



## Case Study 3

### Bridges and walls – barriers to future planning

In high school, in a small town in southern Macedonia, the moment to choose a further educational path was approaching. In the fourth grade, many students were already planning their studies or their career paths. Among them was Natalija – a quiet, talented girl with a passion for biology and environmental protection. She dreamed of studying ecology and of working for an NGO focused on sustainable development. However, as graduation approached, she increasingly heard that her dreams were “not very practical.”



Her parents urged her to choose something “more reliable.– “Why do you need ecology? You'd better go into economics, you'll have a stable profession,” her mother was saying repeatedly. Her classmates were planning to go to a big city, but Natalija felt her financial situation would not allow her to take such a step. In addition, she often heard from friends that studying ecology is “fun for rich idealists.”

With each subsequent conversation, she felt that an invisible wall was growing around her, built of other people's expectations, fears, and stereotypes. She stopped talking about her plans. “There is no point in explaining that I want to do something important. It's better not to lean out,” she thought.



Co-funded by  
the European Union



Fundacija Energia dla Evropy



During the career counseling classes, the teacher, Mrs. Monika, asked the students to prepare a "map of bridges and walls" outlining their future plans. Everyone was supposed to write down what supports them and what blocks them. Natalija was reluctant to approach the task at first, but in the end she wrote:

**Bridges:**

- passion for nature,
- good results in biology,
- support from the educator,
- knowledge of English,
- participation in a project about green professions.

**Walls:**

- lack of faith in one's own abilities,
- opinions of others,
- financial limitations,
- fear of failure,
- lack of examples that it is "possible".

When discussing the task results, Mrs. Monika asked, "Which of the walls is the largest?" "I think it's because I don't believe I can change anything. That my vote counts," Natalija replied quietly.

Then the teacher told the story of her former student, who started in the same place – in a small town, without money, but with a great passion for ecology. Today, she works at a foundation focused on water protection and conducts workshops in schools. "Sometimes the bridge you need doesn't exist yet. You have to be the one to build it," she concluded.

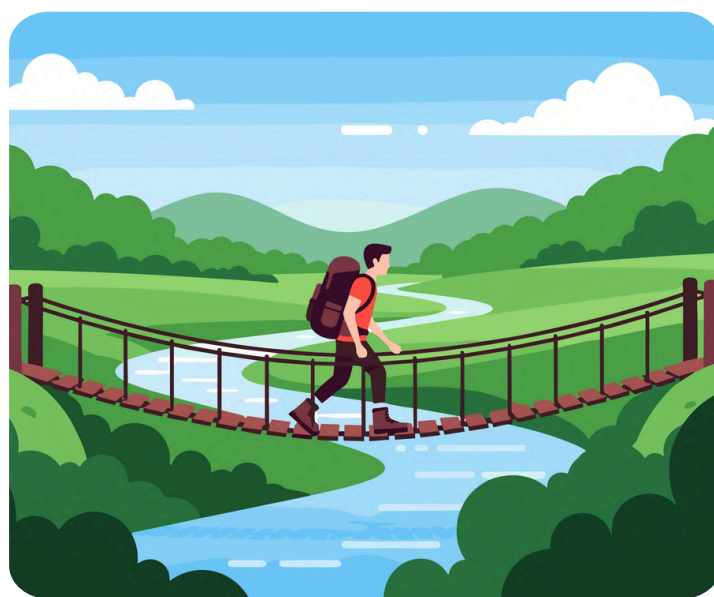


After these words, Natalija began researching scholarship opportunities, volunteering, and youth projects. It turned out that the local authority organizes the "Youth for the Climate" competition and accepts ideas for environmental initiatives in the region. Natalija submitted the project "Green Corner" – a school garden with nectar-rich plants. The project received a distinction, yet what mattered most to Natalija was not the award itself, but the newfound confidence that her idea could succeed.

A few months later, she received a scholarship for an educational trip under the Erasmus+ program. Upon her return, she said: "The most difficult thing in planning the future is not the lack of possibilities, but the conviction that we do not influence it. When I started building my bridges, it turned out that many walls existed only in my head."

Her story became an inspiration for other students. The school, inspired by Natalija's activities, introduced a series of meetings, "Bridges – not walls, where students and graduates talked about their choices, mistakes, and successes. Teachers noticed that young people began to speak more boldly about their plans and dreams – including unusual ones.

Natalija got into her dream studies in environmental protection. Today, a few years later, she works in an organization that conducts environmental education and supports young people in discovering their own paths. She often repeats to her students: "Don't be afraid to be different. Diversity is not an obstacle to building the future, but its foundation."



### Questions for reflection and discussion

1. What stereotypes appeared in this story and what could they result from?
2. What caused Bartek to change his attitude?
3. What intercultural competences did he develop during his internship?
4. Do you encounter similar stereotypes in your environment? How do you react to them?
5. How can a school or teacher help students confront stereotypes with reality?
6. What educational activities could help young people develop curiosity instead of prejudice?



Funded by the EU. The views and opinions expressed are those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of the European Union or the Foundation for the Development of Education. Neither the European Union nor the Foundation for the Development of Education are responsible for them.

All results developed within the project „Building Community Links” are made available under open licenses (CC BY-SA 4.0 DEED). They can be used free of charge and without restrictions. Copying or processing these materials in whole or in part without the author’s consent is prohibited. In the case of using the results, it is necessary to indicate the source of financing and its authors.