



# STUDENT VOICE AS A TOKEN OF A QUALITY SCHOOL

**observations by students from selected schools  
in Portugal, North Macedonia and Croatia  
on active participation, relationships  
and classes during the COVID-19 crisis**



Start the change!

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## TITLE

STUDENT VOICE AS A TOKEN OF A QUALITY SCHOOL – observations by students from selected schools in Portugal, North Macedonia and Croatia on active participation, relationships and classes during the COVID-19 crisis

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# ABOUT THE PROJECT

How to awaken, support and reinforce the voice of children and the youth today is the main topic of the three-year international project titled "Start the Change!", implemented in a partnership with the organizations from Croatia, Portugal, North Macedonia and Belgium.

The purpose of the project is to empower schools, teachers and parents to support and acknowledge the voice of students and their active participation in the life of the school and their local community in the three countries. The project emphasizes, in particular, that active participation of children transforms the balance of power between children and adults: instead of a hierarchical power structure in which adults hold all the power, participation advocates cooperative power relationships based on dialogue, negotiation and cooperation between children and adults.

One of the key project activities is the implementation of a qualitative research – in focus groups, students are asked about how they see their schools as an environment where they can actively participate and encourage the changes they want as well as about the possibilities of a better inclusion and interculturality in the school communities.

The authors of this comparative report, in an informative and substantive manner, present and analyse student voice in 15 schools in three countries, along with important recommendations that will be transmitted to educational policy-makers through various advocacy activities.

The aim of this publication and other project activities is to enable student voice to be more relevant, more influential and a more frequent factor in policy-making that directly concerns students.

We see a particular significance of this research in the fact that the students were interviewed in 2020, when all three countries experienced sudden changes in education due to the COVID-19 crisis. We consider student voice, i.e. the students' perspective on those changes, to be extremely important because they enable consideration to take place about what changes can be implemented in order to achieve a higher quality of the teaching process and student welfare in the challenges of the current situation.



Partners on the “Start the Change!” project:

- Forum for Freedom in Education, Croatia
- Ivan Meštrović Primary School in Zagreb, Croatia
- INOVA+ INNOVATION SERVICES, Portugal
- José Estêvão Cluster School, Portugal
- Macedonian Civic Education Center , North Macedonia
- Secondary Municipal School „Nikola Karev” – Strumica, North Macedonia
- Network of Education Policy Centres (NEPC), Croatia
- SIRIUS Policy Network on Migrant Education , Belgium

You can find more about the project and project activities on [www.startthechange.net](http://www.startthechange.net)



# ABOUT THE AUTHORS



**Nikola Baketa**, PhD, is a Postdoctoral researcher at the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb, where he studies the education policy and youth, particularly civic education, and where he initiates policy changes in the area of higher education. With a Master's degree and PhD in Public Policies, obtained from the Faculty of Political Science in Zagreb as well as a Master's

degree in Political Science from the Central European University in Budapest, Nikola Baketa has been active in numerous organisations, initiative, advisory and expert bodies connected with education and youth at the national level. He is also a member of the HRT (Croatian Radiotelevision) Programming Council. He lectures at the Faculty of Political Science and Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Rijeka as an External Associate.



**Marko Kovačić**, PhD, is a political sociologist, employed at the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb, where he is engaged in youth studies. He is the co-founder and lecturer at the first academic study programme on youth in Croatia, offered by the University of Rijeka. He is the national correspondent for youth policies for the Council of Europe and European Commission as

well as a Youth Wiki national correspondent for the European Commission. For the past eight years, he has been participating in almost every policy process connected with youth at the level of Croatia, the EU and Council of Europe. M. Kovačić earned his PhD in Public Policies at the University in Ljubljana, his Master's degree at the Central European University in Budapest and his Master's degree in Public Policies from the Faculty of Political Science in Zagreb, where he graduated from. He was a visiting researcher at the Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona.





# INTRODUCTION

**Why is student voice, i.e. student participation, important? Is it a value unto itself or does it have an instrumental character? On whose behalf should we advocate student voice, and should we advocate it at all? To what extent? Finally, what are the factors that affect a quality encouraging environment for student participation?**

Shifting the focus from the description and analysis of the education system, curriculum and teachers to the approach where concentrating on students and their voice prevails has lately been the dominant paradigm in various types of research in the field of education (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004).

According to Robinson and Taylor (2007), one of the reasons for that is a growing awareness among various actors of the concept of children's rights as enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. **Student voice has thus become an unavoidable (declared) standard of contemporary education.**

It should be kept in mind that the neoliberal approach to education, perpetuated mostly by policies and imperatives of excellence, performance, standardised testing and focus on employability (or even beyond that: placing education in the service of the labour market), is still prevalent as the mainstream discourse in most of the countries in the world (Ball, 2016; Connell, 2013; Torres, 2008). Were we to counterpose, conditionally speaking, those two paradigms to one another, it would become important to critically examine how different systems address the neoliberal imperatives and to what extent – ranging from support to dissociation – they actively advocate the creation of an encouraging environment for active student participation.





# A SHORT THEORETICAL REVIEW

At the very beginning, it is necessary to demystify the idea of student voice, which is not new in its essence, since the idea of the importance of student thinking can be found in class records dating back to the end of the 19th century (Rudduck, 2006: 131). However, regardless of the fact that this is not a new idea, it is still topical because the realisation of the so called bridge between the educational aim and individual approach to students is still not a standard, neither on the macro nor micro level of the education system (Forum, 2001).

**Student voice can be a value unto itself or can be viewed instrumentally.**

If it is a value unto itself, then we must take the rights-based approach, where decisions on someone cannot be taken without that person's participation. On the other hand, student voice can also be viewed instrumentally, as a mechanism which encourages participation in a community and ultimately student emancipation. Such a pragmatic approach is also substantiated by the proclaimed role of the school – to prepare children and youth for an active contribution to the society and labour market.

Whatever approach we take, **it is essential that the creation of an encouraging environment for the development of student voice be well-thought-out.**





For the purpose of this text, we present a conceptualisation of student voice according to Robinson and Taylor (2007: 8), which explains student voice in four dimensions:

### **COMMUNICATION AS DIALOGUE**

Student voice is based primarily on the conception of communication as dialogue. The premise of this model is the abandonment of the idea that communication is mere transmission of messages, i.e. that the aim of communication is to generate new meaning. Such a communication mission has the potential of mutual understanding between students and teachers, thus also a greater potential for change. During such activities, students feel empowered and motivated for action because they jointly participate in the processes of creating and interpreting the reality that they live and share with the rest of the school staff.

### **INCLUSIVITY**

According to the authors (ibid.), many schools claim to listen to student voice. However, in order for that to be substantial, the question is whose voice is listened to. In order to hear the voice of everyone (or at least the largest majority of students), not only those who possess cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977), it is necessary to foster a climate in which teachers will create the conditions in which they can teach the curricular content based on the backgrounds of their students, i.e. connect the school with the community in that manner (Giroux, 1999).

### **POWER RELATIONS ARE OFTEN UNEQUAL AND PROBLEMATIC**

Unlike students, teachers are those with the power, knowledge, position or authority. However, instead of petrifying those power discrepancies, the role of teachers should be to empower students to critically question their position of power. In that manner, which, according to Freire (1968), develops critical thinking, students become active subjects and may later be the transformative power of the society.

### **TRANSFORMATION**

It is not enough to merely listen to student voice, but rather to act so that students are able to modify school practices and policies. It is the behavioural component, in which students are co-creators of their own reality, essential for their future participation in society and politics. This function of student voice is therefore one of the most crucial ones.

**Overview of the student voice conceptualisation according to Robinson and Taylor (2007: 8)**



As seen from this conceptualisation, empowering students to participate and have their own opinions that will be heard is not simple. It consists of creating an encouraging environment.

**In other words, establishing a student council or sporadically asking students how they are doing at school will not result in the desired outcome – emancipated, empowered and competent citizens who have the right to (co-) decide their own reality.**

In order to understand the way in which students think about various concepts of their participation, we decided on the qualitative approach to the research. Even though student voice was only one of the foci, all three topics below jointly illustrate the manner in which students can realise themselves in their schools. Even though some of the topics have nothing to do with student participation itself at first glance (e.g. classes during the COVID-19 pandemic), the hypothesis of this project – and thereby of the publication – is that students must create, together with the rest of the school staff, the environment in which they are accepted and empowered to participate actively. Accordingly, the following is an overview of the findings of empirical research that will answer to what extent students may act and to what extent they do act in the school environment.



# RESEARCH PART

The research involved 29 focus groups with the following participants:



79 students from  
North Macedonia



99 students  
from Portugal



82 students  
from Croatia



260 students

All focus groups were implemented in the period between 22 September and 12 November 2020. The focus groups included schools participating in the project. In each of them, two focus groups were implemented.



The schools in which the research was conducted ([www.startthechange.net](http://www.startthechange.net)):

### **NORTH MACEDONIA**

"Kuzman Josifovski – Pitu" Primary School, Skopje  
"Nikola Karev" Municipal Vocational School, Strumica  
"Braka Miladinovci" Vocational School, Skopje  
"Pero Nakov" Vocational School, Kumanovo  
"Braka Ramiz-Hamid" Primary School, Skopje



### **CROATIA**

"Ivan Meštrović" Primary School, Zagreb  
Dugo Selo Secondary School, Dugo Selo  
Bjelovar Trade and Commercial School, Bjelovar  
Vrapče Nursing School, Zagreb  
Zagreb Administrative School, Zagreb



### **PORTUGAL**

"Loureiro" Elementary School, Loureiro, Oliveira de Azeméis  
"José Estêvão" Cluster School, Aveiro  
"São Bernardo" Elementary School, S. Bernardo  
"Albergaria-a-Velha" Secondary School, Albergaria-a-Velha  
EPROMAT VET School, Matosinhos



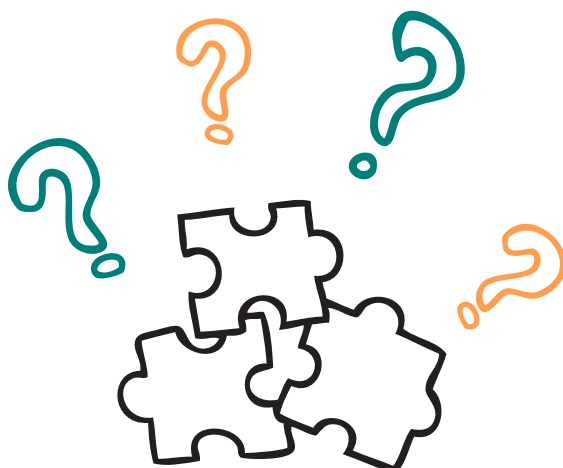
For the purpose of focus groups, a protocol was created and agreed with all project partners in the period between February and September 2020. The protocol defined the main topics, which included:

- **general satisfaction with the school,**
- **needs for changes in the school and possibilities of their realisation,**
- **inequality and exclusion, and**
- **volunteering.**

The aim of the research was to obtain the student perspective on their participation in various activities at school, the responsiveness of the school to their needs, the diversity they are surrounded by, and inclusion possibilities.

After the implementation of the focus groups, national reports were drafted, with the basic information about the implementation, list of topics broached in the focus groups, description of the main findings in connection with each individual topic (how students understand the topic, whether they agree on the main aspects or not, the examples that they gave etc.), and a brief personal impression of the person implementing the focus group on the group dynamic throughout its duration.

It is important to note that the project itself, including the designing of the protocols for the implementation of the focus groups, started at the beginning of 2020, and that there were no provisions to address the topic of the coronavirus epidemic. However, as it became an integral part of the daily lives of the students, with a significant impact on their school experience, the topic was broached spontaneously during the implementation of the focus groups.





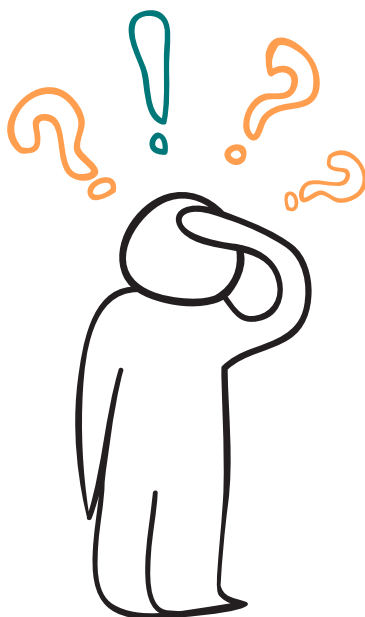
# STUDENT VOICE AND POTENTIAL FOR CHANGE

The representation of student interests and acknowledgement of their opinions is important so that they may accept the school as a part of their identity and have a certain ownership of the school-related decisions and events. However, the responses of students from most of the schools indicate that there are **certain challenges** in this segment.


The first one is the responsiveness of the support and teaching staff to student initiatives in relation to addressing individual challenges. Then, partially related to the first segment, student motivation for taking steps to address certain problems at school or improving individual segments. Finally, there is also the familiarity with the procedures and possibilities at the students' disposal.

The state of play points to the fact that, as far as their initiatives and ideas are concerned, students are often not met with a good response and reaction on the part of the teachers and support staff. Students thus claimed that they often encountered the following:

- **closed doors,**
- **their complaints are either trivialised,**
- **or they are listened to, but students do not see that something has been done in order to address the complaints.**



Similarly, they claimed that the resolution of those objections was protracted or that the competent persons were often busy with other affairs. Students mostly believe they can change very little at their school, and that there are default rules that are difficult to change from their position.



***We can try to resolve a problem, but we cannot resolve it because we don't have our teacher's support. (Croatia)***

***Whoever we ask for, anyone. Even those upstairs don't know what they want. They make one decision today, a different one tomorrow. (Croatia)***

***I talked to the class director to solve this and she paid no attention to it. (Portugal)***



Rare were the cases in which students highlighted actual effort on the part of the competent persons to resolve their problems as well as the possibilities to talk to them openly about the problem. According to the students, such an attitude of the support and teaching **staff causes anxiety and calls into question the resolution of individual issues they face at school.** Some students show interest in taking more concrete steps to remedy the situation in connection with certain issues at school, but the prevailing impression is that they are often not sure that they can change something. It affects their motivation and engagement.

In some schools, as the reason for the lack of interest in taking concrete steps, students mentioned examples of previous generations, which attempted to change certain segments, but was not met with an adequate response on the part of the school staff. **Some of them perceive schooling as a transitional phase, and are unwilling to make changes in order to enable changes for the upcoming generations.**

**If a certain motivation does exist and students discuss potential solutions, it seems that they are often unaware of their rights and options for the realisation of that change.**



In some schools, the students' response indicated the following:

- that they have internal school regulations spanning 500 pages, which they receive at the beginning of the school year, which is impractical; despite them, rules are made on the spot, which is confusing.
- some students say that they are not informed at all about who to talk to if a problem arises: **...we were never told who to talk to when we have a problem.** (Portugal)
- some students have not been informed of the existence of student representatives at the school or their role;
- at some schools, the student council is highlighted as the only possibility to exert influence, but is also stated that the student council is limited in its ability to act, therefore students often fail to see the purpose of that body. Or, as students say **...its purpose is to pass on notices.** (Croatia)
- students from most of the schools confirm that, even when problems are discussed, including whether they are heard and how they can raise their issues, official student representatives (student council or class president) as bodies that can assist students in resolving problems are seldom mentioned;
- another example is the Student Parliament in North Macedonia, which is mandatory, but was only mentioned in one focus group as a body that students can count on.






# SCHOOL CLIMATE AND ACCEPTING DIVERSITY

Students generally consider their school to be a safe space. They feel neither vulnerable nor discriminated against. This is mostly attested by positive claims about the school atmosphere and relationships between students.

Moreover, when they talk about peer violence, they mostly **express an absence of physical violence** at school. If they indeed have witnessed such events, it was outside of the school or only sporadically at school. Still, they spoke about occurrences of verbal violence at school to a somewhat greater extent. Such cases were mostly highlighted by Portuguese students, while students from North Macedonia said they were sporadic, while Croatian students seldom mentioned occurrences of violence at school or did not mention them at all.





*I have never witnessed anything like that.  
In our class there is no violence, nor in  
other classes. (North Macedonia)*

*Last year there was violence in our class,  
not physical, with abusive words.  
(North Macedonia)*


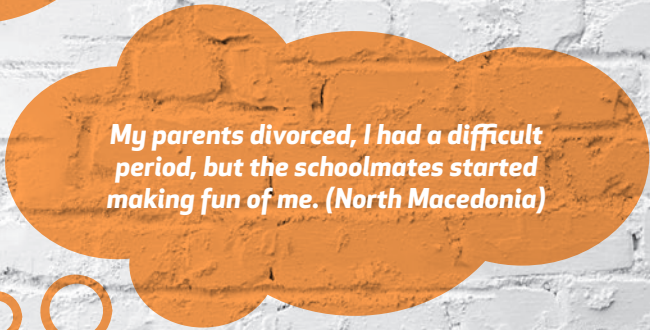
*The only thing I can think of is that  
there is talking behind someone's back.  
(Croatia)*



Croatian students thus say that there is no discrimination or violence, and that they feel accepted by other students. On the other hand, Portuguese students specifically mention the self-exclusion of some students because they feel different, thus avoiding talking to other students in order to avoid potential verbal or physical violence. As regards verbal violence, it mostly occurred in the form of insults and ridicule of personal characteristics or issues faced by individual students (accent, family situation, physical disability, clothing style, nationality, race).



***My class used to be divided between the "socials" and "non-socials" and what identified both groups were the clothes. If I had expensive clothes I belonged to the "socials", if my clothes were cheap, I belonged to the "non-socials". The "socials" made fun of the "non-socials" and the reason was socioeconomic. (Portugal)***



***My parents divorced, I had a difficult period, but the schoolmates started making fun of me. (North Macedonia)***



In cases where such incidents occur (actual or hypothetical situations), the respondents indicated their readiness for reaction and reporting the issues to the competent persons at school. They believe that the staff should provide advice and try to defuse the situation. In the context of competent persons (teachers, support services), students from North Macedonia talked positively about their reaction to verbal violence, while Portuguese students mostly mentioned an absence of reactions.



As a reason for the conflict, they say that the parties involve lack of information, which opened up a focus group debate about the diversity they are surrounded by.

***When there are conflicts, they are usually a result of insufficient knowledge about one another. (North Macedonia)***

They **express empathy and readiness to socialise with individuals who are different**. This indicates a substantial potential for work with students in connection with peer violence, that they are ready to include others and different individuals, and their readiness to react if they notice discriminatory and/or violent behaviour. Naturally, in that context it is necessary to offer them conflict management skills as well as support from support services and teachers.





Even though Croatian students mostly said there was no discrimination among students, it should be noted that students in most of the schools witnessed **gender discrimination by teachers**. To a greater or lesser extent, this topic was broached in all schools where the focus groups were implemented. Accordingly, students, both male and female, find such treatment unfair and obsolete. In that context, such an attitude toward students has potentially long-term consequences of petrifying gender differences, making girls feel disadvantaged. In particular, students stressed differences in the treatment of girls and boys when it comes to the school dress code. That is to say, those rules are applied much more stringently to girls, while boys often get some leeway. Apart from that aspect, attitudes during classes were also brought to the fore – some students noticed that some teachers discriminated based on stereotypes involving cognitive abilities of boys and girls. By doing so, teachers send a message that equality at school is mostly of declarative nature.

*Teachers definitely think that girls can't do the same job as boys, so they help them more. (Croatia)*

*The rules for us are not as strict as those for girls. (Croatia)*

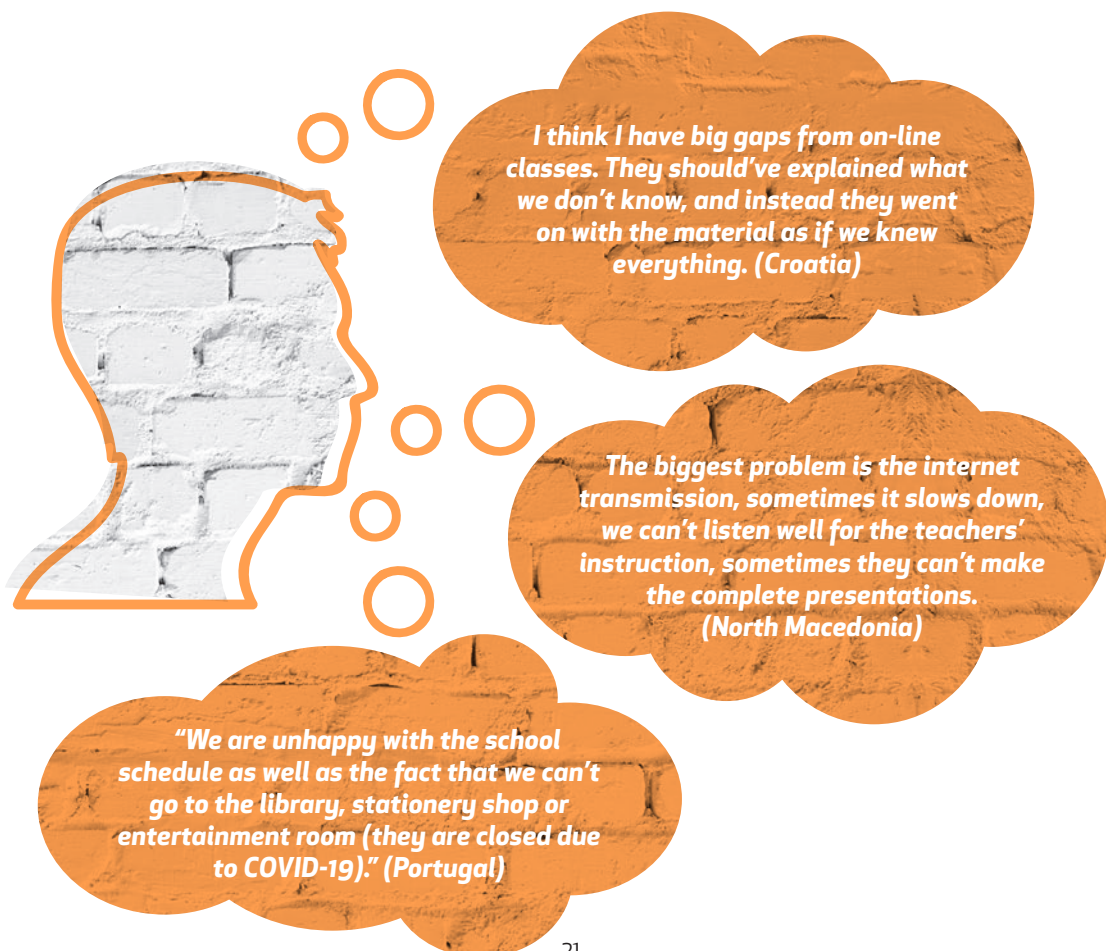
*The rules are more flexible if boys show up in shorts, i.e. it's more likely that teachers won't react to it than when girls show up in tights or tank tops. (Croatia)*



# THE CORONAVIRUS AND STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE

The coronavirus pandemic and its impact on class organisation left a mark on students. In the focus groups, they were not asked about this topic directly, but it was broached in most of the focus groups and in most of the countries. It is possible to isolate several important aspects of that impact. They were mostly characterised as negative by the respondents.

This primarily refers to **on-line classes**. Technical and substantive problems were detected in that regard. The technical problems include the stability of the Internet connection, which, according to students, affects their concentration. On the other hand, with regard to the content, they say that the quality of classes is dropping, and that learning in that manner is complicated and difficult. In some schools, such classes are described as difficult, burdensome and stressful. The reasons often lie in the approach of individual teachers.





Thus, they observe that teachers are unaware of the workload placed on students, so they often overburden them with homework or set unrealistic deadlines. The situation with extracurricular activities is similar – some respondents say that they were either cancelled or their implementation was switched to online platforms, which does not work well.

One of the organisational issues is connected with changes to the class schedule **in case of physical classes**. Highlighted issues:

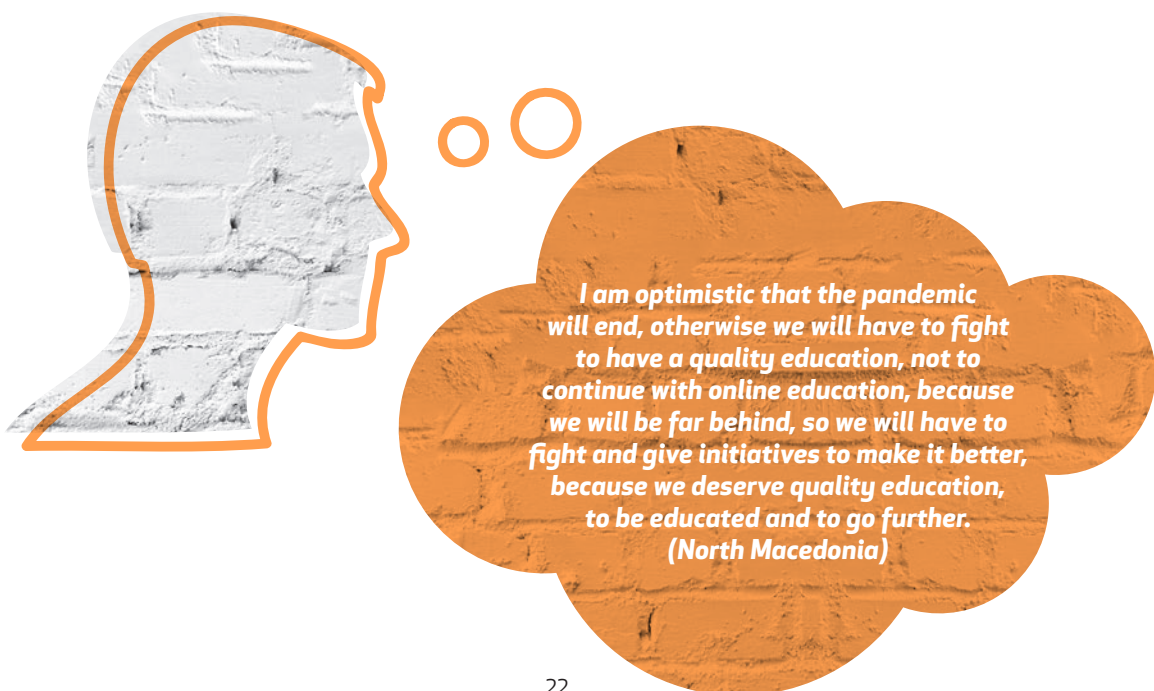
- a lack of breaks between periods,
- classes starting too early, and
- classes ending too late consequently.

Challenges also include **wearing face masks and inability to engage in group work**. Other restricting circumstances due to the current situation were mentioned:

- inability to use the common rooms in the school,
- inability to get together outside of the school building during breaks,
- restricting meeting other classes, and
- project implementation.

All of the above has an impact on their satisfaction with school and socialisation, which may consequently affect their success at school.

Finally, many students expressed their desire to return to normal classes. They are mostly optimistic in that regard.

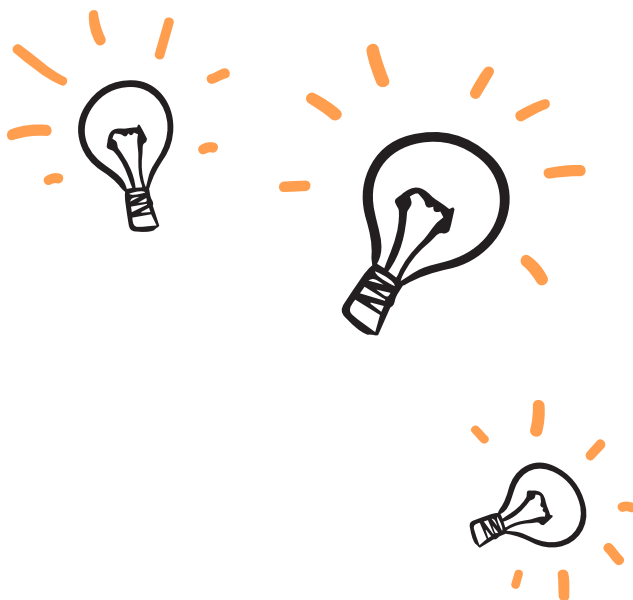


# CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The role of students in the school system is changing. From mere recipients of curricular content, they become co-creators of not only the educational content, but also the school environment. At least, they should be. Contemporary pedagogy sources very clearly list **numerous benefits of active student participation in the school life**. However, in order to achieve this, it is necessary to go beyond the declaratory support for student voice and to invest qualitative effort in creating an encouraging environment for student participation.



The cooperation between students and teachers should thus be focused on creating a quality approach to communication in which all students, regardless of their background, will be able to critically think about their own reality and to take action in order to change it.





The role of teachers should not only be to transmit knowledge, but also demonstrate consistency with the rhetoric through their actions. **In other words, it should be demonstrated to students that talking about democratic values, inclusion and participation is much more than empty ideals.**

The research conducted within the scope of the project titled **Start the change - creating a generation of change makers through intercultural education and volunteering** indicates that additional effort is needed in order to achieve those goals.

Even though mechanisms of student participation are in place in all of the observed schools, the question of their effectiveness is more essential. Students claim that, even though the school asks for their opinions, those are mostly consultations that do not bear any fruit. **That is the reason for their apathy.** The lack of faith that things will change as well as the lack of quality communication through which students would learn why something cannot be done following their suggestions means creating an encouraging environment for student voice.

**Similarly, if students are to truly be encouraged to participate and express their views, it is necessary to deconstruct the student perception that their school practices and policies cannot be changed. Students are discouraged because they believe their participation is futile as they cannot see any potential for change.**

**The prevention of violent behaviour and bullying** is one of the educational goals of every education system. However, while education policymakers both on the national and school level mostly focus on the classic modes of such behaviour, students say that such efforts are superfluous because they are seldom present. Research has shown that students have no notion of peer violence occurring, or if it does occur, it is much more subtle than the schools and national policies claim.

In other words, the research results indicate that it would be prudent to **approach the process of defining violent behaviour and bullying with more finesse** so that prevention mechanisms may be more successful. For example, students recognise that **verbal violence occurs in communication channels** (WhatsApp, Viber, Telegram) outside the classes, to which schools are unable or unwilling to react adequately.

**By communicating well with students and acknowledging their suggestions**, schools could obtain stronger tools to additionally reduce the level of peer violence.



Schools need to further educate students and teachers on how to recognise and define violence, particularly that which occurs online. Similarly, school should acknowledge students' suggestions and work on tools that can further reduce the level of peer violence that the current generations of youth experience in various online channels.



The school year 2019/2020 **was marked by the coronavirus pandemic**, which forced schools to introduce considerable changes. Apart from technical changes (switching to online classes), schools were forced to change the patterns of their educational process and ensure that their educational functions are implemented.

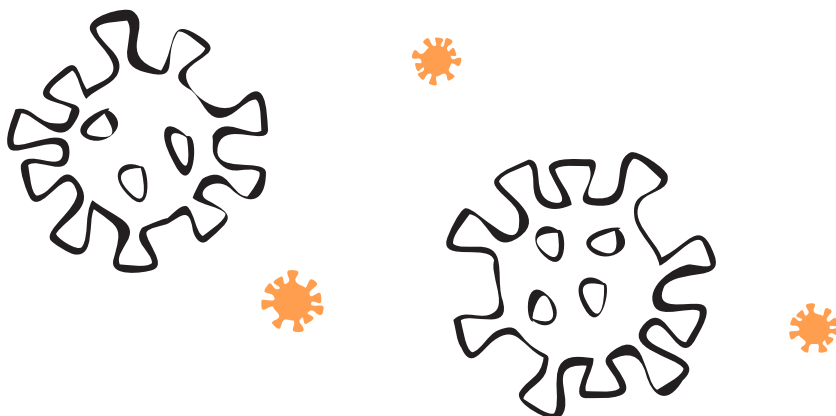
The survey of students in the three countries shows that the coronavirus crisis had quite a negative impact on their perception of the quality of their classes. Students thus listed numerous challenges they faced, and which had a largely negative impact on them.

One of the potential ways in which the negative impacts of this very challenging and unprecedented situation could have been reduced or negated was to **involve students in the very change which was unavoidable**.

Co-creation of the teaching process between the teachers and students involving long-distance classes could have had numerous benefits for both the teachers and students. It could have primarily resolved organisational difficulties that impeded learning. Moreover **the crisis could have been used for building student ownership of the school process segments**.



**Teachers should actively involve students in the co-creation of classes and the teaching process, question their ideas and suggestions, modify the teaching processes and enable students to feel “ownership” of their own education. Schools should actively invest in teachers’ competences to enable them to work with more creativity, innovativity and courage in the teaching process as well as in their approach to students.**



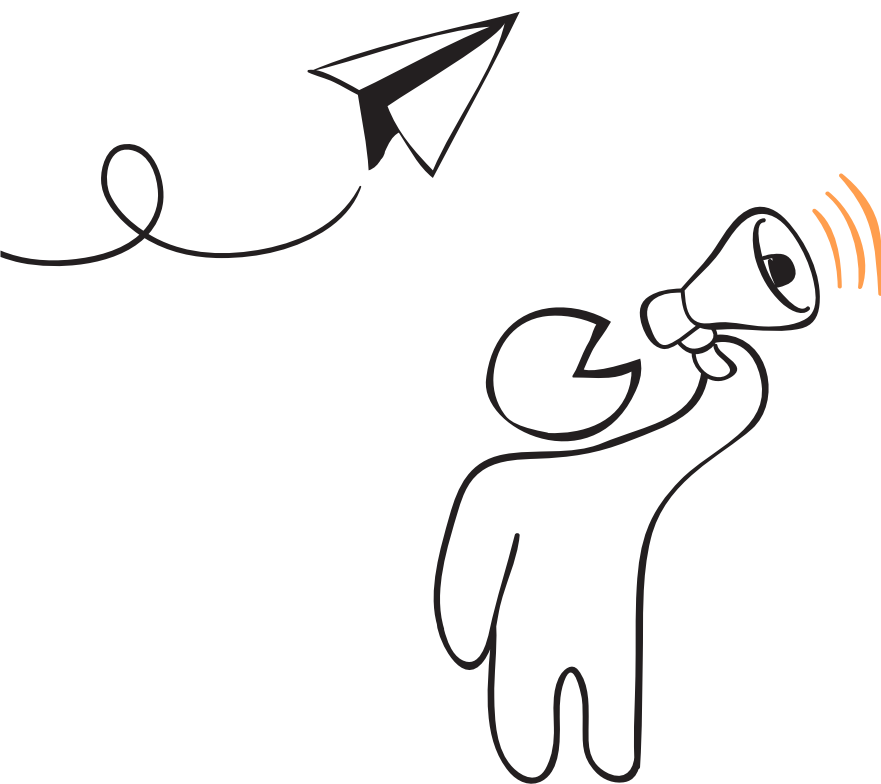


All of the three chosen phenomena derived from the research conducted in North Macedonia, Portugal and Croatia clearly show that **quality participation of students in the school life requires effort on the part of all stakeholders.**

**Education workers have the power to create an encouraging environment** that will be benevolent toward student participation. However, this should first be comprehended, and then implemented. It is thus necessary, as the results of the research indicate, to be ready to question one's own position of power, and to resolutely advocate change.

If the goals of education are to transform students from subjects to citizens, their emancipation, development of innovativity and creativity, then the readiness to the transformation, creativity, innovativity and courage are expected from teachers (management, school support staff and teachers) as well.

**Student voice will always exist, but it is up to us to decide whether we will hear it.**



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