



EMPOWERING STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION

| Policy Road Map Portugal

START THE
CHANGE!

IMPRESSUM

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Empowering Students' Participation – Policy Road Map Portugal

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**START THE
CHANGE!**

PROJECT "Start the Change – creating a generation of change makers through intercultural education and volunteering" (Contract no.: 612200-EPP-1-2019-1-HR-EPPKA3-IPI-SOC-IN) Erasmus+ Key Action 3: Support for policy reform Action Type: Social inclusion through education, training and youth Zagreb, 2022

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BACKGROUND

About the project

The Forum for Freedom in Education together with the partner organizations: INOVA+ (Portugal), MCEC (North Macedonia), NEPC (Croatia), SIRIUS (Belgium), the Ivan Meštrović Primary School (Croatia) and Agrupamento de Escolas Josë Estêvão (Portugal) and the Nikola Karev State Municipal School (North Macedonia) is implementing the project Start the Change within the Erasmus+ program (K3, Social Inclusion). The aim of the project is to strengthen the resilience of youth by supporting them to be healthy, self-confident, fulfilled, broadminded individuals who create and foster healthy relationships, develop their abilities and be actively engaged in their community regardless of their backgrounds and possible challenges they face. Providing opportunities for young people to express their own world perspective and experience being heard and seen by their teachers as well as supported in initiating creative and innovative projects through which they can express their own talents, values and potential for growth strengthens their resilience and reduces the risks of manipulation, extreme attitudes, relationships and attitudes that are harmful.

Therefore, the first cluster of the START THE CHANGE project investigated the perspectives of young people themselves on how they perceive their school community, their position in it and whether they are being listened to and seen or not. These findings were the starting point for developing the second cluster of START THE CHANGE materials and training curricula for teachers and parents to empower them to create positive changes in their schools and learning spaces, together with young people. In the third cluster, the START THE CHANGE project seeks to empower young people to create and lead with the support of their teachers, voluntary initiatives that will contribute to solving the problems that were previously identified by young people. While in the fourth cluster, the partner organizations in cooperation with different stakeholders in 3 countries and at the EU level are developing further recommendations for strengthening the students' voice and participation in their schools and educational systems at the policy level.

The key focus of all clusters of the START THE CHANGE project is the promotion of the students' voice and participation as a growing number of researchers claim that it supports the opening up of spaces and capacities for marginalized youth to play key roles in the positive changes in schools and learning spaces, support more socially just school environments and ensure that disenfranchised youth are included in the decision-making processes and foster positive youth development around agency and civic engagement.

Background

In today's reality and facing the actual school challenges, inclusion is an answer, but also a purpose (Cruz, 2021; Martins et al., 2018). To achieve it, it seems necessary to support more socially just school environments, ensure that youth are included in the decision-making processes and foster positive youth development around agency and civic engagement. Students have to be able to express their own world perspective and their experience has to be heard and seen by teachers and policymakers and they need to be supported to initiate creative and innovative projects through which they can express their own talents, values and potential for growth (Vranješević & Dermish, 2020). In these processes, students will be able to foster democratic and active participation in their contexts.

Today empowering students' participation at the school and community level assumes, more than ever (after lockdowns, during the war and social and economic crisis all over Europe), a major necessity. Enhancing individual civic attitude (citizen identity; individual autonomy; human rights), interpersonal relationships (communication; dialogue) and social and intercultural relationships (democracy; sustainable human development; globalization and interdependence; peace and conflict management) are skills that not only

foster human development but can also help to change the way people connect, see each other and become more empathetic (Seixas, 2020).

Concerning the importance of active citizenship, the Council of Europe (2016), the United Nations Organization (ONU, 1990; 2015) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2014; 2017) have released information and drawn attention to the need for all countries to create ecological strategies to empower youth, as a preventive and timely approach. Specifically, UNESCO (2017) revealed the urgent need to shift our lifestyles and the way we think and act regarding global issues, such as climate change. UNESCO (2017) suggested that education is the stand-alone goal and, simultaneously, a means for attending to all the other sustainable development goals. To do so, it is important to give students the power and responsibility to participate in a democratic society (Mager & Nowak, 2012). The need to ensure that children's views are expressed freely has already been disseminated in the United Nations Organization Convention on the Rights of the Child (ONU, 1990). In this Convention concerning the children's rights-based perspective, it is mentioned that children must be provided with the opportunity to be heard, and to develop their own participation and skills regarding peace, tolerance, the equality of sexes, and friendship among all people.

Finally, focusing on the social inclusion of young people, helping them to develop self-confidence, a sense of identity and belonging, and teaching them how to think critically are among the most important elements of successfully preventing youth radicalization. Valuing and providing opportunities for participation and the raising of students' voices are key to increasing the sense of belonging of students and developing their self-confidence, especially for those in vulnerable situations.

In Portugal, the reality of students' participation shows that there are several national associations and councils, however, students' participation only involves being informed and consulted. The same kind of participation occurs at a regional and local level, whereas the students participate in parliaments, students' councils and associations, where they are informed and consulted but don't have the right to vote. The students' participation is acknowledged as important but there are no developed mechanisms to involve them in the decision-making processes. It was also noted that there is a need to enhance the quality of communication between students and teachers, as well as to develop critical thinking and to co-create knowledge in the cooperation process with their teachers.



PROCESS (METHODOLOGY)

In order to acknowledge the students' voices in reality, the NEPC in cooperation with SIRIUS, conducted a background desk analysis and literature overview on the topic of students' participation that resulted in a paper authored by Jelena Vranješević and Mialy Dermish entitled "Students' participation: Policy and Practice to Start the Change".

Moreover, in order to get a better overview of the status of students' participation in the partner countries information was collected from partners about the policies and practices of students' participation, at national, local/regional and school levels. This data collection was relevant to inform policymakers about the countries' idiosyncrasies, as occurred in the first policy lab. After the needs assessment, the project focused on creating training materials for upscaling good practices and releasing publications that support the practices (with teachers, parents and students).

Policy Lab 2 took place in Zagreb, Croatia and was focused on the students' participation towards an inclusive and democratic society. It was conducted with the logistical support of the Forum for Freedom in Education.

Policy Lab 2 followed up on the knowledge acquired and experiences shared in the first policy event. The main objective was to start the development of national Policy Roadmaps where each country could reflect on policy issues. For this purpose, each country developed recommendations for policy actions to help in overcoming the insufficient participation of the students in the decision-making process in their school life and governance at all levels, with a special focus on the potential for student participation in improving inclusion and combating the negative effects of student disengagement. The recommendations elaborated were afterwards integrated into the present document, taking into consideration the Portuguese context and evidence-based strategies to promote students' social and emotional skills as well as democratic participation.

Overall policy goal

The central role of the school in the development of children and young people has been recognized around the world (Eccles & Roeser, 2015). Nowadays, a school takes on not only the function of teaching and promoting academic skills but also incorporates the goals of socialization, the promotion of ethical and civic behaviour and socio-emotional development (Cruz, 2021). This reality is currently reflected in Portuguese legal documents, namely in the Profile of Students Leaving Compulsory Schooling (Martins et al., 2017), the Inclusive Education decree law (DL 54/2018) and the National Citizenship Education Strategy (República Portuguesa, 2017) as well as in international legal documents created by the Council of Europe (2016), the United Nations Organization (ONU, 2015) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2014; 2017).

Today, advocating for participation and democracy is a right, an aim, and an educative purpose. Along with these demands, a school also aims to be more and more inclusive and increasing demands are being made to promote opportunities for citizens to participate in social life and strengthen fundamental values such as freedom, equality, tolerance and human rights (UNESCO, 2017). Following this line of thought, it is necessary to start the change to acknowledge the historical background, the sociohistorical moment that we are facing and build the puzzle that reflects a macrosystemic perspective, a community-level approach, a school-level definition of learning and citizenship and, finally, the need to give a voice to the students (Cook-Sather, 2020; Seixas, 2020).

The START THE CHANGE project has allowed an understanding of how children and youngsters engage in decision-making processes especially in school settings. Through a review of the literature and data collection with students, stakeholders and policy-makers three main conclusions were highlighted for the Portuguese students who participated in the project:

1. There are several platforms that support youth participation at national, local and school levels. Through these mechanisms, students are informed and consulted but they do not participate in the decision-making processes. Their voice does not foster agency.
2. To foster students' voices, Portuguese schools need to enhance changes in the mindset and school culture, engaging in a holistic (whole-school) and ecological approach (involving all school staff, students and the community).
3. Promoting students' voices is not only a goal itself but is also a means for attaining sustainable development through the introduction of pedagogies that empower the learners and learning contexts.

The analysis of the data collected, as well as the aims of the project, led the Portuguese team to adopt a framework for the proposal of the overall policy goal to promote the students' voice. We consider that the School Wide Positive Behavior Interventions Support (SWPBIS) can be a useful approach because it acknowledges a holistic and system-level policy to promote positive relationships, values and behaviors in all school members (Corcoran & Thomas, 2021) and to build safe and effective school environments (Horner & Macaya, 2018).

The conceptual perspective integrated into the promotion of positive behaviors (Sugai & Horner, 2020), has been contributing to the body of research on the establishment of a school culture, with different levels of social and behavioral support (Cruz, 2021). These interventions are more effective when combined with the organization of school systems and the monetization of resources that facilitate the sustainability of actions (Sugai & Horner, 2020). The involvement of all stakeholders in the school community and all school contexts should be a central objective for building the foundations for understanding the importance of promoting positive behaviors, students' participation and agency and democratic skills, through processes of support, monitoring, training and feedback (Deltour et al., 2021; Sugai & Horner, 2020). SWPBIS has been designed to establish support for social culture and individual behaviors and organizes a three-tiered system of support for all students, increasing the intensity according to the students' needs. The system is built around a primary intervention, known as universal prevention, targeting all students in the school. Secondary interventions are designed to reduce or eliminate risk factors for a reduced number of students, by providing them with tailored interventions. Tertiary interventions are aimed at reducing the severity of behavioral problems in students with identified risk factors (Sugai & Horner, 2009). In this way, SWPBIS is a flexible, contextually and culturally preventive system for the school, with the goal of creating a positive and safe environment and school culture that reinforces student's positive behaviors (Deltour et al., 2021). To do so, an important component of the framework is the data collection of all students and decision-making regarding the evidence (Sugai & Horner, 2009).

The present policy roadmap considers it important to adopt this framework, namely the conceptual approach, as well as other evidence-based strategies to promote youth participation, and start the change in the school-level system so that the students' voices become a reality and can be sustainable.

Promote active student participation in schools and local communities

Giving voice to the students was a movement that emerged in the 1960s and early 1970s to enhance students' power and it has been growing over the years (Mager & Nowak, 2012). A meta-analysis performed by Mager & Nowak (2012) revealed that student participation can have several benefits, such as personal effects on students, interactions among people in the school and on the school as an organization.

In order to promote the students' active participation several goals must be accomplished, and it should begin with a holistic change in the school ethos and a consequent change in the expectations of behaviors in a school's elements, such as school leaders, teachers, school staff, students and in-school contexts, namely in platforms of students' participation and in classrooms (Sugai & Horner, 2020). Specifically, the policy road map suggests implementing changes in the mindset of a school's culture, with implications in schooling practices and the relationships between adults and students, pedagogical practice and the repositioning of students so that they can have a voice and agency (Cook-Sather, 2020; Mager & Nowak, 2012).

The policy roadmap developed two specific goals. The first one is macrosystemic, assuring that the whole school shares the same language and thoughts, and creates opportunities to promote positive and safe environments where students can have a voice. The second specific goal aims to promote citizenship skills in all students through several engagement platforms and the empowerment of social, emotional, and democratic skills.

Specific goals/objectives

1. Ensure schools are empowering environments for student participation

Students build their beliefs and perceptions of reality through the analysis of the behaviors of the different school community members that they contact, observe and reflect on those behaviors and actions and implement problem-solving strategies they identify (Carvalho et al., 2017). Following this line of thought, if we want to promote students' development, participation, and well-being, we must start the change by improving school culture or school ethos.

Fostering school culture is important so that the complexity and diversity of educative phenomena and the need for effective participation of all school community members in the construction of a democratic, moral, inclusive and ethically fair school it is seen by everyone. (Azevedo, 2016).

Student participation in the school raises the need to balance power and responsibility between adults and children within a school so that students can work in partnership with teachers, school leaders and consultants (Cook-Sather, 2020; Mager & Nowak, 2012). This change implies a school leadership focused on people, on creating a school environment based on proximity, cooperation and mutual support (Carvalho et al., 2017). Deltour et al (2021) indicate that principal leadership contributes significantly to the development and maintenance of effective schools through their ability to bring teams to work together and understand the value of collaboration and their ability to overcome barriers as a team.

Priority must be given to empower school leaders, teachers and school staff in interpersonal relationships and power sharing. Training these educational agents to empower them is urgent so that interactions with students become more positive and all elements can deal more effectively with emotional, social and conflict challenges, building clear expectations about student behavior and creating conditions to develop a culture and school environment of support to all students and to create opportunities to enhance students' voices (Cook-Sather, 2020; Cruz, 2021; Jones & Bouffard, 2012). The training of school leaders, teachers and school staff can be complemented with visits to schools that implement SWPBIS so that school agents can observe in context that it is possible to change and accomplish these goals. To raise the engagement of all staff one can also create moments to share good practices with other schools, municipalities and universities. Reflection about the process can be operationalized through the creation of a discussion about interpersonal relationships and power sharing in the school context.

Following the training of the school staff and immersion in the framework to promote the students' voices, we suggest the creation of a work team to organize and lead the following actions, to implement a universal screening (all students) regarding students' voices and social and emotional skills, and to develop, supervise and evaluate the following practices that will emerge from the training process and the screening.

We also consider it important that school administrators foster synergies with the community, namely partnerships with universities, departments of teacher education, municipalities and local entities and integrate them into the culture of the school (Cook-Sather, 2020). Establishing a network of communication engaging different stakeholders and keeping the students as main actors in activities incorporated in the annual activities plan and in the school project, such as: i) develop a day-long or half-day where student and staff can collaborate; ii) integrate opportunities to participate with partners into the regular school schedule (the community into the school, for example in a citizenship subject); iii) professional development days around students' input and lessons from the collaboration with the community, having teachers and students co-present at these events; iv) invite students and teachers to share their insights at the faculty, school board, parent associations' meetings and other forums of school-wide and district-wide discussion (Cook-Sather, 2020).

2. Develop active citizenship competencies in students

The development of student participation and agency at the school level implies the creation of mechanisms through which students are included in the meaningful processes of analyzing teaching and learning so that their voices and perspectives inform classroom practices, transform their own and others' learning experiences, exert influence on their learning context and expand learning (Cook-Sather, 2020). Mager & Nowak (2012) meta-analysis shows that student participation has positive effects on life skills, self-esteem, democratic skills and citizenship, student-adult relationships and school ethos.

To enhance students' collective participation, Mager & Nowak (2012) suggest one-off students' consultations on specific topics (e.g., student surveys), consultations in the classroom, temporary working groups and ongoing involvement in the school governance through council membership. Temporary working groups can be created for school improvement comprised of adult school staff and student leaders, focus groups working on how to improve academic success, and a school team comprised of a variety of school stakeholders.

To start the change, it is necessary to acknowledge the students' needs, interests and feelings about their participation and the skills that can promote democratic relationships and roles. We consider that it is relevant to develop universal screenings along with the consultation of students (as mentioned above). The universal screening should integrate the evaluation of the core skills of social and emotional learning, namely self-awareness, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, social awareness and self-management (CASEL, 2020). This consultation and evaluation will allow decision-making about the priorities to develop active citizenship competencies through multi-tiered interventions (Sugai & Horner, 2020).

Another evidence-based mechanism for students' participation is membership in school councils. Councils offer opportunities for students to learn about being part of a democratic community. Participation in a council increases democratic skills and citizenship, as well as communication skills, cooperation and teamwork skills, decision-making and problem-solving skills and students' agency and responsibility. It also has a positive effect on school ethos and student-adult relationships (Alderson, 2000; Cotmore, 2003; Mager & Nowak, 2012). However, participation is always restricted to representatives or enthusiastic students. One way to counteract this dynamic is to create other forms of councils where a larger proportion of the students can be involved (Mager & Nowak, 2012).

There are different types of councils in a school that can be implemented: a school council, student council and class council. A school council is a mixed council with representatives from different interest groups in the school. The student representatives are from different age groups. A student council is a council consisting mostly of students. An adult advisor can be present at the meetings. Students' representatives are from different age groups. A class council is a council in which all students are from the same class (Mager & Nowak, 2012).

Class councils have origins in the Just Community Approach (Kohlberg, 1971), and are a mechanism of the students' agency that stimulates critical thinking, moral judgment, communication skills, interpersonal relationships and conflict problem-solving (Alderson, 2000; Carvalho et al., 2017). Class councils offer opportunities for students to engage in democratic procedures in the definition of rules, values, behavior management and problem-solving processes (Carvalho et al., 2017).

Councils could be installed in schools or existing councils could be revitalized to strengthen collective student participation in decision-making and create positive change in schools (Alderson, 2000). To make this a reality, students need to be taken seriously and their participation and decision-making need to have an impact on their lives (Cotmore, 2003; Mager & Nowak, 2012). So, the effective implementation of the various types of councils depends on the school leaderships in supporting, stimulating and being available to share the power (Carvalho et al., 2017).

Students' voices can also be enhanced through authorship, by promoting students' publications about their representations of school experiences that include student-authored or co-authored parts, such as newsletters, magazines, books, exhibitions, contests and journals (Cook-Sather, 2020). This strategy fosters students' agency beyond their school contexts and can enhance ongoing projects and the synergies with the community.

The students' participation and agency can be developed through the students' voice in research. The engagement in research methods, investigations and interventions (taking into consideration the students' contexts and age), promotes collaborative actions regarding social problems, the cultural values and idiosyncrasies of their communities and offers youth an opportunity to be a part of a change (Cook-Sather, 2020). Project work may be a method to involve students in planning, executing and evaluating transdisciplinary projects that respond to concerns related to the students' contexts (Vasconcelos et al., 2011).

Finally, the Portuguese school curriculum includes, since 2017/2018, a subject called citizenship education. This formal subject was created after the emergence of the National Citizenship Education Strategy (República Portuguesa, 2017) and has a core of contents that should be explored intentionally with students from kindergarten to high school. These contents concur with the learning objectives related to sustainable development (UNESCO, 2017). Citizenship education provides opportunities for young people to develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes that enable them to become active and give them the power and responsibility to participate in a democratic society (Mager & Nowak, 2012). For this formal subject, it is important to achieve the goal of having a time and space to deliberate and promote the skills and knowledge to become involved in decision-making processes, although it is also important to challenge all other teachers within their school subjects to implement daily strategies that enhance the students' social, emotional and agency skills. In Portugal, since 2018, there has also been the possibility to create specific moments of interdisciplinary work (Decreto-Lei 55/2018, de 6 de julho). The autonomous and flexible curriculum offers the opportunity to engage in projects and activities that unite subjects and teachers in a common schedule (Cosme, 2018). The aim of this mechanism is to foster interdisciplinary knowledge, and it can be used to foster citizenship education as well as to explore the goals of sustainable development within a specific schedule.

Promote active student participation in schools and local communities

Specific Objectives	Recommendations	Actions	Target	Level of implementation	Timeframe/priority
1. Ensure schools are empowering an environment for student participation	Provide CPD about student participation to educators and school leaders	Empower school leaders, teachers and school staff in interpersonal relationships and sharing power through training	School leaders, teachers school staff Psychologists/technicians	School-level	High
		Provide school leaders and educators with visits to schools that implement SWPBIS	School leaders, teachers Psychologists/technicians	Community-level	High
		Create moments/encounters to share good practices with other schools, municipalities and universities	School leaders, teachers School staff, Psychologists/ Technicians	Community-level and school-level	High
		Create a work team to organize, develop, supervise, and evaluate the strategies defined	Teachers Students Psychologists/ technicians	School-level	Medium
		Create discussion forums about interpersonal relationships and power sharing in the school context	Teachers Students Psychologists/Technicians	School-level	Medium
	Raise awareness among school staff about the importance of student participation	Establish a network of communication engaging different stakeholders keeping a specific agenda and keeping the students as main actors	Teachers Students Psychologists/ technicians	Community-level	High

2. Develop active citizenship competencies of students	Facilitate the implementation of student-led actions at the school level	Implement a universal screening regarding social and emotional skills (self-awareness, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, social awareness and self-management) and consult students about the school ethos and their expectations and goals	Students	School-level	High
		Implement target interventions based on the data collected through the universal screening and students' consultation	Students	School-level	High
		Implement (or revitalize) different types of councils: school council, student council and class council.	Teachers Psychologists/ technicians Students	School-level	High
		Develop and enhance authorship, by promoting students' publications	Teachers Students	School-level and community-level	Medium
	Facilitate the implementation of student-led actions in the area of sustainable development at the community level	Engage in research methods, investigations and interventions in the school context and in the community, namely through project work	Teachers Students	School-level and community-level	Medium
		Citizenship education as a formal subject where students can develop skills to actively participate in a democratic society	Students	School-level	High
		Interdisciplinary work through the creation of formal domains of curriculum autonomy (with a specific schedule)	Students	School-level	High
		Provide programs about citizenship and sustainable development to students			

Final notes

This policy roadmap doesn't intend to be a recipe to implement the same "package" in several contexts. Instead, it aims to give policymakers and school leaders the flexibility and responsibility to adapt adequate strategies to their own context, following the needs and characteristics of their 21st-century students.

The main idea of this roadmap is to acknowledge that change can only happen when all of the stakeholders share the same language and the same framework about students' voices and democratic participation. An intervention focused only on the students will not make significant changes, unless the context, the school ethos and the school agents also shift their mindset and their behavior towards others and students. The recommendations proposed are aligned in a tier-1 intervention accordingly to the SWPBIS approach and the result of evidence-based research that shows positive gains in students' participation in school and in the community. The indicators provided by these strategies may sustain more opportunities to promote inclusion and students' voices in social and educational contexts.

We need to act in a holistic and ecological way, where the school leaders and policymakers have a major role in starting the change, engaging and involving the community and evaluating the process.



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