

# Start the Change

Start the Change - young people's voices on their interests, needs, problems and solutions to contemporary challenges

Forum for Freedom in Education

**Comparative research report**



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Forum for Freedom in Education  
Đorđićeva 8  
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### For the publisher

Eli Pijaca Plavšić

### Author

Filip Gospodnetić

### Expert Associate

Ana Munivrana

### Editor

Višnja Pavlović

### National research authors

Italy – Trang Thi Huyen Dang, Amico Dolci  
United Kingdom – Louise Wilson, Kate Jones  
Slovenia – Laura Krančan

### Graphics design

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Contents

- Introduction and context ..... 1**
- The research ..... 2**
- Results ..... 3**
  - Students’ interests ..... 3
  - Problems and possible solutions ..... 5
  - Sense of security..... 6
  - Witnessing violence at school ..... 7
  - Injustice ..... 8
  - Discrimination ..... 8
  - Future ..... 10
  - Volunteering..... 10
  - Additional topics and problems covered ..... 11
    - The link between school violence and terrorism in Italy ..... 11
    - Overview of specific themes covered by British research ..... 11
    - Understanding extremism..... 12
    - Perception of the role of the social media ..... 13
- Conclusions..... 13**
- Recommendations ..... 16**
- Appendix A – focus group questions ..... 19**
- Literature..... 20**

## Introduction and context

Education and upbringing are key factors for empowering the social capital of the community. The educational system plays a crucial role in the development of children and young people into educated and democratic citizens who have awareness, insight, knowledge, and understanding of self and others. In conjunction with a socially just political environment, it is education that contributes to personal and socioeconomic progress.

While the population of Europe is becoming more diverse due to job-related migrations, family reasons and education needs (but also to the influx of refugees and military conflicts in the wider region), these processes might enrich and link cultures, but also increase intercultural tensions, potentially leading to violence and radicalization. Over the last few decades, Europe has been witnessing youth violence linked to radicalization. According to the EU Terrorism Report (2007;2014), violent radicalization is associated with religious terrorism, ethnonationalism and separatist nationalism, left-wing and anarchist, and right-wing terrorism.

Although violent radicalization is a rare occurrence, extreme attitudes, intolerance, prejudices, discrimination towards weaker, vulnerable and the different, and withdrawal in isolated groups can be seen more often.

The Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) Call for Proposals was launched in 2016, triggered by data on the increased tensions between different cultures and communities, increasing flow of immigrants, and terrorist attacks in Europe. The EACEA Call for proposal focused on three objectives. First was improving the acquisition of social and civic competences, fostering knowledge, understanding, and ownership of democratic values and fundamental rights. Second was supporting teachers and educators in handling conflicts and dealing with diversity. The final one was encouraging youth participation in social and civic life and developing inclusion and outreach practices to reach young people.

The project „**Start the Change – Embracing differences through intercultural education and volunteering**“ was created to respond to these objectives. This project was implemented in 2017 and 2018 with **Forum for Freedom in Education** from Croatia (FFE) as the lead organization and with partners: **Centro per lo Sviluppo Creativo Danilo Dolci** from Italy, **Mladinski center Dravinjske doline** from Slovenia and **Think Global** from Great Britain. The project represents an international expansion of the previous project „Start the Change! Volunteering of youth to build a culture of peace“, which was carried out by the FFE in Croatia from 2013 to 2015.

The general aim of the project is preventing radicalization of youth in the society, promoting democratic values, fundamental rights, intercultural understanding and active citizenship among youth in four European countries (Croatia, Slovenia, Great Britain and Italy).

The project aims to empower teachers and young people to better understand and recognise the complex challenges in contemporary society by strengthening their personal, social and civic competences.

Project activities in each country include:

- **research** on young people’s attitudes (interests, needs, problems, solutions) through focus groups with young people in the four countries
- **a 40 hour program of professional development** “Start the Change!” for teachers and youth experts for in the area of personal growth and development, active citizenship and volunteering
- **a set of publications** on intercultural education and good practices in schools

- **supporting the schools in launching projects** promoting dialogue, respect for diversity, personal growth, and development of youth.
- **creative contest** *Colour the World* through which young people creatively express their ideas about tolerance and the value of embracing differences
- **an online „library“** with useful materials in four languages applicable while working with young people.

## The research

The research **“Start the Change - young people’s voices on their interests, needs, problems and solutions to contemporary challenges”** was carried out with the aim of clarifying the interests, needs, problems and solutions to the current and everyday challenges of students in four European countries. Separate teams of researchers from partner organizations in Slovenia, Italy and the UK have conducted the research and created written individual reports on its results. The Forum for Freedom in Education in Croatia has conducted two research projects aimed at understanding the interests, needs, problems and solutions to the current problems of Croatian high school and primary school students and their results will be presented in this text as well.

The research was divided into **four main content areas**.

1. The first took into account **students' general interests**, the way they chose and get involved in various activities, and the level of satisfaction that these activities provided. The goal was to try to establish, from students’ perspective, whether the capacities of schools and the local community were sufficient to satisfy their interests.
2. The second major area covered by the research was the **students’ everyday problems**, with the emphasis on identifying their personal and generational problems at a school and local level. An additional emphasis was placed on examining students’ experiences of discrimination, prejudice, stereotypes, and respect for diversity. Thus, focus groups discussed the importance of respecting other opinions and attitudes, participating in the decision-making process, and feeling secure at school and in the local community.
3. The third research area was aimed at suggesting **solutions to existing problems**. It involved gaining insight into the application of ideas and activities that would change the existing unsatisfactory situation.
4. The fourth area contained an understanding of the concept of volunteering and identification of the opportunities for **students’ own projects and volunteering** at school and in the local community.

The results of this research have been used to develop a teacher training programme, so that teachers could better recognise the needs of their students and help them face their many challenges. Therefore, the focus group as a qualitative research methodology was an appropriate solution for gathering depth information on specific topics. The research questions were created by the Forum for Freedom in Education and then forwarded to the partners for comments and modifications. During the focus group implementation, each researcher could cover an additional specific topic, contributing thus to a deeper understanding of the students’ needs.

A team of researchers from each partner country has conducted a focus group with school students who agreed to participate in the project. It was originally intended only for secondary school students. However, due to practical restrictions, the Slovenian partners have conducted ten focus groups with students from three secondary and seven primary schools. These schools are located in six different municipalities in the rural areas of Slovenia. 109 students have participated in the research, of which 32 were male and 57 female.

**The Italian partners** have conducted ten focus groups with students from nine schools located in the Province of Palermo. The schools involved in the project differed according to their characteristics. There was only one elementary school involved, and there were secondary vocational schools and secondary schools with artistic, technical, economic, scientific and general education programmes. All schools were public, except one, which was private. Some are located outside the city of Palermo, others are on its peripheral parts and in the city centre. The focus groups were attended by 115 students, out of which 62 were male and 53 female.

**Think Global from Great Britain** has conducted research at London and northern England secondary schools. This included five London-based schools with a high degree of racial, religious and ethnic diversity have been included, along with three northern England schools, situated in rural areas, and with predominantly white British students. Therefore, eight schools in total have participated in the project in the UK. However, ten focus groups have been conducted, with 87 students, out of which 46 were male and 35 female. Other focus group participants chose not to specify a particular gender in the official forms completed during research in British schools. The UK partners have also interviewed the teachers to further deepen their content, and they have also conducted an online survey with students from eight secondary schools, which provided them with additional information on the topics studied.

Each partner has made an analysis and report based on a pre-arranged form. On the basis of these reports, the Forum for Freedom in Education has produced a comparison of the focus group results for each individual country.

This chapter describes the topics covered by the focus groups and explained from the perspective of each partner country in order to see the similarities and differences between them. The results of **the two Croatian research projects** are also presented here: "If I were someone - research on the attitudes of children and youth in Croatia: interests, needs, problems, solutions," from 2014, and "If I were someone - research on the attitudes of students of vocational schools about volunteering and active citizenship" from 2016. During both surveys, focus groups with 12 schools (four primary schools and eight high schools, different orientations) from six different counties were conducted.

Taking into consideration different national, ethnic, cultural and educational contexts of the partner countries, it was necessary to describe specific topics for each country. All the conclusions are corroborated by the participants' statements and, at the end a summary of the results from all four countries is presented.

In the final part of the report, authors offer recommendations for teachers and policy makers but also all other stakeholders in the field of education.

## Results

### Students' interests

The interests of **Slovenian** students are related to the activities in and outside the school. Playing sports is the most frequent extracurricular activity. And following immediately after, there are various activities related to music, such as playing an instrument, singing in a choir or playing in a band. In their leisure time, secondly rated activities were: reading books, socializing and going out, as well as in outdoor activities, computer programming, playing games and robotics. Lastly there is interest (but also mentioning of) in poetry, acting, puppetry and drawing.

The quality of extracurricular activities depends on the school budget, capacities and knowledge of the school staff and on the level of cooperation between schools and other institutions, associations and individuals from the local community. At the beginning of each school year, schools put up a list of extracurricular activities that students choose according to their interests. They decide to take them

up with someone they know, and stay in them as long as they have fun or as long as their timetable suits them. The largest number of students is involved in sport and music activities, followed by arts, creative workshops and participation in school competitions.

Some extracurricular activities are not carried out due to insufficient number of students involved, while in some schools students have to choose from a limited supply of extracurricular activities. Teachers encourage students to take up an activity if they notice that they have interest for it. Otherwise the activities are opened for all. The following quote testifies to the importance that students assign to extracurricular activities:

*I think that extracurricular activities are really important for high school, because I don't know yet where I am going to enrol. I want to experience as many things as I can, that is why I am in the school theatre and school radio. /.../ I like to see new things and then decide what I like the most, so I can decide on a profession I am going to love.*

The prevalent interests of **Italian** students are related to sport, music or some form of artistic expression (dance, theatre, and drawing). Hanging out with friends and going out are their second most preferred activities, while spending time with family follows immediately after that. Students attach great importance to interpersonal relationships, but devote relatively little attention to social networks. Italian students separate work from fun, believing that school work should not prevail over other aspects of life.

High school students are aware of the importance of acquiring qualifications and finding work, while at the same time they do not lose sight of career and goals. However, a small number of responses indicate that the students are specifically devoted to the achievement of professional goals. An example may be the following:

*I care a lot about finishing my studies here and finding a job relevant to our study course.*

Although volunteering allows students to acquire different experiences, they do not feel it is relevant to expanding their views. They rarely volunteer, and describe their experiences as follows:

*I often go to one centre that takes care of disadvantaged children. It is a nice experience because you expected to give away but in the end you are the one who receives a lot.*

In all the Italian schools involved in the research, there are extracurricular activities and projects differing in content and features. Secondary vocational schools carry out activities related to job search, technical camps or sports activities, and their students are predominately male. Secondary schools with general programs carry out various social projects and activities in cooperation with cultural and educational institutions from the local community.

**British** students have similar interests as Slovenian and Italian students. Sports activities that "contribute to stress reduction" prevail. Other interests are concerned with music, whether it is playing an instrument, composing their own music or just listening to music. Various creative activities with artistic features, such as writing or photography, occupy a significant place among students' interests. Playing computer games and socializing with friends are also some of the interests mentioned. The following quote shows us how important sport is in the everyday life of students:

*When I'm having a hard time, I just go for a run and it helps me sort things out.*

In the **Croatian** research "If I were someone - attitudes of students of vocational schools about volunteering and active citizenship (2016)" conducted with 39 students of four secondary vocational schools (21 male and 18 female), students' interests coincide with the interests of students from the three other partner countries. Male students are predominantly interested in sports, while female students are interested in socializing and fulfilling their school obligations. All students are very active on social networks, where they spend a lot of time.

Sport extra-curricular activities are most represented in the school offer, while there is a limited supply of non-sports activities. The existing activities, such as volunteering or environmental activism, receive a limited number of students, so not everyone interested can get involved. The local community makes it possible to engage in the volunteer fire department or Caritas, which are often the only such organizations in a particular environment, so the choice is narrowed.

Students from rural areas cannot be involved in many activities due to poor traffic connections. Juggling school work with extracurricular activities is an additional challenge. Students' passivity and lack of interest in active leisure time activities, as well as the time spent on social networks, are additional reasons why young people are not active enough in and outside school. The next quote addresses the reasons for the insufficient engagement of young people in some activities.

*I think there are opportunities, but the problem is that all these activities are centralised, everything takes place in the city centre ...*

*She would like to play volleyball, but that's impossible because the only place where she can train is there. So maybe they could organise volleyball practices somewhere near, I think a lot more people would get involved. They could rent a hall or something. From the firefighters, maybe. That could work.*

## Problems and possible solutions

This part of the text describes the problems faced by students in and outside school.

The challenges **Slovenian** students are concerned about are mostly related to school work and obligations. To ensure the continuation of schooling, students strive for good grades and academic success. An additional challenge is the lack of time to attend extra-curricular activities due to work overload. On the other hand some students are engaged in a lot or are very devoted to extra-curricular activities that they barely have enough time for their regular school work.

Students consider maintaining a positive image to be an important challenge, so they compare and compete with others. They want to be popular and liked by others. They want to be accepted by other groups but they also fear they will lose friends and they lack the time to socialize with other people. A lot of students are unconcerned about their future, which is illustrated by the following quote:

*I am optimistic about my future. I have good grades, good environment ... I live in the countryside so everything is within my reach.*

Physical and psychological violence is the main problem for **Italian** students, even more than alcohol and drugs. Victims of violence often differ from the dominant group by physical appearance, ethnicity, language or external characteristics such as clothing. The following quote illustrates this:

*It happened to my classmate. He is Romanian and doesn't speak Italian very well, and my classmates excluded him.*

Other problems are conforming to the peer pressure and achieving a desirable image about oneself. Students believe that they will not be accepted and that they will be excluded from the group if they do not meet certain standards. Given the special role that family plays in the lives of Italian students, the source of their problems may be family relationships, the death of a family member or the divorce of parents. Such unfavourable family circumstances may cause students to become victims of violence and discrimination.

In the **Croatian** research, one of the main problems is the lack of time for leisure activities. Sometimes work overload may lead to a drop in intrinsic motivation for school. The example is as follows:



*I, personally, for example, need more time for rest because we are at school all day: in the morning and in the afternoon. And when I come home in the evening, I'm supposed to study, but by that time, I have lost all my motivation. I'd like to have more rest and more time in general, and to get more sleep to be able to better achieve my goals.*

The main problems of Croatian students are related to school and peer acceptance. According to the majority of students, their classes are taught "in a dry and uninteresting way, with too little practical work", which is essential for students of vocational schools. Teachers tend to favour some students over the others, and students do not have the feeling that their opinion is important. This is illustrated by the following quote:

*The prevalent opinion in this century is that kids are terrible. I mean, we're not perfect, because we can sometimes really drive some teachers mad. But that is not the reason to be treated in a way that our rights are disrespected. The teachers are also not infallible; sometimes they can also be wrong.*

Croatian students consider their peers' opinions extremely important. Being different from most of their peers means being excluded from the group. This can take the form of exclusion from different social groups, gossiping, mockery, or violence. Peer exclusion may be caused by different looks, clothing, rural or urban origins, and attitudes to certain topics. In schools attended by members of a national minority, the exclusion is based on a national and religious diversity. To fit in with colleagues, students accept different risk behaviours such as smoking or drinking. An example of this is:

*A lot of friends started smoking or drinking just to be accepted, or even taking drugs.*

## Sense of security

**Slovenian** schools and local communities generally give students a sense of security. Violence at school is forbidden by school rules and teachers in school prevent it. Students are aware that there are trouble-making individuals and groups in local communities, but they avoid them and move in the social circles of their friends. Their attitude to getting into dangerous situations is reflected by the following quote:

*I have no reason to be a part of any dangerous situation. I simply keep company with people I love and know that they will not hurt me.*

**Italian** high school students feel safe at school and outside of it. However, the sense of security in the local community varies depending on the circles in which the students are moving. Students experience Palermo as a typical big city where bad things happen occasionally. At the time of the research, students were not afraid of potential terrorist attacks.

The sense of security in **Croatian** high schools is related to the violence that takes place in them. In some schools there is an extremely pronounced physical violence, so students defend themselves by using force. The relationship between minorities and the majority also contributes to the feeling of insecurity. In schools attended by members of national minorities, students belonging to the majority feel insecure about the behaviour of the minorities. Many students of vocational schools live in dormitories where there is a high prevalence of violence causing them to feel less safe. The following quote illustrates this:

*In primary school I walked about without concern, I knew nothing would happen, and here that's not the case, I'm always ready to be attacked by somebody.*

Students in the **British** research did not explicitly discuss school safety; instead, they brought up the subject of the school as a safe place to discuss extreme positions and sensitive topics.

The research also covered the opinions of British teachers who described the school as a safe place for students to discuss sensitive issues and extreme attitudes. However, only about half of the students feel the school is a safe place to discuss sensitive subjects. Students from northern England do not consider it a safe place to debate, and only a small number of students argue the opposite. There is a distinct difference in the perception of school security between teachers and students. While students experience it as a moderately safe place to discuss sensitive topics, teachers have the opposite view. Here is the quote illustrating this:

*(Students) know they can go to their tutor, their year leader, and we've also got the anti-bullying ambassadors...*

## Witnessing violence at school

**Slovenian** students have witnessed various forms of violence at school and outside of it. Some students spoke of *friendly physical fights* between friends and brothers, not considering them as a form of violence. Many Slovenian students have been victims and even more witnesses of verbal violence although some students do not consider verbal violence as a form of violence. The presence of violence on social networks has also been recognised with negative consequences for the victim. After witnessing the violence, students turn to adults, teachers, parents or social workers.

**Italian** students have also witnessed violence at school, which is one of the biggest problems they face. Unlike their Slovenian peers, Italian students do not turn to teachers for support, but rather rely on parents or brothers and sisters. The following quote illustrates how students cope with the experience of violent behaviour:

*I didn't remain friends with anybody from my secondary school, it was such a bad experience that I want to forget.*

**Croatian** students describe various forms of violence they experience on a daily basis. Apart from the physical violence prevalent among boys, also emotional abuse (insults, mockery, and making up false stories) is also represented. There is violence widespread on the internet and social networks.

Students deal with conflicts by talking to someone they trust, like close friends and family. They rarely choose to talk to teachers about a problem related to violence. Even if they do, they are very reserved because they feel they cannot say what they think. Students have developed their own mechanisms of dealing with violence at school. They emphasize the importance of resourcefulness, making good decisions, and the choice of friends they can talk to. The following quote shows the way students approach solving problems:

*When I have a problem, I solve it in any way, first I try it in a calm way, and if it doesn't work, then in any other way.*

The cases of extremism in **British** schools are rare. They are manifested in the form of participation in anti-Muslim protests, with serious violence or in expressing extreme views. Violent incidents are linked to expressing racism, calling others terrorists, religiously-based insults, sexist comments, bodily abuse, or mocking based on ethnic origins. Despite such incidents, most of the students have not witnessed the expression of extreme views at school, and there are no indications of their radicalization. The following quote describes some of these events:

*Things have come up. For example, some kid brought up the 'je suis Charlie' poster. Some Muslim children were upset.*

British students feel they can turn to their teachers to discuss sensitive topics such as racism, sexism or extreme political or religious worldviews.

## Injustice

**Slovenian** students relate injustice to the education system, school context and biased evaluation. They consider that the student's financial status, gender, popularity or some other personal circumstance and the current mood of the teacher are factors that influence teachers' assessment practices. The feeling of injustice among students arises also due to mutual false accusations or when a teacher incorrectly accuses one of something they or their peers haven't done. In such situations conflict often arises.

Provocations without a clear reason are common among Slovenian students and those in the position of power are more likely to start them. Some factors such as nationality, special needs, or social or economic status may be an incentive to be provoked or verbally attacked. An additional source of injustice is the unequal sanctioning of students for the same mischief. Students recognize injustice and consider it bad. If they witness injustice, they help the victim by talking to them or ask for help from adults.

The following quotation illustrates a student's opinion of why injustice comes about:

*Injustice in school is happening within the grading process within which I think that teachers evaluate students differently. At that time I usually say something and I have already achieved something with this. There's no sin to try that. It also happened to me that it was not the best outcome when I spoke up and that it would be better to be quiet.*

**Italian** students perceive injustice mostly in the form of the teachers' biased grading and behaviour towards the students. According to the students, teachers sometimes neglect the violence experienced by students of lower socioeconomic status or those who differ from the majority, which students find unfair.

Students perceive social injustice in the domain of work or the public sector, which can be supported by the following quote:

*...injustice in the healthcare field, people tend not to trust the public health services any more but the private ones because the public system is not efficient...*

**British** students object to the other students' behaviour during breaks and lunch breaks. Students are unhappy because other students often jump the queue, they would like more diverse food and more different activities during the break. Additional facilities for young people, activities aimed at combating discrimination and building social understanding are some of the things the British students would like to see in their local community. Students consider that their schools provide them with enough support to solve potential problems either at school or in the local community, but they feel that they need additional support to deal better with the fear of failure, physical violence in school and the fear of being judged, which represent some of the major problems for British students.

On the other hand, British teachers have a different view of the main problems in school. They find that parental support and involvement in the education of their children is insufficient. They also identify problems caused by students' activity on social networks. Emotional challenges such as anger management, pressure for achievement and reduced self-esteem are other problems identified by British school teachers. Here is what they say about it:

*Our biggest challenge is educating parents to support boys to aspire.*

## Discrimination

About half of the interviewed **Slovenian** students have been victims of discrimination while most of the students have witnessed it at some point. The most common reasons for discrimination are gender,

nationality, physical and/or psychological developmental difficulties. Discrimination may also be encouraged by health reasons, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status or personal interests.

About half of the students have helped their discriminated peers by turning to the school staff, some have turned to their parents and some to their brothers and sisters. Only a few students have spoken directly with their discriminated peers as well as with those who have discriminated against them. Others have included the discriminated students in group activities to get them acquainted with their friends.

**Slovenian** students had different views on how to deal with people involved in a discriminatory relationship. They would organize workshops with victims of discrimination in which they would share their feelings and stories as well as workshops that would provide support for dealing with the consequences of discrimination. They suggested workshops where students would put themselves in different roles and thus experience the discrimination their peers had to experience. They consider that it is necessary to have an insight into both positions in a discriminatory relationship:

*It's hard to judge the situation if you don't know the arguments from both sides.*

**Italian** students claim that they generally get on well with each other. However, some students feel excluded because of the hobbies or interests they don't share with others:

*I feel excluded ideologically in the first place, because it turns out that my thoughts are too articulate and if there is somebody that doesn't share them, I don't feel understood.*

Some students exclude themselves by their own choice, because they do not want to belong to a particular group, which is supported by the following quote:

*Rather than being excluded I prefer to exclude myself because I don't find myself at ease with my peers, I feel better with older people.*

Others do it because they don't approve of their peers' behaviour. For example:

*Within my circle of friends I see horrible situations, people that from the outside seem nice but have problems related to alcohol and drugs, smoking, and I prefer to stay away.*

Students of a lower socioeconomic status may sometimes exclude those of a better socioeconomic status. This case shows that discrimination and exclusion can be directed from any group to any member of any other group and it is illustrated by this quote:

*This year I played in a [football] team with older boys and many of them come from low social context and at the beginning we were excluded (contrary to what usually happens). From one part they made fun of us because we were younger and for our economic conditions, but from other side it looked like they were a bit intimidated, and with the envy, after one year's staying together such things passed away.*

In **Croatian** schools, students discriminated against are all those students different from the majority, regardless of what that difference might be. Croatian students emphasize the role of education and workshops on tolerance and acceptance of diversity. They believe that there should be some common space for different groups to get to know each other better. Bullies are experienced as people who need support, whose problems are manifested through violence. This is illustrated by the following quote:

*Since we were kids, we've been listening to our parents, to our environment, trying to make our way through life. But they're not necessarily right. As we're learning, we can see that they're wrong. Our parents, our grandparents, they all make mistakes, their thoughts and opinions are not*

*necessarily perfect. That's why you should build yourself as a person, be positive and stick to some moral standards.*

**British** students feel excluded because they are disempowered in decision-making processes at a school level, which is usually justified by their age. Their peers exclude them by not inviting them to social network chats, based on external features such as hairstyle or clothing. Sometimes exclusion is based on difference in interests or hobbies. An example of disempowerment in the decision-making process is illustrated by this quote:

*It's kind of worrying when there are decisions that are being made for you that you haven't got control over.*

## Future

As far as the future is concerned, **Slovenian** students have clearly crystallized the goals of completing the school, finding work and building a family. On the other hand, **Croatian** students are concerned about the future after graduation. They consider their future insecure. **Italian** and **British** researchers did not dedicate attention to this topic because they processed other, contextually more relevant content.

## Volunteering

**Slovenian** students describe volunteers as people who like helping others, who offer help by their own initiative, feel an urge to be useful, are not paid for that and do not expect anything in return. **Slovenian** students have volunteered for charitable purposes, mostly by collecting or selling items. They have volunteered in social, environmental, educational or health projects and the least in the field of culture.

Slovenian schools have regular voluntary actions aimed at collecting certain materials, such as bottle caps, old paper, empty batteries, toners, toys and school supplies. Students also participate in clean-up campaigns, learning assistance, helping students with special needs and assisting in various school projects and events.

Outside the school students can volunteer in a volunteer firefighters association, fundraising for animal welfare organisations, local community activities, churches, nurseries or homes for the elderly.

However there is in part a conceptual ambiguity about the nature of volunteering because the students confuse volunteering with voluntary blood donation or giving money donations to poor people. Some have mentioned that doing household chores is also volunteering as well as membership in extracurricular activities like scouts. The following quote illustrates well what being a volunteer represents for them:

*Being a volunteer is life-changing and makes both parties involved feel good.*

**Italian** researchers have devoted relatively little time to the subject of volunteering during the focus group implementation, so it was not possible to get a complete picture of volunteering in Italian schools. Only a small number of Italian students have directly been involved in volunteering. Some have volunteered in scouts; some students have been involved in the immigration reception centre in Palermo, while most of them have never volunteered.

**Croatian** students have experienced volunteering as a voluntary pro-social activity for which they do not receive financial compensation. Their definitions of volunteering include only helping others, with an emphasis on the social dimension of volunteering. However, there is a disparity between the choice of volunteering activities offered by schools and the students' perceptions of volunteering. While students experience volunteering as an activity aimed at helping others, schools promote the

collection of financial resources for humanitarian purposes as volunteering. The following quote is an example of the way students understand volunteering:

***I think that volunteering is, in essence, encouraging people to do good things, not for money, but simply because they want someone else to benefit from it.***

Students are involved in volunteering in various ways. They are active either in a school volunteer club, or in their local community, e. g. in their parish, in the Red Cross or in the volunteer fire brigade. Some are not involved in volunteering due to distance or poor traffic connections, others due to sports activities or school responsibilities.

Direct volunteer experiences of Croatian students are related to volunteering with other people, but the students have observed that the school as an institution does not provide sufficient support for volunteering. They also believe that there is a lack of people who could initiate mass volunteer activities. The reasons why students mostly volunteer are personal fulfilment and satisfaction, socializing with others, and seeing the direct consequences of their work.

### Additional topics and problems covered

Individual national teams of researchers have also addressed specific topics through their focus groups to clarify the research questions. **Italian** researchers have studied the relationship between school violence and terrorism.

#### The link between school violence and terrorism in Italy

Students have identified several common features in school bullies and terrorists. Both have developed hatred towards everyone around them because of personal bad experiences. They want to feel strong and be in the centre of attention, so they use physical strength, violence or humiliate others. They have a "closed mentality," they are manifestly conservative, and they do not like diversity. School bullies and terrorists justify their actions on the basis of certain motives. The following quote exemplifies the opinion that terrorists must have had bad personal experiences:

***I think that [members of] ISIS were normal people that have a bad past and violent life episodes and seeing that kind of behaviour they wanted to strike back.***

The students' opinions on who is likely to become a terrorist diverge in two directions. Some believe that school bullies may become terrorists, while most students feel it is the victims of violence who are mostly targeted by the radicals. This is their reaction to an early exposure to violence, which causes a growing sense of suffering, which is, in turn, manifested as terrorism.

***Their rage that grows day after day and creates frustrations leashes out.***

#### Overview of specific themes covered by British research

Several terrorist attacks occurred before and during the implementation of the focus groups in the United Kingdom. The first was in March 2017 at Westminster Bridge in London. In May 2017 there was a terrorist attack in Manchester, and in June that same year there was yet another attack, this time at Borough Market, also in London. These circumstances have partially determined the content of focus groups and opened up a space for discussion on certain topics. They are related to the students' identity, the concept of diversity, immigration, and understanding of extremism and the contextualization of identity, diversity and extremism.

British students associate their identity mostly with the activities in which they are involved. A smaller number of students identified with their ethnic, religious or cultural group, and little attention was paid to gender identity. Considering the fact they don't tend to associate much with these identities,

they pay relatively little attention to them, even though it is precisely these identities that represent a basis for discrimination.

Students experience diversity as a dynamic social force that can connect and separate people. Variety is good because it allows people to learn about different cultures, but at the same time, they also may be exposed to racism, discrimination, prejudice and stereotypes. London schools, mixed on ethnic, religious and other grounds, believe that the degree of integration amongst different communities in their local community is relatively high. Understanding the negative consequences of defining individuals purely on one aspect of their identity is illustrated by the following quote:

***Splitting people into groups causes disagreement. Living together means people can get on. They can learn and prevent violence.***

In the north-east of England where communities are not so diverse, the degree of integration is not so high. It is interesting that students from northern England express a bit more concern about integration compared to London students. Students from both groups, regardless of the degree of diversity of their local communities, feel that integration is good.

Students do not link the concepts of immigration and diversity because they perceive differently the benefits and disadvantages of these two phenomena. When they talked about immigration, they mentioned the importance of allowing others to enter the country for humanitarian reasons. Still, they are sceptical of immigration because they are afraid of the country's overcrowding, the lack of space and jobs. Here's what they say about it:

***I am only a little concerned about immigration because I feel like jobs will be limited because of people coming from other countries.***

The focus group participants were satisfied with the degree of integration of students from different communities in their schools. This applies to the schools with a large number of students from different ethnic, religious or linguistic groups. Schools in Northern England are attended mostly by the white population, and there are few students belonging to other ethnic groups. Students say that integration is a bit less successful there.

But the students in northern England schools are seldom in contact with different cultures and members of other ethnic groups. Sometimes they express themselves in a discriminatory way without a complete understanding of what they are doing. The research conducted in the UK found that students belonging to some minority ethnic groups in the London schools that took part in research often interact primarily with other members of their own group (identified by gender, ethnicity, and/or religious background) and may have little contact with other communities outside school. Teachers therefore face several challenges. One of them is that students involved in the research in northern England have little contact with their non-white peers, and the other is that there's a tendency for some ethnic minorities in the London schools that took part in the research to have little contact with other communities outside school.

### Understanding extremism

Students perceive extremism as a historical phenomenon, and they have corroborated this opinion by some examples from the past. They associate extremism with violence, hatred, religion, or racism, followed by xenophobia and a lack of tolerance to other people's views. The students did not directly associate extremism and terrorism, nor did they mention specific terrorist attacks that could be associated with extremism. As an example of extremism, only the Islamic state has been quoted, and as an illustration of their awareness of the interconnectedness of xenophobia and racism, this quote can be used:

***Racism, xenophobia, extremism – they're all linked.***

Students interpret extremism in a wider historical geopolitical context, rather than through current political and international tensions, as possible triggers of terrorist attacks in the UK. Some research participants linked extremism and politics. Although the students were acquainted with extreme worldviews, political groupings, geopolitical events, and events, they did not link them, as they did not associate them with extremism.

### Perception of the role of the social media

Relationships among students on social networks are a major problem for teachers. They spend a lot of time solving conflicts among students originating from social networks and escalating at school. They observe that students' self-esteem has eroded because of their activities on social networks, and their parents might have no idea what their children are doing there. Also, students sometimes lack the capacity to evaluate relevant and credible data on social networks.

This represents a significant source of problems for the emotional development and psychological well-being of students, as well as for their critical thinking skills. Teachers have to cope with these developmental difficulties, and they describe the harmful effects of social networks as follows:

*Abuse of social media is the biggest problem. Heads of years spend all their time dealing with fights that spark from social networks.*

## Conclusions

Besides school obligations, students of Slovenian, Italian, British and Croatian schools in their teenage years show most interest and engagement for **sport and music activities** (which are also the most accessible ones). **Arts, technology, socializing and social media** are the next mentioned most preferred activities. The activities organized at schools depend on the school curriculum, the type of school, and the activities outside the school depend on the characteristics of the local community. The quality of their implementation depends on the school, the capacities of the teacher, the interest of the students and various other logistical factors. Therefore, **there are not always equal opportunities** present for the children, but they are accommodating their wishes to the present possibilities and available options.

**Students' problems and worries** are linked most with:

- their academic success,
- relationships with their teachers,
- acceptance among their peers,
- their physical appearance and
- self-image.

There are very **strong collective norms** (Bettenhausen and Murnighan 1985), such as physical appearance or some risk behaviours. It appears that conforming to certain risk behaviours or bodily appearance on the basis of normative social influence (Aronson, Wilson and Akert 2005) is necessary for peer acceptance.

The **feeling of injustice** is related to the problems that students experience. **Biased grading or unequal sanctioning** of students for their mischiefs causes a strong feeling of injustice. Students believe that injustice is caused by their belonging to different groups, which is why some have preferential treatment. It is obvious that social categorization (Tajfel 1982) can serve as an adequate explanation for the students' sense of injustice.



Discrimination among students begins by labelling others based on the principles of social categorization (Tajfel 1982) and by formation of their social identity (Tajfel and Turner 1979). Students are often **discriminated against on the grounds of:**

- gender,
- sexual orientation,
- nationality,
- ethnicity or
- religion.

These features are present in all surveyed students and can be grounds for discrimination irrespective of the country or type of school.

However, there are also other characteristics relevant to adolescents that serve as the ground for rejection, and sometimes violence among peers, such as:

- physical appearance,
- socioeconomic background and
- school success.

**Physical, but even more predominantly psychological violence** as well as related sense of (in)security are a fact of life for many students, especially **online conflicts and bullying**. Though they sometimes reach out to adults, most find their own ways of coping with it.

Regarding their own **initiative in local community and democratic participation in the school's life**, students often do not feel invited, encouraged or competent to do it. They describe volunteering as a "voluntary activity of helping others without financial compensation". This view is in line with existing research perspectives (Wilson 2000) of volunteering as a pro-social behaviour. Students say they **like working directly with people because they see the immediate consequences of their work**. Despite their desire to engage in volunteering activities, they are sometimes unable to do it because their **school and local community are under-capacitated** and because of other logistic problems.

It is interesting that students are **more likely to identify themselves with their activities and preferences** and **less emphasise the ethnic, religious or linguistic dimensions of their identity**. It is possible that their aim is to reduce the possibility of inter-group discrimination, which is a form of protection from other groups, but also to ignore potential limitations they might be facing.

When it comes to **students' ideas for solutions** for the described problems, they emphasize certain actions and interventions that might help them. First of all, they expressed the need for more relaxing life schedules, more time for **rest and leisure time**, but also (especially for students in smaller communities) that they need more **options for extracurricular activities** in order to try out what they are good at. Besides encouragement from parents, they would like more **encouragement and initiative from teachers**, for them to recognize some of their talents and interests and provide resources and information. They feel they need **additional support to deal better with the fear of failure, violence in and outside school and the fear of being judged**. They also had views on how to deal with people involved in discriminatory relationships, for example: workshops with victims of discrimination in which they would share their feelings and stories, as well as workshops that would provide support for dealing with the consequences of discrimination. They consider it necessary to have an **insight into both positions in a discriminatory relationship: victim and bully**. They also emphasize the role of education and **workshops on tolerance and acceptance of diversity**. They believe that there should be some common space for different groups to get to know each other better. Finally, the school might provide **more sufficient support for volunteering and civic initiatives of students**.

When it comes to the **specific topics of radicalization among youth**, they described their views on the link between school violence and terrorism. Students' explanations that **both bullies and victims can become radicalized** are theoretically justified. Doosje, Moghaddam, Kruglanski, de Wolf, Mann and Feddes (2016) explain that radical and extremist groups adopt a certain ideology that helps them rationalise the violence caused to the members of the group which initially caused their suffering.

For them, identity is related to the tendency towards radicalisation because marginal members of a group of **undefined identity** are subject to the influence of radical groups that provide a clear framework of beliefs and action (Hogg, Kruglanski and Ven den Bos 2013).

**Contact among members of different groups** helps reduce prejudice and increase positive attitudes among members of different groups (Pettigrew 1998). Direct contact among members of different social groups can lead to perception of the benefits of immigration and social diversity for the development of the society. **Students who have more contacts** with students from other ethnic or religious groups feel that **diversity is good**. However, students also **experience immigration as a realistic threat to natural and material resources**, which is explained by the integrated threat theory (Stephan and Stephan 2000), attitudes they might have adopted through media and their local environment.

## Recommendations

The results of this research suggest that today's teachers in the countries studied are faced with great challenges. While working with students belonging to different ethnic, religious or linguistic groups they are demonstrating competences much broader than their initial teacher training education could have provided them.

In multicultural environments they are challenged by more or less serious student conflicts, sensitive intercultural issues and potential human rights violations that they might not know enough about.

Understanding the complex processes of adolescent identity development, intergroup dynamics, conformity to norms and conflict resolution might help them, but are they enough? Furthermore, the immersion of youth in various Internet platforms that teachers are not well acquainted with is an additional challenge.

Trying to find answers to these challenges, what can **teachers** do?

Based on the conclusions from this qualitative research, these are some initial recommendations for all teachers that might help them face these challenges through their own **personal and professional development** (involving formal, non-formal or informal education):

- strive towards **deeper understanding of social psychological processes** that occur among their students in the classrooms as well as own stereotypes and prejudice
- acquire knowledge and skills in the area of **sensitivity to intercultural issues, communication and relationships building** with students as well as **inspiring leadership**
- **continuously develop their critical thinking skills**
- continuously develop skills in **teaching and debating about controversial issues** in the classroom
- acquire **basic concepts of citizenship education** and connect its topics to their own specific subject
- improve their **knowledge on the social networks** students use, as well as **basic media literacy** teaching and skills

Furthermore, if we know that teachers are often not perceived by students as someone with whom they can talk in case of violence or other problems, it is highly recommendable for teachers to:

- **invest efforts in building trust** with their students. This might be a good way to raise the social capital of the school, consequently reducing violence and substituting it with prosocial behaviour.

### What can policy makers do?

Broader policy recommendations can be made both on **national and school level**.

**Regarding national level**, it is highly recommendable that policy makers introduce or to do far more even if some basic policies are already in the place (depending from country to country):

- incorporate **education about diversity and cultural sensitivity** into **teacher training programmes and in-service training**. Education about diversity could help reduce such negative consequence arising from prejudice or discrimination.
- Organise continuing professional development for school heads (principals) on civic education topics
- Incorporate more topics on diversity across the curriculum

- include and/or upgrade education about diversity, multiculturalism and working with prejudice in the **national curriculum for students**.
- In countries where there is a lack of civic competences and political literacy among students, introduce citizenship education as a separate subject in primary and secondary schools.
- To support, encourage and recognize as a valued part of the educational system the role of civil society organisations in providing civic education programmes (especially in non-formal education)

### What can schools do?

**Schools' own internal policies** have a lot to contribute to the schools' functioning and student well-being. School policies might grasp various issues identified in the research. Some of them might be to:

- **Modernize and improve school's policies on conflict resolution**, especially conflicts emerging from students belonging to different social groups. Unlike interpersonal conflicts, these carry greater risks of polarizing the school's community if not resolved timely and thoroughly.
- ***Restorative justice principles, Intercultural mediation, Reciprocal maieutic approach (additional resource), Deep democracy, Young ambassadors of intercultural dialogue and Philosophy for Children (P4C)*** are just some of the advancing methods schools can implement, but also applying intercultural learning and reflecting sensitivity to differences in school practice and policies.
- **Introduce/improve school policies on diversity**. Since there are many problems that originate from school diversity, introducing policies on promoting diversity as a favourable school value might be of great help, as well as dedication of the whole staff to continuously raise their awareness on intercultural practices, fairness and equality.
- **Implement school projects promoting and valuing difference and diversity** (for example **human library**).
- **Implement school projects aimed at topics relevant for adolescents**: identity, talents and interests, emotional support in dealing with failure, discrimination, peer acceptance, on-line bullying etc.
- **Closely track national policies** on discrimination, school bullying, education of minorities etc. and implement them in the school curricula.
- **Broaden the definition of volunteering and invest into specific school projects** led by the students and their own volunteering clubs. In that way, broader activities of student engagement could be introduced, and not only focusing on the ones whose primary purpose is providing aid to people in need. For example, students could volunteer in human rights organisations, in the field of public policies, civic initiatives, improving their school's policies etc.
- Encourage and facilitate the active participation of students, teachers, members of local governments and parents in the governance of educational institutions.

The research results have also provided an abundance of insights related to **managing school projects**. For example, schools offer limited student participation and volunteering options, and those that exist are mostly concerned with humanitarian and prosocial activities. Therefore, recommendations for schools are to:

- **extend the collaboration with key organisations** from local community. It will provide more volunteering options for students, and give more possibilities for future careers.

- Invest additional efforts in **motivating students to lead their own school projects and volunteer**. This attempt might be complementary with increasing the scope of organisations school collaborates with.
- Invest efforts to **make school a safe place** in which students can talk about their problems and raise important issues as the basis for future school projects.
- Create **environment for student creativity and initiative**, but also for the creativity of teachers.

## Appendix A – focus group questions

### STUDENTS' INTERESTS

The interests of the students were the first topic examined by the focus groups. The main question asked within this topic was:

*What are the main interests of the children / young people of your age?*

It was followed by the following sub-questions:

*What interests you in life? What interests your peers? How do you select which activity you will take up? Do you have everything you need to be able to do this activity? List some of the interesting activities or projects in your school and local community. How does your school encourage you to engage in these activities?*

### PROBLEMS AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

The main research question addressed to the participants of focus groups was:

*What are the main problems of the students your age?*

It was followed by the following sub-questions that covered topics like sense of security, witnessing violence at school, injustice, discrimination and their view of future.

*What are your peers concerned about, what are the problems typical for your school and outside it? Do you feel safe at school and outside it? Have you experienced or witnessed violence? Have you experienced or witnessed any injustice around you or in your local community? Do you feel excluded at school or in your local community? Do you feel that other students or teachers exclude you? What happens if someone is different? How do adults relate to someone who is different?*

*Are you involved in solving problems at school and your local community and how? What do you need to solve these problems and who can you contact for help or advice? How do you see your future and how optimistic are you about it?*

### VOLUNTEERING

Participants of the focus groups were asked the following questions regarding volunteering:

*Are you familiar with volunteering? What does it mean? What is its purpose? What opportunities for volunteering does your school offer? Are you involved in volunteering? Specify what else you would like to try. What is the most interesting thing about volunteering?*

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