



EMPOWERING STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION

| Policy Road Map Croatia

START THE
CHANGE!

IMPRESSUM

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Empowering Students' Participation – Policy Road Map Croatia

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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 (Croatia) together with the partner organizations: INOVA+ (Portugal), Macedonian Civic Education Centre (North Macedonia), Network of Education Policy Centres, SIRIUS – Policy Network on Migrant Education, the Ivan Meštrović Primary School (Croatia), Agrupamento de Escolas Josê Estêvão (Portugal) and the Nikola Karev State Municipal School (North Macedonia) is implementing the project **"START THE CHANGE – creating a generation of changemakers through intercultural education and volunteering"** within the Erasmus+ program (K3, Social Inclusion).

The purpose of the project is to strengthen the resilience of youth by supporting them to be healthy, self-confident, fulfilled, broadminded individuals, regardless of their backgrounds and possible challenges they face, who create and foster healthy relationships, develop their abilities and are actively engaged in their community. 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 risks of manipulation, extreme attitudes, relationships and attitudes that are harmful. 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.

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 organization 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.

Why students' participation and students' voices are important?

The term "children's participation" is fundamental within this policy road map. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in Article 1 defines a child as "every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier" and in Article 12 it defines the children's rights to participate - "1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.; 2. For this purpose, the child

shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law." The following Articles (13-17) define the specific rights relating to participation (right to be informed, right to freedom of expression, right to freedom of thought etc.).

Since the main focus of the policy road map is to ensure participation within the schools the term "students' participation" will be used in order to describe the state of affairs regarding children's participation and realization of their rights to participate within the educational system. The alternative term is "pupils' participation" and there are slight differences as Robinson and Taylor (2007: 6) noted, "pupil" can be used to refer to children and young people of any age in schools or colleges, while the term 'student' tends to exclude those very young children (for example, four-year-olds), who are in schools or nurseries." However, these authors use the terms "student" and "pupil" synonymously. Furthermore, since the previous publications within the START THE CHANGE project used terms "students' participation" and "students' voice" this term will also be used here in the previously described manner.

The benefits of students' participation are various and three large groups of benefits are recognized – personal and learning outcomes, outcomes for school and classroom, and outcomes outside the school (Yamashita, Davies and Williams, 2010). Within personal and learning outcomes the authors point out that "students in more democratic schools were happier and felt more in control of their learning; if students gave feedback on teaching, this had the twin effect of teachers' practice improving and students gaining in awareness of the learning process; participation enhanced skills of communication and competence as a learner; skills in specific curriculum areas such as citizenship improved, as well as in other curriculum areas." (Yamashita, Davies and Williams, 2010: 100). On the level of school and classroom outcomes, it is seen that there is an improvement in classroom relationships and school organization and governance (development of curriculum and assessment, empowered and more influential school council, changes regarding meal providers). Finally, the outcomes outside the school are recognized as the result of improved students' participation – students become more engaged in their communities, they are more ready to volunteer or participate in elections, beneficial impacts on families and improved relations between families and schools.

Thus, the main findings of the extensive research indicate that participation at both the school level and the educational-policy level is a wholly beneficial activity for children and students involved, and it creates a healthy basis for a democratic and participative society. Not only does it provide developmental continuity since it enables children to acquire competencies that are important for adulthood, from the earliest age, but it also has a great transformative potential. It can be seen as an activity that creates an opportunity and space for the better articulation of students' voices. According to Robinson and Taylor (2007: 8) students' voices take into account four core values – the conception of communication as dialogue, the requirement for participation and democratic inclusivity, the recognition that power relations are unequal and problematic, and the possibility for change and transformation. Thus, in order to improve students' participation, it is necessary to take certain steps that address – a tokenistic approach to participation, inclusion of different students' voices (silenced voices or critical voices), challenging power relations between students and teachers, the possibility of making changes within the school as the result of the students' participation.

What are the main issues on this topic in Croatia?

The initial insight related to students' participation in Croatia is that this area is well regulated by the strategies and laws (Jeđud Borić et al, 2017). Jeđud Borić et al. (2017) provide an overview of the legal, strategic and curricular documents related to children's participation within the education system. Their main conclusion is that normative foundations are solid and that there are preconditions for the realization of child participation on the general level and students' participation on the level of the education system. Thus, the legal framework and strategic goals provide the possibilities for the improvement of students' participation. However, the research results (e.g. Spajić-Vrkaš, 2016) indicate that it is discreetly present in practice. This indicates that there are certain challenges within the organization of schools and relations among school actors.

One of the important factors that determine the possibility for students' voices to be heard and students' participation to be exercised is called school culture. A school culture includes attitudes and beliefs, cultural norms, and relations among school actors (Deal and Peterson, 1999, cited in Spajić-Vrkaš and Horvat, 2016). The research conducted in Croatian elementary schools in 2010 identified five types of school culture in Croatia – a modern democratic school, a school of rights and responsibilities, a school focused on nurturing national identity, a responsive school, and an authoritarian school (Batarelo et al., 2010). Similar types were identified in later research (Spajić-Vrkaš et al. 2014; Spajić-Vrkaš 2015; Spajić-Vrkaš, 2016). According to Spajić-Vrkaš (2016) there are five types of school culture in Croatian schools that are named – a school as a democratic learning community, a school of order and discipline, an authoritarian school, a school oriented towards social topics, and a school of students' emancipation. These findings indicate that the democratization of the schools in Croatia is neglected and deficient, the process is "often inverted and turned into a process of the disciplining of students" (Spajić-Vrkaš and Horvat, 2016: 127), teachers do not promote dialogue and they mostly use a Q&A method, students' representatives are only formally included in the decision-making process and their proposals have no weight (Spajić-Vrkaš and Horvat, 2016). These findings were corroborated within the START THE CHANGE research report (Baketa and Kovačić, 2020). The students within the focus groups claimed that they are often not listened to ("doors remain closed") and that their complaints are not taken seriously. Even when school staff hear their complaints, concrete steps are not taken in order to resolve the addressed problem.

Since it is expected that the educational system should enable children's right to participate, provide them with citizenship competence and empower them for further participation, it is necessary to take into account these indicators. Several studies (Bagić and Gvozdanović, 2015; Baketa, Bovan and Matić Bojić, 2021) into the political literacy of high school students in Croatia show that the citizenship competence of Croatian students remains low. More specifically, their participation is limited to humanitarian actions and volunteering. The majority of them do not participate in public protests or youth/student representative bodies. Furthermore, if the broader population of youth (age 14-29) is taken into consideration, it is obvious that participation remains significantly low (Gvozdanović et al., 2019). According to this research, the vast majority of young people do not participate in political activities online, do not engage in political party activities, and do not participate in volunteer activities and public demonstrations. These results suggest that the educational system does not equip students with the knowledge and skills for participation in a democratic society. Also, it is necessary to point out that teachers do not gain adequate initial education in this area. As Jeđud Borić et al. (2017) show there are no specific curricula in Croatian universities whose core is children's participation. Furthermore, even when there are fragments of the curricula that cover children's participation, they are concentrated mostly on general knowledge and less on skills and ethics.

These noticed deficiencies led to the proposal of a democratic school model (Baketa and Pažur, 2017) that includes the democratization of four basic components (educational activities, educational content, school governance and extracurricular activities, and interaction with other spheres of social life), and individual steps and examples. The main goal of this model was to "increase participation of all actors within the school, to open the educational process in relation to students and parents and to strengthen cooperation with the community" (Baketa and Pažur, 2017: 7). Among numerous proposed steps the model also contained the specific steps related to – the empowerment of students for participation and cooperation, enhancement of teacher education in participative methods, and development of school democratic culture. This model is comprehensive and represents some sort of ideal type within the existing legal framework. Thus, without individual assistance and mentoring, it was hard to expect that schools would introduce this kind of structural change. This leads to the conclusion that it is necessary to try to implement an incremental approach, address a few important issues and provide individual assistance to selected schools.

PROCESS (METHODOLOGY)

How did we get to Policy Road Map?

The Policy Road Map is based on the collaborative work of the two policy events organized within the project. The function of the first one was to introduce the topic of the students' participation and the second one was focused on defining the overall policy goal for the Policy Road Map.

Policy event 1 "Policy and practice to Start the Change" (18th May 2021, online form)

The goal of the first policy event of the START THE CHANGE project was to introduce and raise awareness of the topic of students' participation and the importance of students' voices in connection with policy change. Having that in mind, this policy event was about "setting the stage" for future policy activity: introducing the topic of the students' voice as a right and its importance to the relevant stakeholders, a deeper understanding of the topic and importance of policy change with that in mind.

To achieve the set goals, the first part of the policy lab consisted of the theoretical introduction to the topic of the importance of students' voice and the data regarding the existing policies in relation to students' participation in the project partners' countries as well as in the countries with high students' participation. Moreover, a representative from the country with high students' participation shared their experience and approach to the topic.

The second part consisted of the presentation of the results from the comparative report from the students' focus groups implemented in the partner countries with the intent to open discussion, raise questions and share ideas about the topic.

Policy event 2 "Students' participation – a path towards an inclusive and democratic society" (28th and 29th March 2022 in Zagreb, Croatia)

The two-day event gathered teachers from 15 schools in Croatia, North Macedonia and Portugal and the policymakers from the educational field who met in person and exchanged their experiences in this project and discussed further recommendations for the strengthening of the students' voice and participation in their schools and educational systems.

The event was organized through several learning and solution-generating sessions. The learning sessions featured keynote lectures: *The right to participate: How to achieve the meaningful participation of children?* and *Vulnerability and radicalization* as well as an introductory lecture about the policy component of the project. The main objective of the event was to generate recommendations focused on overcoming the insufficient participation of students in the decision-making process in school life and governance at all levels with a special focus on the potential for student's participation to improve inclusion and combat the negative effects of student disengagement such as radicalization. The information gathered also served for the preparation of the following National Policy Road Maps that will outline the country-specific policy issues at school, local and national levels as well as offers step-by-step recommendations for policy improvements.

Overall policy goal

Ensure schools are a safe and empowering environment for students' participation.

Specific goals/objectives

1. **To enhance the competencies of educators for students' participation**
2. **To develop a culture of dialogue in schools**

Recommendations

Improve the current framework of pedagogical competencies to include students' participation based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in order to provide educators with new knowledge and skills related to theoretical, methodical and didactic approaches. New competencies would empower educators to provide opportunities for students' participation in everyday classes and to recognize and include students from vulnerable groups.

Provide continuous professional development in students' participation and active citizenship to educators in order to introduce them to contemporary issues, approaches and vulnerable groups. Planned and continuous development provides a stable educational path for educators and ensures that they are up to date. Furthermore, it ensures that they can seek professional and peer support regarding sensitive topics, and share their experience and solutions.

Develop guidelines for an inclusive and student-centred school development plan. These guidelines for the strategic planning of school development would be based on the good practice examples that proved to be effective in the development of the culture of dialogue. The good practice examples and experience of school staff ensure that the guidelines are tailored to unique school environments, student bodies and specific vulnerable groups.

Ensure the inclusion of student-led activities in the school curriculum. The inclusion of the students in the development of a school curriculum provides the space for their participation and gives them the opportunity to articulate their needs and vision of their school. The survey and proposals should take into account the diversity of the student body and recognize the voices of vulnerable students. This inclusive approach fosters dialogue between students and staff, as well as among different groups of students, making it inherent to school culture and a school curriculum.

Facilitate students' participation and ensure its development from a mere formality to a meaningful process, with the focus on student councils. In order to facilitate student's participation and their development, it is necessary to provide information, education and discussion among school staff and students. The next step is to ensure cooperation with the local community, the visibility of the schools' interventions and create recommendations for local and regional governments. These actions would provide a more meaningful process of students' participation since the actors would understand the real purpose of the process, its impacts would be extended to the broader local community and more visible to others. These activities foster dialogue within the school, as well as with the various actors in the local community.

Ensure schools are a safe and empowering environment for students' participation.

Specific Objectives	Recommendations	Actions	Lead/ Actors	Level of implementation	Timeframe/ priority
1. Enhance the competencies of educators for students' participation	Improve the current framework of pedagogical competencies to include students' participation based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child	Identify key competencies for engaging in meaningful dialogue with children (social, emotional, etc.); Identify the gaps in segments of students' participation within the current pedagogical competences framework; Add segments about students' participation competencies to the current pedagogical and active citizenship competence framework;	Ministry of Education/ experts local authorities	Policy level National and local	Immediate Continuous
		Promote the quality of teaching in students' participation that is inclusive of all children.			
	Provide continuous professional development in students' participation and active citizenship to educators	Develop a continuous professional development (CPD) curriculum for teachers in the students' participation (age and ability related) and active citizenship; Integrate the Student Participation teacher-training course into the official Education and Teacher Training Agency CPD system (ETTAEDU). Promote and acknowledge the importance of competencies for students' participation.			
2. Develop a culture of dialogue in schools	Develop guidelines for inclusive and student-centred school development plans.	Conduct analysis of the existing guidelines for inclusive and student-centred school development plans; Identify a minimum of 10 school developmental plans from Croatia that are good practice examples of student-oriented and inclusive processes; Finalize and promote the guidelines for inclusive and student-centred school development plans.	CSO and schools/ experts, student council, teachers, students	School level	Immediate Continuous

<p>Ensure inclusion of student-led activities in the school curriculum.</p>		<p>Implement a survey among students about their needs and challenges that they would like to address in their school prior to the development of the school curriculum;</p> <p>The student council together with teachers analyses the survey results and proposes student-led projects;</p> <p>Integrate the students' ideas into the curriculum in the form of extra-curricular activities, school projects and/or other activities;</p> <p>Promote and invite students to be part of and lead the activities with the school's support from the beginning of the school year.</p>	
<p>Facilitate students' participation and ensure its development from a mere formality to a meaningful process, with the focus on student councils.</p>		<p>Organize the in-house lecture and/or training in students' participation for the school staff and head of the school;</p> <p>Ensure continuous discussions on improving the students' participation in the school, among staff and among students, particularly within the student councils;</p> <p>Implement continuous surveys among students about the needs and problems they cope with (particularly prior to the development of the school curriculum);</p> <p>Based on surveys inform students about the problems of vulnerable groups and encourage members of vulnerable groups to participate in the students' councils;</p> <p>Ensure continuous informing of the student population about the survey results and appreciation of their input;</p> <p>Plan and implement the visibility of the schools' interventions to ensure the students' participation;</p> <p>Develop guidelines for a school's cooperation with the local community so as to ensure child participation in the decision-making processes related to children and schools.</p> <p>Develop recommendations for local and regional governments for meaningful child participation in decision and policymaking processes related to children.</p>	

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