

POLICY BRIEF

This policy brief aims to present recommendations for increasing effort to introduce different models of social and civic competences development in primary and secondary schools in Croatia. Therefore, it is intended for the stakeholders in the educational sector, particularly teachers, schools and educational policy makers.

These recommendations are based on the implementation of the 2-year long project “Start the Change – embracing differences through intercultural education and volunteering”, that was implemented in four countries by the Forum for Freedom in Education (FFE) from Croatia in partnership with the Think Global from United Kingdom, the Youth Centre of Dravinja Valley from Slovenia and the Centre for Creative Development “Danilo Dolci” from Italy during 2017 – 2018. The organization Network of Education Policy Centres was an associate partner on the project. The project was financed by Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (Erasmus+, K3: Support for policy reform).

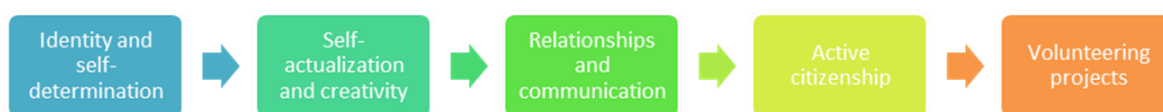
About the project “Start the Change”

The project aimed at supporting young people and their teachers to initiate intercultural and peace building projects focused on preventing radicalization and developing sensitivity and mutual appreciation. Since radicalization most often happens in a context of deprivation (whether economic or psychological), within search for meaning and identity, but is also fuelled by personal issues and/or need for revenge, the project focused on developing and nurturing the opposite values and capacities:

- psychological thriving, emotional development and self-regulation
- civic competences and positive attitudes towards differences and
- multi-perspective understanding of the world.

Therefore, the activities developed aimed for young people and teachers to find personal satisfaction, respect, acceptance, and feeling of positive engagement that inspires action for a constructive goal, to develop critical thinking and a deeper understanding of the world we live in, to build connectedness, assertiveness, strong and positive relationships and a support network and to feel desire to make positive changes realistically and constructively in their school and local communities.

The key model of the Start the Change educational program:



Key project results:

- **41** schools in four countries participated
- **311** students participated in the research (focus groups)
- **100** teachers and volunteers trained within 40 hours training (s)
- **41** school projects implemented - promoting peacebuilding, intercultural understanding and critical thinking
- Over **2500** young people participated in the school projects
- Around **800** students participated in the creative contest Paint the World with Diversity
- **4** publications and **1** short documentary created as resources for teachers

Context

Despite over a 15 years of advocacy, Croatia still does not have a systematic model for civic and social competences development in primary and secondary education. The Children's Ombudsman report for 2017 emphasised once again that all schools in Croatia (both Primary and Secondary) should have continued implementation of Civic educations as a separate obligatory subject. Also, the conclusion of the study conducted as a part of the COBRAS project "Aiming High in Diverging Life Contexts (2017)", showed the need for development of civic competences among children and youth in the Croatian educational system and it shows that voices of children and young people are often neglected. The results of the international study Citizenship Education in Schools in Europe (2017) showed that the civic education in Croatia mostly depends on enthusiastic teachers as there was no clear political support for its implementation. The students from Croatia showed a lack of trust in public institutions, the government, parliament and political parties and the media in comparison to other countries. According to the study the level of time devoted to civic education is low and teacher preparation is weak. Croatia delivers citizenship education primarily as a compulsory cross-curricular theme, with the addition at the secondary level of a one-year compulsory separate subject. Croatia provides the fewest hours of citizenship education – either as compulsory separate subjects or integrated into other compulsory subjects – in the EU (Eurydice, 2017).

As in most other EU countries, there are no specialist or semi-specialist teachers of citizenship education, and in addition there are no national regulations on the pedagogical competences in initial teacher education. Croatian teachers also have significantly fewer opportunities to participate in citizenship education trainings, either in initial or ongoing training, as measured in the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) (IEA, 2017). Expanding citizenship education in Croatia depends on municipal-level initiatives. In 2017, the city of Rijeka experimented with introducing civic education in primary schools as an extra-curricular activity. Following a positive external evaluation, the experimental implementation expanded to 11 other municipalities and now includes the third- and fourth-largest cities in the country. In implementing these initiatives CSOs are key partner to growing number of local authorities that decided to introduce Citizenship education on local levels. FFE is one of three CSOs that delivers the modules of civic education teacher training program in these local communities. Unfortunately such a level of cooperation is not recognized on the national level and there is a lack of cooperation between Ministry of Education, Agencies involved in teacher training programme and CSOs with expertise in education and providing teacher training programmes.

In terms of accepting diversities Gallup's research from August 2017 included Croatia among the states whose citizens are least friendly to migrants and refugees. According to the CULT Committee Report (2017) Croatia has not prepared comprehensive educational policies targeting immigrant children, other than language courses (consisting of 70 hours). Furthermore, no system for evaluating and monitoring such policies exist. Therefore it can be concluded that social inclusion policies as well as practices are not implemented in schools in Croatia and there is an evident need for additional support to teachers and schools in order to promote inclusive policies and projects. The recently published "European Commission against Racism and Intolerance report on Croatia" (2018) is showing that in Croatia there is a growing rise of nationalism, particularly among the youth. In the regional media and on Internet, expressions of racism and xenophobia against Serbs, LGBT persons and refugees are commonplace, as is abusive language when referring to Roma.

Since 1999 FFE strongly advocates for systemic and quality introduction of civic education in schools. FFE is one of the three coordinating organization of the GOOD Initiative – the network of more than 30 civil society organizations that are advocating for introduction of the civic education in schools. However, due to the lack of political vision and will, most of CSOs in the field of civic and social competences development currently focuses on direct work with and support to schools that are open to such collaboration.

Recommendations

Several studies including the research implemented within the Start the Change project suggest that today's teachers 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 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 and from the experience of this project, these are 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 civic education and connecting its topics to their own specific subject
- improve their knowledge on 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 social capital of the school, consequently reducing violence and substituting it with prosocial behaviour.

What can policy makers do?

Regarding national level, it is highly recommendable that policy makers:

- 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 continuous professional development for school heads (principles) on the civic education topics
- Incorporate more topics on diversity cross curricular
- include and/or upgrade education about diversity, multiculturalism and working with prejudice in national curriculum for students.
- 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 and during the project. 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, volunteering, active citizenship initiatives are just some of the advancing methods, 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 differences and diversity**
For example human library or volunteering in local community - many ideas presented in the Book of Good ideas (find below)
- **implement school projects aimed at topics relevant for adolescents**
Topics identity, talents and interests, emotional support in dealing with failure, discrimination, peer acceptance, on-line bullying etc. Start the Change Workshop Book offers workshops on these topics (find below)
- **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 lead 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 the local officials and parents in the governance of educational institutions.

The feedback from teachers coordinating school projects 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, **further recommendations for schools would be 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.

Teacher resources created within the Start the Change project that can help in finding ideas, good practice examples and concrete methods:

[Start the Change Comparative Research Report](#) - young people's voices on their interests, needs, problems and solutions to contemporary challenges

[Start the Change Handbook](#) - offers the summary of the project START, key research findings, theoretical framework and key topics that can help in building young people's resilience and empowering them in various ways as well as practical steps in starting the local level youth projects as well as examples of good practices in work with young people.

[Start the Change Workshop Book](#) - offers 40 workshops in the area of diversity for direct work with young people (different age level – from primary to secondary schools) and it is divided in three key areas: personal and social development, civic education and volunteer projects.

[Book of Good ideas](#) – 36 school projects promoting diversity, social justice and critical thinking implemented in Croatia, Italy, Slovenia and United Kingdom

[Start the Change Documentary](#) - the stories of teachers, students and project coordinators about implementing their projects from Book of Good Ideas