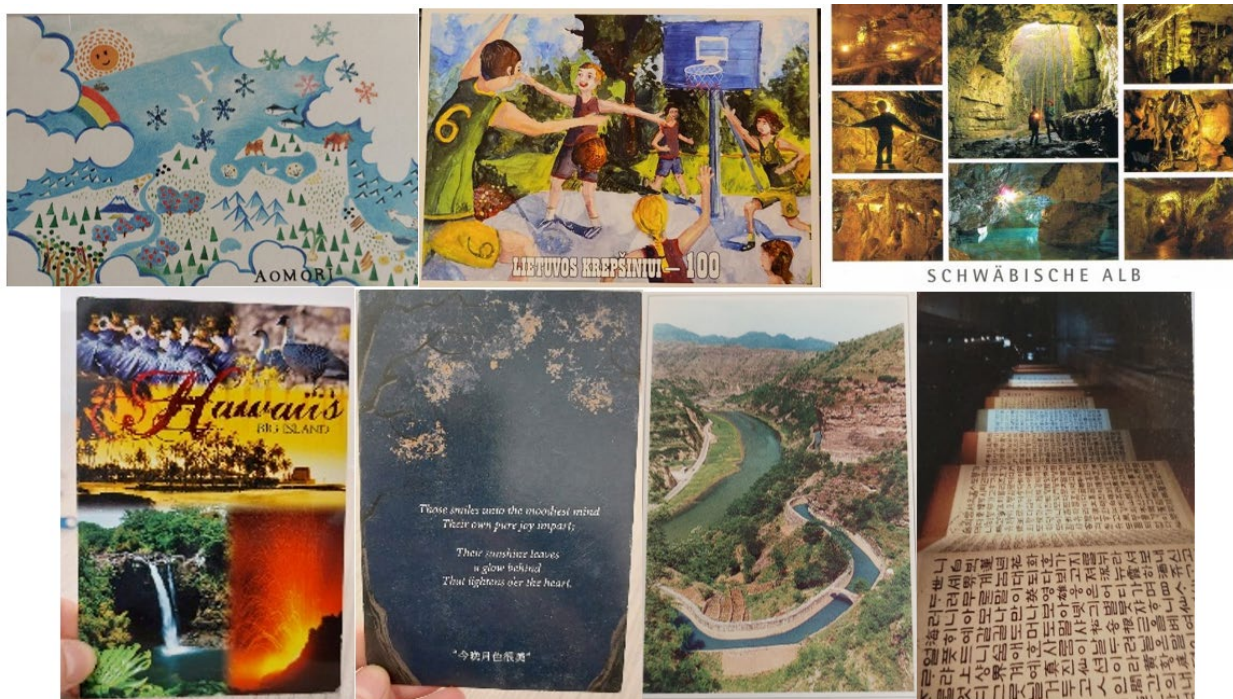
Distribution by country of postcards received by students from Romania



(Source: our questionnaire; see Appendix A.)

Figure 7

Collage of some of the postcards received by students from Romania





Students also reported encountering difficulties, the most common being finding appropriate replies to the messages received (mentioned by 30% of students), managing time for writing and sending postcards (20%), and composing the message (15%). Other difficulties mentioned included lack of inspiration, limited proficiency in English, and uncertainty in expression (Question 4).

Regarding intercultural learning (Question 5), the majority of students (70%) answered affirmatively when asked if they had gained new knowledge about other countries or cultures. A smaller percentage (30%) indicated that they had not learned anything new or were unsure.

Among the aspects mentioned by students who reported learning something new (Question 6) were: information about local customs, traditional holidays, specific foods, notable monuments, or common expressions in other languages. Some students also noted differences in communication style or the politeness of correspondents from other cultures.

Writing a message in English or French to a stranger (Question 7) was perceived as very easy by 25% of students, quite easy by 58%, while 17% reported experiencing difficulties.

A high percentage of students reported having received postcards that surprised them or that they especially liked (Questions 8 and 9). The reasons certain postcards were considered special included: artistic design, unusual landscapes, warm or original messages, beautiful handwriting, and interesting stamps. Students also noted that some messages contained personalized wishes, hand-drawn illustrations, or words in the sender's native language, adding emotional value and authenticity to the experience.

Regarding personal development, 70% stated that they had learned useful life skills (such as responsibility and cultural curiosity), while 30% responded "probably," indicating a significant formative impact (Question 10).

Regarding the geographical component of the activity (Questions 11 and 12), 80% of students located all the involved countries on the map, while the remaining 20% located only some of them. The most stimulating geographical aspects were cities, tourist attractions, and cultural symbols. Open-ended responses mentioning traditional foods and daily customs indicated an overlap between geography and culture.

According to students' responses to questions related to future perspectives (Questions 13 and 14), the majority of participants (80%) would like to repeat the experience, while 20% answered "maybe", with no one explicitly rejecting the idea. Most students had no suggestions for improving the activity, indicating a high level of satisfaction. However, a few specific suggestions included creating their own postcards, adding a drawing, or speeding up the process of receiving postcards. Open-ended comments (Question 15) were generally positive, highlighting enthusiasm for the activity and appreciation for the opportunity to communicate with young people from other cultures.

DISCUSSION

Geographical distribution of postcards

Students sent postcards to 15 countries and received postcards from 16 countries. These countries are spread across 4 continents: Europe (Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, France, Poland, Italy, Lithuania, Belgium, Finland and Norway), Asia (Japan, China, India and South Korea) and North America (USA and Canada).

From direct observations, no particular country was preferred by students, although the greatest enthusiasm was shown for non-European countries. Germany was the most frequently encountered country in their correspondence, being both the country to which the most postcards were sent (15) and the country from which the most postcards were received (6), due to the high number of Postcrossing users in Germany.

Students' perceptions of the activity and its outcomes

Analysis of the students' questionnaire responses (Appendix 1) provided a clear picture of how they perceived this activity, as well as the educational benefits and areas for improvement. Regarding the level of engagement in completing open-ended responses, a reluctance to provide detailed answers was observed, with most students preferring brief formulations.



The novelty of the activity was confirmed by the fact that, for the majority of students, this was their first time sending a postcard (Question 1). The experience was generally perceived positively; since only 10% reported being indifferent, this suggests a high level of engagement and curiosity (Question 2).

Students' answers regarding their favorite part of the activity (Question 3) reflect a genuine interest in written communication with people from other countries, indicating openness to intercultural experiences. The fact that they most enjoyed writing the messages and receiving postcards shows that the activity was both engaging and motivating.

The difficulties mentioned (Question 4), particularly related to message composition or time management, suggest that such activities require a certain level of planning and personal expression. This can be seen as an argument for integrating similar activities into the educational process, as they help develop transversal skills such as organization, clear expression, empathy, and time management.

The potential of Postcrossing-type activities to facilitate intercultural learning and increase students' receptiveness to diversity was confirmed by their responses regarding the identification of new cultural elements (Questions 5 and 6). This component of the activity can be utilized more deliberately in teaching approaches focused on developing intercultural skills. In contrast, unclear responses may indicate that such activities ought to be accompanied by guided reflection or discussions about the messages received, to foster better cultural understanding.

Regarding students' perception of the difficulty level in writing a message in English or French (Question 7), the high percentage of students who found composing the message easy (a total of 83%) suggests a satisfactorily functional level of linguistic competence in both English and French. It also indicates familiarity with written expression in foreign languages, likely developed through both school contexts and informal digital environments, reflecting a good level of comfort in using foreign languages in real-life situations. The difficulties reported by 17% of students were both linguistic - related to idea formulation and personal expression in a foreign language - and affective, linked to a lack of confidence in addressing a stranger.

Personalized interaction and the element of surprise were met with enthusiasm (Questions 8 and 9). Students appreciated the postcards based on the personalization of the messages and the quality of the graphic details, which stimulated their curiosity and enabled an emotional connection with unknown people from different parts of the world.

The high percentage (70%) of students who stated that they developed life skills (Question 10) indicates that students are aware of the educational value of this activity. The proportion of students who gave a more reserved response ("probably" - 30%) may reflect a lower level of engagement in the activity or the fact that some of the skills acquired are not fully recognized or consciously perceived by the students.

Students' responses to the questions regarding geographical content (Questions 11 and 12) confirm the potential of the activity to support transdisciplinary learning, particularly in the field of geography, through learning tasks such as locating countries on a map, identifying and locating cities and tourist attractions, or highlighting representative physical-geographical features (mountains, lakes, rivers).

Students' willingness to participate in similar activities again (Question 13) reflects the attractiveness of the experience and indicates that the activity was not necessarily perceived as a traditional school task, but rather as an opportunity to learn in a less rigid setting. The suggestions received from students (Question 14) show that they wish to contribute to the smoother execution of the activity and are capable of genuine involvement. Open-ended comments confirmed that the activity generated enthusiasm and motivation for intercultural communication (Question 15).

Difficulties

Although the activity received positive feedback from students, several challenges arose during its implementation that affected the project's flow and coherence. One of the most frequent issues was time management, as some students delayed sending or registering their postcards. Additionally, a lack of experience in correctly completing data, identification codes, or using the online platform caused minor confusion and required additional intervention from the coordinating teachers.



On the linguistic level, some students were hesitant to write texts in foreign languages due to uncertainty in expression, and difficulties related to handwriting - especially in a context dominated by digital communication - were evident. Moreover, the motivation of some participants decreased over time, either due to the absence of immediate rewards or delays in receiving postcards from abroad, leading to unequal engagement within the group. Finally, external factors such as postal losses or delays, as well as logistical challenges in obtaining postcards and stamps, added to the range of obstacles encountered, highlighting the need for careful planning and continuous support to ensure the smooth execution of the activity.

Educational benefits of the activity

Starting from the premise that the postcrossing project has high educational potential due to the cognitive and affective processes involved in writing and receiving a postcard, a number of educational values of participating in the project were identified through the conducted activity. Without claiming to provide an exhaustive classification, these benefits can be grouped, from the perspective of key competencies and curricular areas, into several categories: cognitive and linguistic, geographical and cultural, affective and emotional, and creative and personal.

Cognitive and linguistic benefits

Learning foreign languages. The desire to communicate effectively with recipients from other countries encourages students to improve their vocabulary and expression in foreign languages. Students develop their writing and composition skills in a foreign language; in this case, they corresponded in French and English. By observing similarities between French and Romanian, students became interested in the shared vocabulary of Romance languages. These observations prompted them to ask questions about equivalent terms in languages such as Italian or Spanish and to explore the etymology of certain Romanian words whose origins were previously unknown. For example, they analyzed words like „familie” (family), „voiaj” (voyage), „suvener” (souvenir), „sejur” (stay), and the verb „a vizita” (to visit). Additionally, translating received messages or rendering texts simultaneously in their native language and a foreign language represents a valuable exercise that develops linguistic mediation and meaning-transfer skills. Exposure to different language registers helped students understand not only the language but also specific cultural nuances. It is also noteworthy that some recipients include greetings in their native languages or provide information about their language. For instance, in a postcard received from India, the sender mentioned that the local language is Malayalam, noting that its name is a palindrome.

Improvement of handwriting. Although it may seem like a minor detail - especially considering that the physical act of writing is not the primary focus of the activity - composing these messages still reinforces the importance of handwriting and its ability to convey additional, indirect messages (Chaudhari & Thakkar, 2019). Handwriting contributes to the development of fine motor skills, attention to detail, clarity of expression, and an emotional connection with the act of writing. It also helps create a neural environment conducive to memory and information encoding (Askvik et al., 2000). Students made efforts to write legibly, neatly, and clearly, paying close attention to the visual appearance of the text. They became aware that the message communicated does not depend solely on the content of the idea but also on the way it is visually presented.

Improvement of written expression in foreign languages is supported both by the development of a personal writing style and by practicing coherence in message formulation. Writing short, clear, and personal messages creates an authentic context for language practice. For example, Antonia shared that she was excited because it was the first time she wrote a message in English to a real person.

Synthetic thinking. The limited space on the back of a postcard forces students to express their ideas clearly, concisely, and effectively, a process that enhances their capacity for synthesis (Mercedes, 2010).

Geographical and cultural benefits

Building mental maps. By associating the countries and cities from which postcards were received and to which they were sent with their locations on a map, students develop mental representations of the world (National Geographic Education, 2024).



Strengthening geography-specific skills. Locating cities, countries, and regions on postcards, as well as identifying physical-geographical features mentioned by senders (most users provide geographic references, such as a well-known nearby city, a river, a mountain range, etc.), helps develop students' geographical orientation and interest in geography. Students were excited to discover connections with their geography lessons. For example, Raluca received a postcard from Hawaii that featured a physical map of the archipelago on the back, and she had never seen such a detailed map of this well-known area. Sonia discovered that the sender had added two stickers with symbols of China: bamboo and a panda. Dalia received a postcard in which she identified karst landforms.

Accessing geographical information about the environment from which the postcards originate: for example, some senders include the outdoor temperature on the postcard. As a result, recipients learned that in Vienna, in April, the weather was sunny with a temperature of 10°C, or that in Aomori (Japan) in February it was 4°C.

Cultural openness and development of cultural sensitivity (Shelestova et al., 2024). Students had the opportunity to learn about other traditions, customs, holidays and lifestyles through the descriptions included in the postcard texts, as well as through the images on the postcards and the stamps.

Promotion of local and national identity. When students send postcards, they have the chance to talk about their country, city, or culture, developing local pride and skills in representing their own community. Through sending postcards featuring images representative of Romania and writing texts on the postcards, students become ambassadors of their culture.

Affective and motivational benefits

Stimulating curiosity. Each postcard can spark a new question or research inquiry, serving as a starting point for exploring the geography, history, or culture of a given place. For example, one postcard featured the Red Flag Canal in China, an impressive engineering achievement that also symbolizes devotion to party ideology.

Developing empathy. Students come into contact with people from diverse backgrounds and cultures, learning to respect diversity and to be receptive to different ways of life and modes of expression.

Increasing motivation for learning. The activity is practical, authentic, and enjoyable, encouraging students to want to learn more and explore further.

Creative and personal benefits

Stimulating creativity. Creativity is fostered through choosing a postcard, composing the message, and decorating the postcard (students can add stickers or small drawings). Moreover, students can choose to send a postcard they have made themselves.

Activating Imagination. Interacting with people from other cultures challenges students to imagine different places, lifestyles, and perspectives.

Developing Responsibility. A sense of responsibility is cultivated through sending a postcard, which requires following rules, respecting deadlines, adhering to project guidelines, and maintaining a moral commitment to other community members. In this respect, most students were able to meet the requirements easily, although some encountered minor difficulties..

CONCLUSIONS

The postcrossing activity conducted with one of the 10th-grade classes of "Gheorghe Șincai" Technological High School from Târgu Mureș demonstrated that postcard exchange can become an authentic, effective, and enjoyable educational tool, even in a highly digitalized era. Far from being an outdated exercise, correspondence through postcards proved to be a valuable opportunity for students' intellectual and personal development, stimulating their cognitive and linguistic skills, as well as cultural openness, empathy, and motivation for learning.

The practical, international, and emotional dimension of the project transformed writing a message into an activity that impacts critical thinking, written expression, and awareness of one's cultural identity.



Students became both active recipients of other cultures and ambassadors of their own community. Moreover, this experience facilitated the development of transversal skills—responsibility, creativity, autonomy—that contribute to shaping the profile of a high school graduate.

Integrating such activities into the Romanian educational environment, whether during lessons or as extracurricular activities, can support the modernization of teaching and bring students closer to learning through interactive, authentic, and relevant methods for today's world. The postcrossing project reminds us that sometimes the simplest gestures - such as sending a postcard - can have the most profound educational effects. At the "Gheorghe Șincai" Technological High School, we aim in the future both to continue and expand this educational project (by including new classes) and to organize postcard exchange activities in other formats, further exploring the benefits of this type of initiative.

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Appendix A

Evaluation questionnaire – Postcrossing at school

This form aims to collect impressions, opinions, and suggestions related to the activity “Postcrossing at school”, carried out at the “Gheorghe Șincai” Technological High School from Târgu Mureș. Your responses will help us evaluate the impact of the project and improve future activities. Please answer honestly — all responses are confidential and will be used solely for educational purposes.

1. Have you ever sent a postcard before this project?

- Yes
- No

2. How did you find the activity of sending and receiving postcards?

- Very interesting
- Interesting
- I was indifferent
- Boring
- I didn't like it at all

3. Which part of the activity did you like the most?

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4. Which part of the activity did you find difficult?

- Writing the message
- Managing time for writing, sending, using the platform, etc.
- Finding appropriate replies to the messages received



○ Others:

5. Did you learn anything new about other countries or cultures?

- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure

6. If you answered YES to the previous question, please specify what you think you have learned.

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7. How did you find writing a message in English/French to a stranger?

- Very easy
- Quite easy
- Difficult
- Very difficult
- I wasn't able to do it

8. Have you received postcards that surprised you or that you especially liked?

- Yes
- No

9. If yes, from which country and what did you like about them?

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10. Do you think you have learned useful life skills (e.g., responsibility, respect, cultural curiosity)?

- Yes
- Probably
- I haven't learned anything

11. Did you locate on a map the countries from which you received or to which you sent postcards?

- Yes, all of them
- Yes, some of them
- No, but I would have liked to
- No

12. Which geographical aspects sparked your curiosity the most?

- The geographical location of the countries
- The landforms and climate
- The capital and major cities
- Cultural and tourist symbols
- Other

13. Would you like to participate in such activities again in the future?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

14. What would you improve about this activity for the future?

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15. Any other comments or ideas you would like to share?

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