

Start the Change

Embracing differences through intercultural education and volunteering

Policy recommendations

Centro per lo Sviluppo Creativo Danilo Dolci – Italy



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 Italy. Therefore, it is intended for the stakeholders in the educational sector, particularly teachers, schools and educational policy makers.

1. The Project

In the period between December 2016 and December 2018, four European partners worked together in the project “Start the change: Embracing differences through intercultural education and volunteering”, funded by the Erasmus + Programme (KA3: Support to Policy Reform). Centro per lo Sviluppo Creativo “Danilo Dolci” worked in the project, coordinated by Forum for Freedom in Education (Croatia), and together with Youth Center of Dravinja Valley (Slovenia) and Think Global (UK).

The main aim of the project was to *educate and support young people and teachers to start up intercultural and peace-building projects aimed at preventing radicalization and developing sensitivity and mutual appreciation.*

The project has given the space to youngsters to express their opinions, show their voice and take their responsibility in changing their environments. Furthermore, the project has supported teachers to work with young people, tackle difficult topics and support them to be active citizens.

For more information, please look at the following website: www.startthechange.net

In Italy, CSC Danilo Dolci has mainly worked with 7 schools and 23 teachers over the course of 2 years, which included:

- Research with youngsters
- Training for teachers
- Implementation of local projects on active citizenship and peacebuilding in school
- A creative contest on the theme of diversity and social inclusion



2. The context: what about radicalization in Italy?

The radicalisation process itself does not have a generally accepted common definition, but most of the existing definitions point out that it is a process by which an individual or a group embraces ever more extreme social, political or religious attitudes, i.e. ideology that calls for a significant change in the society (Borum 2011). The path to the realisation of such a change may be either violent or non-violent.

In Italy, radicalization could arise by its changing political context which is characterized by a still lasting economic crisis and an increased influx of migrants, far-right parties and xenophobic propaganda¹. There is a draft law on the prevention of radicalization – seen only from the perspective of a jihadist extremism and not in the wide meaning - with the involvement of schools and other institutions, as well as training for teachers^{2, 3}.

However, as prevention of radicalization in the wide perspective, some initiatives are already put in place, even if they are not organized in a coherent and planned way: there is Citizenship and Constitution lessons at school, established by Law 169, 2008. Furthermore, Law 107/2015 or “Good School Legislation” - the basic law for school organization in Italy, underlines the importance of citizenship education with priorities such as the development of active citizenship and democratic skills “through the enhancement of intercultural education and peace, respect for differences and dialogue between cultures (...)” (art. 8/c), “preventing and combating (...)including computer bullying; strengthening school inclusion (art. 8/i), and “Development of schools as active, open communities to the territory and able to develop and increase the interaction with the families and with the local community, including third-party organisations and companies” (art. 8/m)⁴.

2.1 The local context:

In Palermo, Sicily, in the spring of 2017, a research was conducted on the difficulties youngsters face in today’s world. The research was part of the Start the Change – project activities.

The research was carried out with

- 9 participating schools, primary and lower/higher secondary schools (VET, Classical, artistic, scientific curricula) in Palermo and Partinico, Italy.
- 10 focus groups, involving 115 students (aged between 10 and 17)

2.1.2 Main findings of the research

Young people highlight the influence of difficulties and issues in their daily lives, such as bullying and violence, especially when victims “differed” from the mainstream group; small grouping and feelings of superiority within the group, peer pressure and social image, family problems, lack of self-esteem and motivation, worries about the future, self-acceptance, relationships with friends and the fear of being alone. Most of the pupils interviewed talked about episodes of injustice regarding different treatments or violence/exclusion on people who are seen as “different”. Exclusion is seen as one of the main

¹ <http://www.sciencespo.fr/coesionet/sites/default/files/Italy%20Extremism.pdf>

² [http://www.camera.it/leg17/465?tema=prevenzione dell estremismo jahadista#m](http://www.camera.it/leg17/465?tema=prevenzione%20dell%20estremismo%20jihadista#m)

³ <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/italys-draft-law-prevention-radicalization-missed-opportunity>

⁴ <http://www.paschinimarchi.it/legge-107-del-13-luglio-2015-riforma-della-scuola-con-note.pdf>



factors that could lead to radical behavior. Nevertheless, they expressed positive feelings regarding their hobbies, friendships, families and other daily activities.

The conclusions of the research were the following:

- Youngsters are very aware of their situation
- Bullying and exclusion are common phenomena in schools, especially in lower high schools (age 12-14), on the basis of “being different”
- Most students agree with the constructed nature of the radicalization process in which negative experiences lead to violence rather than an inherent evil inside people.
- Difference are to be encouraged however in practice the easiest way is to stay with those similar to you.
- Students are motivated and willing to implement projects to change their environment⁵

3. The experience of the project

Giving the situation which has been analyzed in our local research and based on the identified students & teachers needs, 11 local projects were implemented in 7 different schools with in total 212 students who participated in the projects directly. This collective action aimed at providing a safe space for schools to prevent factors leading to radicalization amongst youth.

All teachers completed a teacher training before implementing activities with their students and received a folder with activities that they could use with their students. All activities proposed by the project were student-centered.

On the **teacher training**, the reactions of the 23 teachers involved were positive:

- It helped them to face and introduce new arguments in class
- The practical, non-formal activities were very much appreciated by all teachers
- It has created a more student-centered teaching approach for the majority of the participants
- Teachers even wanted more into-depth training on certain themes and activities

During the local project implementation, students were asked again which problems they could identify in their near environments and were supported by teachers to find solutions to those problems by means of projects that they could design themselves. In this way, students were obliged to look at their environment critically and take responsibility for the change they would like to see. The ideas for projects ranged from murals, to an upgrade of the classroom, to new classrooms to respond to the needs of students. Other projects included more research on certain topics of diversity or the use of social networks. Every school and class had its own interpretation of the local projects, the method and their definition of the key themes, such as for example, diversity and radicalization.

Although at first students might have been slightly uncomfortable, the reactions at the end were positive. They appreciated the different approach and realized that they could change something, even

⁵ For further information on the research results, please, download the results at the following links:

Italian research: https://danilodolci.org/media/STC-National-Report_Start-the-change-CSC_Danilo_Dolci.pdf

Comparative research: https://startthechange.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/research-report_dissemination_english_final.pdf



if it was sometimes as little as cleaning the classroom. It required a change of thinking for most of the students, but with some practice of non-formal exercises, students got used to look at their environment different and to see the problems they could solve. To shift from complaining about problems to actively being part of the change, gave a positive energy to all students.

Impact on students:

- All teachers received positive reactions from students
- Students made new contacts – the project offered a space to value other people outside of their friend group or close circle
- Students were motivated for similar activities in the future
- During the project teachers saw a high engagement of students
- The project gave students a possibility to express themselves and learn to articulate what is important to them
- The project made students feel part of the community
- Opportunity to think and discuss topics that normally are not part of the curriculum but that are very important
- Better coordination and collaboration skills

Role of teachers:

The role of teachers is very important in the guidance of students during implementation of projects. The activities were meant to favor critical thinking and active initiative of students are highly dependent on the attitude of the teachers. This kind of activities requires an active engagement of students, but also a high motivation of teachers to support students in expressing and finding their own voice and to step back as teachers.

Success of the project:

- Reactions of teachers were very positive: 64.7% was very satisfied with the participation in the project.
- Teachers enjoyed seeing their students coming with new and original ideas, seeing them working together and develop autonomously a project.
- Teachers recognized the usefulness of activities and use more informal activities in their classrooms.
- Teachers felt supported by the project partners.
- Teachers felt more competent to face actual issues of today's world in their classrooms.
- Schools and teachers are prone to use the activities in the future.
- Teachers appreciated the collaboration among educational staff from NGOs & local volunteers with schools, since it started valuable synergies enriching the educational offer of the schools.
- Recognize the importance of reflecting and working on themes such as diversity, stereotypes, emotions, interculturality, etc.
- Recognize the importance of non-formal activities in the formal setting.

The main **challenges** of the project implementation according to teachers was:

- To engage other colleagues, especially in case of project implemented as a “optional course” in which students from different classes were involved
- To insert the project in the normal curriculum
- To motivate the students for them to take the initiative to start the change



The **creative contest** gave students the possibility to express themselves in an individual and creative way. Here again, the initial role of the teacher was very important in supporting and promoting creativity in education, but the outcomes were great. Especially for students who frequent schools where there is little room for artistic classes, to include creativity gave students yet another way of expressing themselves.

4. Recommendations

Based on our experience, we recommend...

- a. The **“Start the Change” activities and approach should be continued** in the already participating schools and implemented in new schools as a finished and **tested methodology to encourage active citizenship** and prevent the radicalization process amongst youngsters at school.
- b. Addressing topics such as radicalization, with all its related terms such as diversity, emotions, problem solving, inclusion, human rights, etc. is important both for teachers and students. Both students and teachers are motivated to deal with this topics, therefore we recommend that **schools should have space in their curriculum to include activities that empower young people to take initiative and be active** in identifying problems and tackle them.
- c. To **organize teacher trainings** on the above topics, with a specific attention on the following:
 1. teachers should be prepared well through a specific training course that addresses the most important themes, but that also gives practical activities and possible the space to learn from each other (in case of intra-school training).
 2. Teachers need also to be prepared for a more facilitative role in which they can really support students in their own development and sense of initiative.
- d. **More student-centered activities and non-formal teaching in high school.** These kinds of activities have been proven to be important for the development of active citizenship of students as well as skills development such as communication, collaboration, critical thinking and emotional skills.
- e. **A whole school approach is necessary.** Non-formal education and initiative of students is not something only for citizenship-classes but can be used in any subject and it will have a greater effect if the whole school collaborates or at least supports initiatives of particular teachers who want to work with active citizenship topics and methodologies.
- f. **Creativity is a good medium for talking about sensitive but actual and important issues** and it gives new input for students to think in different ways and express themselves.
- g. **Educational authorities should provide a more coherent and addressed-to-issue intervention to radicalization in a wide perspective and not only referred to jihadist extremism.**
- h. Last but not least, the **collaboration among non-formal education organizations & schools and between teachers and non-school educators has to be further fostered** because of the benefits of non-formal education and formal one can have together for the learning path of the students and the skills development that this union implies. Moreover, **it could give strength to a potential holistic approach in which all part of the community work together to prevent radicalization process**, counteracting all the factors leading to it.