

## **BE-IN: Best Innovative Practices for an Inclusive and Emotional Education to face early school leaving in Europe**

**National research report  
of the state of art of inclusive pedagogical and methodological  
practice**

**– Croatia –**

**Vanja Kožić Komar  
Eli Pijaca Plavšić**

**Forum for Freedom in Education**  
29<sup>th</sup> June 2022

## **1. Table of contents**

<b>1. Table of contents</b>	2
<b>2. Introduction</b>	2
<b>3. Desk research findings (the state of the art) (7-8 pages):</b>	3
<b>I. Inclusive education and inclusive school</b>	3
• Policy and guidelines of educational national institutions	3
• <b>Definition of inclusion and Application of inclusive education</b>	5
<b>II. Emotional education and wellbeing at school</b>	6
• Policy and guidelines of educational national institutions	6
• Definition and Application of emotional education	7
<b>III. Early school leaving</b>	8
• <b>Definitions and national data</b>	8
• <b>Main elements and connection between early school leaving and pedagogical approaches</b>	9
<b>IV. Competences and needs of teachers and educators</b>	10
• <b>Competences and skills</b>	10
• <b>Training needs</b>	11
<b>V. Formative needs of vulnerable students</b>	12
• <b>Definitions</b>	12
• <b>Formative needs and strategies</b>	12
<b>4. Field research findings</b>	15
<b>I. Summary of findings and results concerning Focus Groups</b>	15
Teacher Focus Group	15
Student Focus Group	17
<b>II. Summary of questionnaire-based online survey results</b>	19
<b>III. Summary of stakeholder interview results</b>	21

<b>5. Conclusions and recommendations (2 pages)</b>	26
<b>6. References</b>	27
<b>7. Annexes</b>	27

## **2. Introduction**

### **I. Available data and other resources**

When reviewing the available literature on the topic of inclusion in Croatia, it is still most common to talk about students with disabilities. With regard to vulnerable groups of students, there is a large range of young people who are not recognized by the system, and who should be in the focus of educational policy. Among them are students with mental health problems, LGBTIQ + students, migrant children and young mothers. (Farnell, T. [Ed.] 2022).

One of the most important indicators that students from the earliest age in Croatia do not have equal starting positions, and thus no equal chances in the education system, is the availability of preschool education. The UNICEF report “An Unfair Start: Inequality in Children’s Education in Rich Countries” (2018) ranks 41 Member States of the EU and OECD on the extent of educational inequalities at preschool, primary and secondary school levels. It examines the link between children’s achievement and factors such as parents’ occupation, household income and place of residence, migration background, gender, and school characteristics. Based on the level of equality in preschool education, Croatia is in 24th place (out of 41 countries). Among all the states in the report, according to the criterion that measures household income, Croatia has the highest level of inequality regarding access to preschool education: only 22% of the poorest children attend kindergarten, in comparison with three times more children from the richest households (70%). In urban settlements in Croatia, four out of five children over 3 years of age attend kindergarten, while in rural settlements only one in three children attend kindergarten. (Lecheval et al, 2021)

Croatia has the lowest rate of early school leaving in the EU (3.3%, compared with an EU average of 10.6%) but PISA results show us that we need to change something with the quality of education in Croatia (students perform below the EU average in all areas). The gap for students with disabilities is one of the largest in the EU (14 pps, as against an EU average of 10 pps) (Grammenos, 2013 as cited in Lecheval et al, 2021).

The focus of this research was on current policies, documents and guidelines, as well as on recent research addressing key topics related to this project: vulnerable groups, inclusion, socio-emotional learning, teacher and student needs, pandemic impact, mental health.

### **3. Desk research findings (the state of the art):**

#### **I. Inclusive education and inclusive school**

- Policy and guidelines of educational national institutions

**International/UN conventions/declarations to protect the rights of groups who are potentially vulnerable to discrimination and exclusion has been integrated into national and regional law:**

Articles 65 and 66 of the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia; Regulation on Primary and Secondary Education of Students with Developmental Difficulties (Official Gazette, No. 24/2015); New Gender Equality Act, 2008; Article (Official Gazette 87/08, 86/09, 92/10, 105/10, 90/11, 5/12, 16/12, 86/12, 126/12, 94/13, 152/14, 07/17, 03/18), Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNESCO); Articles 3, 14 and 65 of the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia.

**Laws on general education that affect the inclusion of students from vulnerable groups:**

#### **The Law on Pre-School Education**

Law on Primary and Secondary Education new Law and adoption of the National Pedagogical Standard; Primary and Secondary School Education Act; Constitutional Act on The Rights of National Minorities (Official Gazette, No. 155/02, 47/10, 80/10, 93/11; Law on International and Temporary Protection (Official Gazette 70/2015)

**Education policy or guidelines impacting on inclusion of learners from vulnerable groups:**

The Regulation on Primary and Secondary Education of Students with Developmental Disabilities (Official Gazette 24/2015, enacted) - Compulsory education can be provided at home in exceptional circumstances (because of health reasons). Teaching activity can be organised at home or in a health institution for students who cannot attend school because of severe motor disorders or chronic illnesses for a longer period of time – [only with Ministry of Science and Education permission).

Ordinance on teaching assistants and communication mediators (Enacted Official Gazette 102/18, 59/19, 22/20) – February 2020 – in order to regulate in more detail the procedure for recognising the student's right to support, funding for teaching assistants is also regulated (development of a qualification program, local self-government units provide funds for the financing of assistants).

**National strategies to support inclusion in education:**

- **Special pre-primary education programmes for gifted children** - with the permission of the Ministry of Science and Education, kindergarten teachers, professional associates and other kindergarten staff, as well as scientific institutions (if necessary), develop and implement the special programme.

- **National Plan for enhancement of equity in HE 2018-2021** (enacted in 2019)

The plan identifies 15 categories of disadvantaged students who have challenges to access higher education or are at a dropout risk; it includes policies and instruments for better monitoring and also a better funding system for low SES students or students with disabilities.

- **The Strategy for Lifelong Vocational Guidance and Career Development in the Republic of Croatia 2016-2020** (enacted in 2016) - aim to develop a system of support and monitoring of students from marginalised groups.

- **The National Strategy for Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities from 2017 to 2020** - acts as the implementing document of the **Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** with the main goal to involve more children from vulnerable groups in the regular preschool programs and primary and secondary education.

- **Strategy of Education, Science and Technology** (2014) – measure 6.6.1. and 6.6.2.: funding for two-year preschool programs for Roma children and alternative programs where preschools are not available.

- **National strategy for children's rights in the Republic of Croatia 2014-2020** - one of the main goal is ensuring the rights for children in vulnerable groups (children with disabilities, Roma children and children living in poverty). Some of the sub-goals are: a preschool inclusive education for a larger number of children, providing educators educated in the field of inclusion, availability of early intervention services for children with disabilities, prevention of discrimination (in access to services) and stigmatisation of low SES children, ensuring consistent implementation of professional support measures and family support in child care for the members of the Roma minority (based on the principles of interculturalism and the cultural identity).

- **National Plan for the Inclusion of Roma 2021– 2027.**: The plan was adopted by the Government and one of the main special goals is to enhance the equal access of Roma in inclusive and quality education. The specific measures are: (1) Reducing the share of Roma children who attend compulsory preschool program / primary school education in groups in which is the majority or all children are Roma (baseline: 45%, target: >20%), (2) Reducing the gap in participation in preschool education between Roma children and children from general population (baseline: 23%, target: 54%).

- **Action Plan for Integration (2017 – 2020)** - the aim of the plan is to ensure some fundamental rights guaranteed by the Aliens Act and the International and Temporary Protection Act.

- **Poverty and Social Exclusion Strategy in the Republic of Croatia (2014-2020)** - One of the measures is increasing the availability of education at all levels, regardless of the economic or social status of the individual.

- **National Plan to Combat Discrimination (2017-2022)** – Main goals are to equalise access to education for different marginalised groups and to abolish discriminatory practices in the education system and promotion of human rights and equality through the education system.

**National Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Republic of Croatia 2021-2026** (Government, 2021) – even though it does not specifically target children at risk in terms of education, it emphasises the importance of establishing equal educational opportunities throughout the educational process. It is stated that the reform of education in Croatia should contribute to the construction of an educational system that enables each person, regardless of their socioeconomic origin, age, and other circumstances, to acquire knowledge and skills relevant

for their personal development and successful labour market integration, which is in line with the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which provides for inclusive, high-quality, and equitable education and learning for all. It should be noted that education is recognised as one of the development priorities in the 2030 National Development Strategy of the Republic of Croatia (2021).

**National Development Strategy – Croatia 2030<sup>1</sup>:** strategy is focusing on different goals. One of them is education and human capital. Even though mental health and wellbeing of students, educational staff etc. are not mentioned in the Strategy (mental health of young people is mentioned only once on the pg.80 under the goal “Healthier life”), the general goal of the educational part of the strategy is to secure equal access to all educational levels to children and youth. Also the focus of this part is on professional development of teachers on all educational levels.

(Lecheval et al, 2021)

- **Definition of inclusion and Application of inclusive education**

According to the Regulation on Primary and Secondary Education of Students with Developmental Disabilities (article 2.) the inclusion in education is broadly defined as follows: Education of students is based on the principles of accepting diversity of students, accepting different characteristics of student development, ensuring conditions and support for maximising the potential of each individual student, equalising the opportunity to achieve the highest possible level of education and providing educational opportunity for students as close as possible to their place of residence. (Official Gazette, 24/2015 as cited in Lecheval et al, 2021)

Bouillette (2013) states several earlier research conducted in Croatia provides an insight into the quality of inclusive education in Croatia: Stančić et al. (2011) emphasise that the main obstacles in inclusive education in Croatia are inadequate material conditions and lack of professional support to teachers (school counsellors, assistants etc.), as well as insufficient education of teachers to work in inclusive conditions; Ljubić and Kiš-Glavaš (2003) indicate that attitudes of teachers in Croatian schools towards inclusive practice need to be

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://hrvatska2030.hr/>

improved; other research shows that although teachers have positive attitudes towards the process of inclusion they are less positive about the conditions of work and the implementation of educational inclusion (Dulčić & Bakota, 2008).

#### **Application of inclusive education:**

**World Bank Supports Croatia in Transforming Its Primary Education and Creating Better Learning Opportunities:** In December 2021. The contract for the Loan Agreement for Croatia: Towards Sustainable, Equitable and Efficient Education Project (SEE Education) in the amount of € 25 million was signed. The project will support the design and introduction of the Full School Day system in selected primary schools, which aims to improve student learning outcomes, particularly among disadvantaged students, through increased instructional hours and improved teacher training and school infrastructure.

**Teaching assistants**, together with teachers and professional services, have been an integral part of the school system for more than a decade and their number is continuously growing. They have provided direct support to pupils with developmental and learning disabilities, but their rights and status are not regulated. Moreover, teaching assistants are not part of the system and there are still disparities in their status and labour rights at the national level, which continually makes their violation possible. Their unclear status is also reflected in the financing of their work, which comes from various sources at local and EU level. Teaching assistants for children with disabilities are financed by the local government, the Croatian Employment Service and civil society. Additional funding from the European Social Fund (ESF) has allowed schools to adapt programmes more fully to the needs of these pupils. The assistants help children with tasks in the classroom and activities such as eating meals or moving around the building.

The secondary education system is socially stratified. Not all students have equal opportunities to achieve educational outcomes through additional support for participation in extracurricular activities, which further puts students of lower socioeconomic status at a disadvantage. Local self-government units differ significantly in the level of funds allocated for education, which results in significant differences in the equipment of secondary schools, the level of **scholarships for students** and the provision of subsidies for various elements of the educational process, such as transportation and nutrition. Croatian Employment Service (CES) is issuing educational enrolment policy and scholarship policy at the beginning of the every new school year. Moreover, for the first time in 2021, the possibility of awarding



scholarships to students in order to enrol them to programs that are relevant to labour market needs is proposed. According to CEDEFOP report (2020<sup>2</sup>) the Ministry of Economy, Entrepreneurship and Crafts awards scholarships (101) to learners in JMO in crafts and trades where there are labour shortages; 3 020 scholarships were awarded in 2018. The total amount awarded was around EUR 3.6 million, indicating a sharp increase from 2017, when the amount was EUR 2.8 million. The list of eligible programmes is determined nationally, but allows regional modification. Local communities, professional associations and private firms also provide incentives and stipends for learners. Although early school leaving is, on average, very low in Croatia, vulnerable students—particularly those from the bottom 40 % of the income distribution and Roma—are still very much at risk. Students from poor families, students whose parents have limited educational experience, and students from ethnic minorities and immigrant families are frequently left behind, with far-reaching effects on the economy and society. Most troubling, the Roma are much less likely to complete school than others due to social marginalisation, poverty, language difficulties, and cultural differences according to the research (Kunac et al, 2018), members of the Roma community frequently detected an increased number of the Roma who studied or graduated from higher education institutions, as well as increased possibilities for scholarships for Roma students. **There is a National scholarship for Roma students** (secondary education and higher education) provided by the Ministry of Education and there are some local communities (e.g. City of Zagreb) that are continuously supporting Roma students (high schools and university students) with yearly available funds for scholarships for Roma students.

**Support program for the education of members of the Roma national minority** for the period 2021 to 2023<sup>3</sup>: The program was adopted by the Government in March 2021. The total secured budget for the 3 year period is 5 mil €. Measures are focused on co-financing participation in ECEC for Roma children, transportation to kindergartens and schools, additional support to students such as integration in extracurricular activities, additional programs learning Croatian language, after school care, co-financing summer school programs, providing scholarships to students etc.

---

<sup>2</sup> Cedefop (2020). Vocational education and training in Croatia: short description. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. <http://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/121008>

<sup>3</sup>

[https://mzo.gov.hr/UserDocsImages//dokumenti/Obrazovanje/NacionalneManjine/Program-potpore-romi//program\\_potpore\\_u\\_odgoju\\_i\\_obrazovanju\\_pripadnika\\_romske\\_nacionalne\\_manjine\\_2021-2023.pdf](https://mzo.gov.hr/UserDocsImages//dokumenti/Obrazovanje/NacionalneManjine/Program-potpore-romi//program_potpore_u_odgoju_i_obrazovanju_pripadnika_romske_nacionalne_manjine_2021-2023.pdf)

From the school year 2020/2021, the Ministry of Education provides funds for **all textbooks for all children in primary schools free of charge** (budget HRK 158 million). Other educational materials (e.g. workbooks) are purchased by parents unless the local government provides it from its own budgets (e.g. the City of Zagreb provides free textbooks and other teaching materials for primary and even secondary schools). The second case when it is possible to apply is in the case of low SES families (children coming from the family of the beneficiary of the guaranteed minimum benefit) who can then send a request to provide them with free and other teaching materials.

**Inclusion of students with disabilities in regular classes:** The total percentage of students with special educational needs is 3,21% in secondary schools. According to the Ministry of Education data 30,36% of students are enrolled in Grammar schools (Gimnazija) while 69,64% of students are in VET schools.

The **preparatory Croatian language classes for migrant students** of elementary schools and high schools last for 70 hours. The program must be personalised to the individual student. Students listen to one or two hours of language lessons per day. The number of total hours can vary due to the language knowledge and learning progress of each student. This means that a student can listen up to 7 hours more or less. The program can last for up to one year. According to many analyses done in recent years the 70 hours of classes is not enough for students and many organisations are advocating for securing at least 200 hours per year.

Based on the UNICEF analysis (UNICEF, 2022<sup>4</sup>) in the field of education, **two public policy objectives with corresponding recommendations are proposed:**

- Providing affordable and free primary and secondary education for children at risk of poverty
- Promoting inclusive educational practices and building a culture of diversity

## **II. Emotional education and wellbeing at school**

- **Policy and guidelines of educational national institutions**

---

<sup>4</sup> Basis for the development of a National Action Plan for the Implementation of the European Child Guarantee in Croatia (2022), policy brief, UNICEF

A detailed description of the social-emotional learning is not expected to be found among the fundamental laws Preschool education Act and the Primary and Secondary School Education Act, but they do provide a legal platform for the implementation of SEL in practice (Ljubetić, Maglica, 2020). The most prominent documents related to socio-emotional learning are: National Curriculum for Early and Preschool Education and the Program of Inter-Subject and Interdisciplinary Contents of Citizenship Education for Elementary and High Schools (which describes areas, outcomes and competencies related to the topics of socio-emotional development for each grade of primary and secondary school). What the Croatian education system certainly lacks is an entire social-emotional implementation framework consisting of: structured and integrated curriculum, adequate institutional climate, early intervention, targeted interventions for children in risk, children (student) voices, quality implementation and adaptation, but also staff competence and wellbeing, and parental collaboration and education. In addition, it is important to emphasise that collaboration with parents is a key feature of a whole-school approach to social and emotional learning and a crucial element for its effectiveness. (Ljubetić, Maglica, 2020)

- **Definition and Application of emotional education**

In Croatia, emotional learning most often occurs in the context of socio-emotional learning and these two components of this concept are usually not separated. Several related definitions are used, and one of the most common is by CASEL: SEL is defined as 'the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions' (CASEL, 2017 cited in Ljubetić, Maglica, 2020).

Although many international studies show the connection between socio-emotional learning and prevention of behavioural problems, achieving better school results and many other positive outcomes, the development of socio-emotional skills in students often depends on the enthusiasm of individual teachers or schools.

(...) „the programs of social-emotional learning in kindergartens and elementary schools in the Republic of Croatia are mostly conducted occasionally, in an unorganised manner, and fragmentarily (one or several workshops for a selected sample of educational groups/classes), usually held by expert associates or educators/teachers for whom there is no information available on how much and what way they have been trained for the area of

social-emotional learning.” (Ljubetić, Maglica, 2020) The same source mentions the PATH-RASTEM program started in six preschool institutions in Zagreb as an exception and that was accomplished by the scientists of the Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences of the University of Zagreb, with topics: 1) understanding feelings and developing self-control, 2) interpersonal problem solving, 3) peer relationships/friendship and 4) developing self-respect in children, were presented through 37 lectures, and the positive changes were obvious after the first year of implementation.

In 2014 the Ministry of science, education, and sports adopted the Program of inter-subject and inter-disciplinary contents for the Citizenship education for elementary schools and high schools that can be implemented as a special subject or an inter-subject. Although cross-curricular topics include to some extent the topics of socio-emotional learning, in Croatian schools they share the same problem: they are processed when the subjects allow it, they are conducted only during the community class or depend on the enthusiasm of the teacher. (Hrgović, 2019). The topic of socio-emotional learning is more actively addressed in Croatian schools (9 cities and 4 [from 21] counties that conduct civic education as an extracurricular activity (extracurricular activities are planned by the school curriculum, which is adopted by the school board, and the parent of the student has the right to give or not to give consent for the participation of students in these activities). Some of the topics of socio-emotional learning that are included in the civic education are Self-esteem and self-confidence and Understanding of human relationships and emotions.

The practice of social-emotional learning in Croatia is still not all-encompassing, not yet structured and intentional, but occurs rather occasionally and spontaneously. We still do not possess structured, comprehensive and evidence-based programs of social-emotional learning offered to children at all education levels systematically and continuously. (Ljubetić, Maglica, 2020)

### III. Early school leaving

- **Definitions and national data**

One of the definitions used in the research is: „Dropping-out is the interruption of the education of a student who enrolled in high school, but who did not successfully complete it and did not obtain a certificate, but dropped out before completing the enrolled high school program.” (Rumberger, 2011)

Strugar (2011) states that the term termination / abandonment of schooling is not well explained in pedagogical dictionaries, so this term is referred to as a disorder of the course of education. (Berc, Majdak & Bežovan, 2013)

There is no systematic monitoring mechanism for drop-outs in all schools across the country. Matković (2010) states that drop-outs from secondary education are associated with lower levels of parental education and lower household incomes. (Berc, Majdak & Bežovan, 2013) Children with special educational needs (SEN) often do not have secured teaching assistants. Those children are also not able to attend the ECEC program without a teaching assistant (The Ombudswoman for children Annual report for 2019, as cited in Global education monitoring).

The larger dropout rate is still among Roma students. According to the ECRI report on Croatia (5th monitoring cycle, May 2018) the number of Roma children enrolling in primary school is as high as in the general population (95%), but in secondary school level is 35% - much less than 86% among the general population. According to a UNDP Survey in 2014, only 10% of Roma children complete secondary school. Croatia has the second-highest Roma NEET rate in Europe, after Spain, at 82% and 72% for women and men respectively. (Global education monitoring)

According to research done by Ombudswomen for Children in Croatia “Participation of children in education” (2018) showed that children in rural areas do not have the same opportunities as children in urban areas. The same research concluded that the children in VET schools don't have the same opportunities as children who are attending Gymnasium programs. Students in school are emphasising that occasionally they do not have secured some basic conditions needed for schooling like secured food, hot water and toilet paper. Also students from the low SES families disproportionately attend VET 3- and 4-year

programs, which often rely on teachers with outdated knowledge and teaching skills. (The UNICEF report “An Unfair Start: Inequality in Children’s Education in Rich Countries”, 2018)

According to the study “Indicators of coverage into regular ECEC programs in Croatia” (Dobrotić, Matković, 2017 as cited in Lecheval et al, 2021) almost every third (161) city and municipality in Croatia does not have a kindergarten or nursery in their area, and 96 of them do not even have an organised preschool, which is mandatory for all children in the year before entering primary school. This is important if we keep in mind that many studies show the importance of quality preschool programs on later school success, as well as the well-being of children. E.g. Perry Preschool Project (Schweinhart et al, 2005, as cited in Djajkovska et al, 2019) and the Abecedarian Project (Campbell et al, 2002, as cited in Djajkovska et al, 2019) show that children in the intervention were more likely to graduate from high school, attend college, have full time employment, and be enrolled in health insurance, are less likely to be involved in criminal behaviour or have symptoms of depression (Reynolds et al, 2007, as cited in Djajkovska et al, 2019).

- **Main elements and connection between early school leaving and pedagogical approaches**

Many studies show that children can start to distance themselves from educational institutions if in kindergarten they experience social rejection. It is good relationships and positive interactions that stand out as those that can help reduce the fear of failure, stress and thoughts of escape, above all in cases where the pupil has achieved poor results (School education getaway, 2015).

In the period from the school year 2006/2007 until 2011/2012, the largest share of dropped out students was recorded in vocational schools and amounted to 9-16.2%, with male students being three times more represented than female students. According to the perception of professional associates, the three most common causes of high school dropouts are negative grades, a high number of unjustified hours and problems in student behaviour. According to expert associates, preventive activities should be more focused on individual work with students, better cooperation with students' families and the social welfare centre and timely detection of dropout risks. In addition, preventive activities should be based on teamwork and improving cooperation with the career guidance service.

Research participants emphasise the need to include experts dealing with family issues and problems of children and youth in the professional team of the school. Professional associates also point out the problems in cooperation with parents. Therefore, they propose to organise workshops for parents and children to strengthen cooperation and motivation for providing constructive assistance to students. (Berc, Majdak & Bežovan, 2015)

#### **IV. Competences and needs of teachers and educators**

- **Competences and skills**

Most socio-emotional learning interventions are student-centred, and teachers often receive too little knowledge and support to encourage SEL in students, much less to encourage their SEL. (Jones et al, 2013, as cited in Vračko, 2021). “Social and emotional competence of teachers is often neglected, which strongly influences the quality of learning, teacher-student relationship, classroom management and teacher burnout” (Jones et al, 2013, as cited in Vračko, 2021). How to deal with stress by looking at their teachers as everyday examples, and quality and warm relationships with them can enhance both their school success and well-being. Therefore, it is important to invest in teachers and their socio-emotional competencies, as well as to be aware of the impact that their attitude towards students has on their success and motivation. Research shows that teachers today are more stressed and unhappy than ever before and more often they are leaving their profession. (Vračko, 2021)

Jones et al (2013) recommend the following interventions for teachers: Emotion-focused training (recognizing the emotional nature of one's work, recognizing one's emotions and their causes, and dealing with difficult emotions through reshaping, problem-solving, and emotional management), Relationship-building interventions (to encourage positive teacher-student interactions), 4R's - Reading, Writing, Respect, i Resolution, MTP (My Teaching Partner) - online resources with materials for teachers, Mindfulness and stress reduction - meditations and focus exercise techniques within two programs: CARE (Cultivating Awareness and Resil-ience in Education) and SMART (Stress Management and Resil-iency Training); SEL routines Rutine (routines include Stop and Stay Cool - a three-step process to maintain control of feelings and a Decision Tree). (Vračko, 2021)

The UNICEF study (2018) concluded that there are differences between the teacher's need to increase competences in the field of work with special education need children or children from vulnerable groups and the available professional development courses. In this regard, the analysis illustrates the need to think more systematically about the initial and continuous professional development of teachers in relation to education of children in vulnerable groups and that this strategy should be produced on the national level. There is a real need to invest in developing teacher's competencies in inclusive practices, especially those helping minority students, students with special educational needs and gifted students. Every school in Croatia should be covered with employed school psychologist, and if possible social rehabilitator. There is lack of expert associates specifically psychologist, social rehabilitators and speech therapists in schools in Croatia, so the investments in this field would be utmost important. The Government should encourage universities across the country to increase quota at the study programs that are educating future experts in these profiles.

- **Training needs**

In a study conducted by Kafedžić (2009), the results showed that most educators are not sufficiently prepared to work with students with special needs through their initial education; most of them expressed the need for continuous professional development in the field of inclusive education. (Dragojević, 2019)

A survey conducted in 69 primary schools (Bouillette, 2013) in Croatia showed that teachers would like to receive more specific advice, as well as more concrete assistance in the education of students with disabilities.

A survey conducted in 2017 (Muslić et al.) on the needs for knowledge and competencies in the field of mental health protection of 2,027 teachers, professors, associates and principals from 170 primary schools and 83 secondary schools in Croatia showed that almost all (97.7%) have shown a willingness to seek help for students with a problem, but feel insecure (70.6%) in their own ability to provide assistance. Through this research educational workers have expressed the need to educate about working with students with mental disabilities.



Teachers from 32 Croatian high schools included in the 2015 survey (Berc, Majdak & Bežovan, 2015) pointed out that they need workshops on topics: knowledge in the field of choice theory, preventive work, supervision, motivation techniques and psychotherapeutic methods, communication, working with children at risk, techniques and methods of motivating students for schooling.

"Teachers are not sufficiently familiar with cross-curricular topics and ways to bring them closer to students. And what is not clear to them cannot be qualitatively presented to the students." (Vidović, I., pedagogue in Croatian primary school, 2019)

## **V. Formative needs of vulnerable students**

- **Definitions**

Article 65 of the Primary and Secondary Education Act does not use the term vulnerable group of students, but uses the term students with disabilities where we recognize the characteristics of vulnerable groups of students: students with disabilities, students with learning difficulties, behavioural problems and emotional problems, students with disabilities due to educational, social, economic, cultural and linguistic factors. Agency for Education in Croatia in addition to the previously mentioned vulnerable groups, it additionally states: students from families living in unfavourable social and economic circumstances, students of divorced parents, complicated divorces, children without adequate parental care, children with limited knowledge of the official language. (Tot, 2012)

Focus groups with decision makers and relevant stakeholders in the field of high school education within the TEMCO<sup>5</sup> project refers to the following vulnerable groups: students from socio-economically deprived families, students with disabilities, students from conflicting families and victims of neglect or abuse, members of the Roma minority, migrant students and members of the LGBTIQ + community, students with mental disorders and underage mothers. (Farnell [Ed.], 2022)

---

5

- **Formative needs and strategies**

This term is not used in the Croatian language, so it will present what needs students need to meet, especially with an emphasis on mental health, in order to feel good, and thus achieve better school success. Special emphasis will be placed on the mental health of students due to the results of extensive research: a survey conducted in 2021 in 161 schools with 27,023 students and 5,374 educators on the impact of the pandemic showed that 59.1% of students attending the final grade believe that the pandemic has negatively affected their lives, 52.4% say it has negatively affected on their mental health. (Jokić, Ristić Dedić, 2021)

In addition to all the needs of students that we have already mentioned through the previous questions, we will present the preliminary results of the research within the Forums Erasmus + project *Let's talk: Developing gender sensitive mental health program for young people*<sup>6</sup>. One of the main goals of the survey was to establish the needs of the young people (age 15 to 25) with different gender affiliation. The research was conducted from April to June 2022, and through focus groups and interviews, 19 experts in the field of mental health of young people and 13 young people participated.

"General overview of the findings shows how the COVID-19 pandemic to some extent intensified the symptomatology and pointed out the alarming need for continuous, comprehensive, preventive and efficient work with young people at all possible available levels (school system, health system, social welfare system, etc. (...))

Stigmatisation of those seeking help is still very much present (*Stigmatization for seeking help, lack of adults communication with young people, lack of taking into account the perspective of young people - judgement*) and it is a one of the crucial obstacles in dealing with mental health. When talking about mental health, destigmatization to mental health and seeking help is crucial as a condition for developing good mental health. (...)

---

<sup>6</sup> <https://letstalk-project.eu/>

**Most of young people state that one of the main problems is that society (adults) do not recognize young people in general as an equal subject and do not take their specific needs, views and problems as equal legal. (...)**

Most of the experts stated that we all as a society miss the opportunity to meet young people and understand their vision of the world in which they live, that which is mainly related to the digital sphere. The greatest space for progress and development is a better understanding of today's young people, more empathy with them and involvement in social processes, especially those that concern them. Almost all experts stated the need of interdepartmental cooperation and importance of the mental health of young people recognition and understanding youth behaviour, familiar with the developmental stages of young people, continuous media campaigns on the importance of mental health, adapt content to the young people (youth friendly) and provide accessible, free and timely service within the local community (e.g. youth centre). (...)

Some of the detected concrete activities and practices are: to show real interest in a young person's life (interests, hobbies...); to listen; not to diminish any interest or problem; important that young people feel respected and to be heard; to approach a person respecting his or her particularities and previous experiences (e.g. different to work with someone who was growing up in family where it was normal to talk about emotions), no matter the gender (good question tough - to approach differently to boys or girls or other); to have in mind particularities when working with boys and girls/LGBTQI+ - not to force talking about emotions, to allow longer time to establish a relationship; to get to your side the louder one (boys); to have in mind knowledge from developmental psychology (e.g. for teenagers is essential importance of acceptance of peers); to emphasise gender non-stereotypical examples in the media and schools; to raising awareness of the importance of emotional literacy of young people, interdepartmental cooperation, awareness of social context etc. (...)

**Participants recommendation:**

- respect, trust and inclusion
- involve children and young people in promotion of mental health and normalise it
- breaking the stigma of mental health and seeking help
- learning and developing social and communication skills
- continuous information on who to turn to for help and support
- understanding the perspective of young people and respecting their problems and challenges as equally important and relevant

- develop good and quality relationships with young people individually and provide an individual approach in working with them (the emphasis is on the educational stuff)
- higher use of collaborative teaching instead of ex cathedra
- shifting the emphasis from grades and putting on well-being
- carry out the early pedagogical interventions in schools
- The importance of workshops for developing social and emotional skills (especially knowing and managing emotions) - as a prevention method
- include parents in the theme of mental health problems and working with them (schools)”

(Brkić, Perak, 2022)

It is also important to mention the survey (Ilišin, Spajić Vrkaš, 2015) on the needs of young people in which young people at risk or who have already dropped out share the following: “That support is important for continuing education and raising the quality of education is confirmed by respondents schooling. Most of them mention the poverty and financial difficulties of their family, followed by a lack of learning habits and poor grades. Only a few of them link their schooling to the inability to obtain credit or some other form of support. Providing support is part of the state's responsibility to protect the right to education of those who cannot exercise this right without support, regardless of whether they are low SES or with a lower school achievement. Unaware of this, **instead of looking for reasons for the lack of protection of their right to education, young people most often associate dropping out with their own shortcomings or the shortcomings of their families, which means they unconsciously agree to be victims of self-fulfilling prophecy.**”

#### ***4. Field research findings***

##### **I. Summary of findings and results concerning Focus Groups**

**Teacher Focus Group** (5 teachers from vocational school in the rural part of Croatia)

##### **Part 1: IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM**

All participants' answers can be grouped as positive and negative experiences, although the impression is that there are more negative ones. Participants point out that both during and now after a pandemic, they are available 24 hours a day, which is often abused. It was especially difficult with practical classes that could not be done online. They call this generation of students “lost generation”: students do not greet, do not look in the eyes, they are inert, less independent, they need to be more motivated. "There's a new generation that

doesn't need to do anything." Participants also singled out the problem of over-sending material, and the burden that fell on the backs of parents.

One teacher points out that she really hates online classes and doesn't see anything positive (students had their cameras turned off, it's hard to say what they were doing and whether they listened at all). The problem is that now all seminars for teachers have become online and are always in the free time of teachers. "For me, it's so intangible teaching, everything in the clouds, the Internet ... I personally don't have anything concrete after that, unfortunately" (about online education). The other teacher said that online education opens up the possibility for her to participate in more education.

This form of teaching is welcome to quiet and withdrawn students - some students have shone and found a way to better results (those who deal with anxiety and stress around public appearances). As a way of working, one teacher kept using the Teams app and suggested that a few school hours a year be held online so that everyone could practise this way of working together. One teacher points out computer illiteracy among students, who are often assumed to know how to do everything on a computer. The other teacher singles out quizzes and similar tools as good to continue to use, and she points out that it was important for the students that the teachers record their own videos, and not download the finished materials, so that's how she worked.

## **Part 2: RELATION BETWEEN POSITIVE PERFORMANCE AT SCHOOLS/WELLBEING AT SCHOOLS AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION APPROACHES**

In this school, the classes have a smaller number of students, so it is much easier to adapt the teaching and their own approach to these students. The teacher singles out how she chooses methods that have been shown to give students better results, and avoids ways of working that she knows could make students feel incompetent. Students are given a bunch of opportunities just to finish school, and when rare drop outs happen, it's because of messy life situations. The most important thing is to be human and show understanding for their needs - says one teacher. "Don't force your subject, but help them if we see that they need it." The problem is that students become addicted to technology, it is assumed that they know English and computer work because they are a young generation and do not know.

The teacher points out that students like handcrafts, outdoor classrooms, project days, implementing students' ideas (eg painting walls); more practical classes, less theory, letting students work on their own to solve problems and only subsequently offer help if needed; the importance of humour and relationships with students, students love outdoor activities. Teachers point out problems: lack of books for vocational subjects, also the problem of abolishing history in vocational schools, teachers will lose their jobs and children in vocational schools will be deprived of general topics ("I am so happy to have history, I feel so smart" - statement of one student).

### **Part 3: TEACHERS' COMPETENCE IN THE LEARNING FIELD OF INCLUSIVE AND EMOTIONAL EDUCATION - FORMATIVE NEEDS OF TEACHERS AND EDUCATORS**

Class teachers do not know if they are allowed to talk to students about some topics, sometimes children do not want to inform their parents about the problem - uncertainty about the rules in some situations. Also, often children later abuse the situation and report the teacher saying or doing something. "I'm afraid I wouldn't be the one to trigger an even bigger problem."

### **Part 4: DEVELOPMENT OF EFFECTIVE INCLUSIVE AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS FOR VULNERABLE STUDENTS - EXAMPLES AND GOOD PRACTICES**

Education should be more: concrete examples from the practice of children's and teachers' problems, which will show how other teachers have come up with something. "It's all blah blah, theories, theories " and when you find yourself in a specific situation with a student ... how to think about the mental health of the student and do what needs to be done (exams, absences ...). They would also like the lecturers who would not come with the attitude "that teachers are always to blame, questions are stupid, their fears are stupid."

All participants agree on the importance of an individual approach to the student, but emphasise that they do not have enough knowledge of how to act in certain situations that students address them and are afraid that some of their advice will not do even more harm.

**Student Focus Group** (5 students from vocational school in the rural part of Croatia)

#### **Part 1: IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM**

It has affected online teaching, it is not effective and students cannot learn well enough - they say. It affected the social life of the students. There have also been finger pointing if someone is not wearing a mask. Also, the problem was that they were isolated and not allowed to meet other classes: "I don't even know where all the classrooms are, where what is." Also, not everyone was able to participate in classes equally well due to the poor internet, computers.

One student states that he was involved in classes online for a while before, and he felt lonely.

Some positive aspects that stand out: the student was under less stress due to online classes due to fear of public appearances, and another points out that she learned to prepare materials on her own.

Some teachers prepared video lessons themselves which were much more useful to the students. In some subjects it is also very difficult to explain something online (e.g. physics). "They just go, press the button and read, they don't explain anything." The math teacher prepared her materials, turned on the cameras and explained the tasks - the students are very satisfied with this way. "Don't send video lessons but send presentations and explanations."

"I would like from subjects like chemistry, biology experiments, not to be only talking. Let's see exactly how it goes." They also suggest to teachers to send a nice board plan so they can learn more easily.

Also, they needed longer breaks, students were very tired and saturated with online classes, some teachers would not finish on time, so students were left without a break.

Sometimes teachers would simply log in earlier and just start under a break, or stay longer.

## **Part 2: RELATION BETWEEN POSITIVE PERFORMANCE AT SCHOOL/WELLBEING AT SCHOOL AND TEACHING METHODS**

Emotions are mentioned quite often at school. Workshops are frequent, but students do not find it useful because these workshops are often not in the classrooms where they would be most needed. "There is no such thing in our class, so there is no sense in talking about it.

There are no such workshops in classes where there is peer violence."

They would like to work more on topics: dealing with sadness, fear, anger, self-confidence.

The school lacks socialising and more free time, longer school breaks "I can't even have lunch."

"We talk all the time, we have surveys every year and then they ask what we need, what we could change in school. But nothing ever changes. "

Students feel equal to each other, but they do not feel that teachers treat them that way.

"Teachers may say that we are all equal and have the same opportunities, but from our perspective we don't see it that way." Teachers should have more understanding.

They point out that they should not favour students who are better, that they should not lower students when they do not know something (respect), that they should not be nervous (dealing with stress). "They don't have to take their problems to school."

But they single out for most teachers: "You can see that they like their subject, they do well, they explain well, they know how to teach, they are friendly to us."

They would like: fewer exams, fewer subjects, more burdened by less important subjects. "I don't like our education system. They want to do something to make it easier and better for us, and they do the opposite and worse. " (exams are announced much earlier, but there are even more than before; change of graduation criteria)

"It would be easier for us to present something without less stress and fear if the teachers always gave us some criteria according to which we would know."

## **II. Summary of questionnaire-based online survey results**

**The online survey involved 10 teachers from three vocational schools** (90% women and 10% men). They teach the following school subjects: Physical and health culture, English language, Health care, Vocational subjects - mechanical engineering, Mathematics, Politics and economics and ethics, Croatian language and literature, Biology. One hundred per cent of the respondents teach to a group of 15 - 18 years and all of them are from public schools. Sixty per cent of the respondents claim that there is a good atmosphere in the school, while 40% say that's rather true. All respondents claim that teaching in their classes is inclusive and also that they way of teaching is inclusive (100%). Eighty per cent of participants think the pandemic has negatively affected the motivation of their students while 20 per cent cannot tell. Ten per cent of participants think that the coronavirus pandemic and distance learning



have an effect on students' performances – positive, 60% - negative, cannot tell 30%. Seventy per cent of participants think that they reached all students during distance learning, and 30% said they did it, but partly. Fifty per cent of participants think that students were partly excluded from classes through distance learning, and the other half think they were not excluded. On a question why, they answered: Technical issues (42,9%), missing resources at home (57,1%), barriers in access (57,1%), social problems (28,6%) and other reasons are too much content to handle on your own (1 answer). Ten per cent of participants think that the atmosphere in the class is better as a result of distance learning, 30% think that it is worse and 60% think it didn't change. The coronavirus pandemic has had a positive impact on school dropouts think 10% of participants, 10% think that it had a negative impact, 40% think that answer is no, and 40% can't tell. *I can address the individual formative needs of my students in the classroom* is opinion of 40% of participants, 50% think it's a rather true and 10 per cent can't tell. To the same question, but in the context of distance learning the answers are: rather true 70%, other answers are 10% each (true, cannot tell, rather not true). Reasons that are singled out: lack of time (50% - 3 answers), More or less unavailability of some students during distance learning due to technical or other reasons (1 answer), Everything is easier in person (1 answer). All participants include emotional learning in their teaching (70% in full, 30% in part). The same question but in the context of distance learning brings next results: 60% in full, 40% in part. Seventy-five per cent of them find resources online, 75% through additional training, and 12,5% - one person through specialized organizations. *I implement inclusive education in my teaching during distance learning* said 80%, and 20% of participants said that's rather true, and during distance learning situation is a bit different: 70% / 30% (75% get resources from online platforms, 75% from additional education courses and 12,5% from specialised organisations). *Every student in my school, no matter which background, has the same chance of success* is an opinion of all participants. Sources used for inclusive teaching that participants point out: Peer-to-peer approach (50%), individual support for vulnerable students (90%), application of participatory methods (20%), digital resources (60%). In order for their teaching to be even more inclusive, they need: methodological aspects (50%), technological and digital aspects (50%), social emotional and psychological aspects (80%). Participants find useful all of the mentioned resources, especially a course for teachers on approaches and methodologies for emotional and inclusive learning (88.9%). In the last 2 years, all participants have attended online training

organised by educational institutions, and all are interested in training on the topics of this research: 40% blended, 30% via online platforms and 30% in person.

**The other online questionnaire was attended by 10 students (15 – 18 y),** from three vocational public schools, 6 female and 4 male students. Eighty per cent feel comfortable in class while 20% think this is partially true. All of them think that teaching in their school and their class is inclusive. Fifty per cent of the respondents think that pandemic and distance learning didn't affect their motivation, 40% said that it affected negatively and 10% cannot tell. The impact of the pandemic and distance learning on grades is visible to 60% of respondents (positive 30%, negative 30%), 20% cannot tell and 20% don't see the impact. Sixty per cent had everyday contact with teachers and other students, 10% less than once a week and **30% didn't have contact!!!** Forty per cent felt partly left out of classes by distance learning and others didn't feel left out. Reasons that they share: Technical issues missing – 20%, resources at home – 60%, barriers in access – 20%, social problems 20%. Most students - 80% do not know anyone who has been excluded from classes, 10% one person, and 10% more. Technical problems (66.7%) and social difficulties (33.3%) stand out as the reason. For 30% of students wellbeing in class changed for the better, 10% cannot tell and 60% don't see any difference. Twenty per cent know one person who dropped out of school early due to the Corona pandemic. *In my class I have the opportunity to learn in different styles and teachers pay attention to what works best for me* is the opinion of 40% of participants, 30% think it's rather true, and others think in the same percentage that they cannot tell, it's rather not true or not true. Fifty per cent think that everybody in class has the same chance of success, 40% said *No* and others (10%) cannot tell. *My teachers pay attention to my feelings and moods...* is an opinion of 50% and others said rather true – 20%, cannot tell – 20%, not true – 10%. *My teachers help me, whenever I'm struggling* is an opinion of 40%, and other said rather true – 20%, cannot tell – 10%, not true – 30%. *When I'm struggling I can turn to one or more of my classmates* is true for 70% per cent of students, 20% said it's rather true and for 10% it's not true. *My teachers recognize and encourage my strengths and potential* said 50% of students, for 10% it's rather true, 30% cannot tell and for 10% it's rather not true. *I feel supported by teachers when:* they listen to my needs said 44,4% of students, when they value my competences is opinion of 88,9% and when they create appropriate pedagogical resources said 66,7% of participants. The students said they have the following support in their school: school counselling – 80%, extracurricular activities –

50%, social workers – 20%, school psychologist – 80%, mediation – 40%, peer Mediation – 50%. Ten per cent use it regularly, 40% partly and other **50% don't use this support at all**. From that number, 25% use school counselling, 12,5% extracurricular activities, 12,5% social workers, 37,5% school psychologist, 50% peer Mediation, 25% none. They would like to learn about: self awareness – 30%, self confidence – 70%, empathy – 40%, key competences like communication, leadership, public speaking or problem solving – 50%.

### **III. Summary of stakeholder interview results**

The following stakeholders participated in this interviews: two educators at the university and experts in the field of inclusion, one expert from the Institute for Social Research, one pedagogue of a secondary vocational school in urban area and one principal of a secondary vocational school in rural area

#### **Part 1: THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM**

Stakeholders who work with students highlight the following visible changes: alienation, different energy, different learning, different conversation, socially distant - changes for the worse.

It is negative that the school material was greatly simplified, so the students were deprived of knowledge, the pandemic even more endangered the vulnerable groups and negatively affected their already reduced educational chances.

The advantages are that a large number of people realised that the computer cannot replace human - teachers, that people realised how important the role of live school and education is, that some new online tools were discovered that can still be used, that both students and teachers worked on digital literacy.

The school principal points out that the priority should have been the resocialization of students and asks them how they are because it was obvious that the children had lost basic social skills, their mental health was impaired, and school was the only safe place for some students. "Sometimes it's just enough for someone to listen to them, encourage them, empower them." - the importance of the relationship, the principal tries to compensate with her support for the lack of professional service, which consists only of pedagogues and librarians. The students themselves emphasise the family atmosphere with great advantage

(it is a small school). The big challenge is that the school has no one to refer to students' mental health problems, for example, the principal reports students' suicidal thoughts, but does not receive a response from the competent services, which are overwhelmed with cases. "We don't have a place to send those children to ask for help." A pedagogue from a vocational school points out that after the pandemic, they noticed problems with an increase in peer violence, a decrease in motivation, problems with concentration, and emotional difficulties. Problems that stand out in this school both before and after the pandemic are non-cooperation with parents and a large number of students with disabilities (in some classes as many as half of students have some difficulties, which is not in line with the norm).

## **Part 2: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GOOD SCHOOL SUCCESS / GENERAL SCHOOL WELFARE AND AN INCLUSIVE APPROACH TO EDUCATION AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING**

Croatia has a low drop-out rate, but **our students mentally drop out of school**, they sit in school physically and just wait for the *paper* – high school diploma, points out one educator from the university.

She also personally meets a large number of students who want to leave college, what helps her are workshops in which she encourages them to gather thoughts, defend theses and think creatively about what they can do where they are and the conditions they have. She believes that students should be asked, listened to and really appreciate what they say, use techniques that influence their actions and motivation, and create a positive school environment. "From objectifying the child to looking at the child as a subject, an equal stakeholder - that is our responsibility."

The other interviewee, an educator at the Faculty of Teacher Education, believes that drop-out is the responsibility of the entire system. Problems arise as early as preschool and early primary school - the system's inappropriate response to students' educational needs. She believes that we have a low drop-out due to lowering the criteria for them to stay in school.

A researcher at the Institute for Social Research mentions we inherited high participation in the education system, "but what's behind it - are children released from school without adequate support to the end, without capacity building." She also states that mostly out of focus are children who are **vulnerable and not visible** - there is a need to raise awareness on

the topic of unequal starting positions and unfavourable situations for the success and well-being of students.

It is necessary to promote inclusion during studies, cross-curricular topics, to identify students at risk in general - cooperation with other departments and families. Inclusive strategies are actually participatory learning - child-centred, where different children have the opportunity to show their strong different sides. It is important not to confuse inclusive education with the needs of children of various rehabilitation types, additional needs. He also points out as a problem that often students are sent to a professional service to be corrected, everyone thinks that students' problem is not their job.

20 - 30% of workers understand what inclusion is, an internalised system of educational values is needed, initial education of educators, teachers on inclusion - mandatory. Inclusive strategies are actually participatory learning - child-centred, where different children have the opportunity to show their strong different sides. It is important not to confuse inclusive education with the needs of children of various rehabilitation types, additional needs.

The school principal emphasises the importance of volunteering - volunteering is an opportunity to build relationships - they are always the key, then you gain students in the subject you teach (in this school a huge number of interests in volunteering, visible transformation of life).

The vocational school pedagogue points out that students do not know how to list any of their skills, as if no one has ever praised them; they can't even tell what their goals are in life. Students are not interested in topics and workshops, lack motivation, and always participate the same. Due to the very large number of students with disabilities, the quality of teaching for all has been reduced.

The ministry uses scholarships to keep students in school, but this year the promised scholarships were not awarded to one program - very demotivating for all and sending a very bad message about the importance of vocational education.

### **Part 3: COMPETENCES OF TEACHERS IN THE FIELD OF INCLUSIVE AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING - FORMATIVE NEEDS OF TEACHERS AND EDUCATORS**

It is necessary to recognize the needs and open the eyes to the needs of the students, not to imply. We need to ask and look for answers and get to know the child, not to think in advance that we know everything. The goal is to involve vulnerable groups in activities.

Curricula and programs are likely to already help students in a favourable position, and those who are not will not participate in it anyway, or will be excluded.

All socio-emoc-oriented curricula resemble each other. **But it is more important to overcome the mistakes in the initial education of teachers.** It is wrong to assume that all teachers feel comfortable in workshop types of activities or in working on socio-emotional topics - it is important to empower teachers to empower themselves in this field and feel comfortable without having learned about it; without teacher education more harm can be done than good. Invest a lot of energy in working with teachers!

"Children will not be changed by programs, but by interpersonal relationships, because it is relationships that will influence whether a student wants to listen to the teacher, to confide in him, and that is actually the privilege of a great teacher."

Teachers lack education on relationship building, conversation culture, problem solving, emotions, desires and needs - they should be introduced as topics in schools from the first grade (necessity of introducing civic education). Such training should be organised by the Ministry because the school does not have the money to finance teacher education on its own.

The pedagogue of the second vocational school points out that the same teachers always attend education and that it is difficult to implement most of it given the classes with too many students. Also, teachers first need to develop their own emotional competencies to be able to help students. Topics to work on: peer violence, mediation, mental health, development of relationships and trust, awareness, acceptance...

It is pointed out that there are already curricula of cross-curricular topics *Personal and Social Development* and *Learn How to Learn*, which deal strongly with the topics of motivation and socio-emotional learning, but are not implemented systematically and depend on the engagement and will of individuals.

A researcher at the Institute for Social Research mentions how the problem is that many schools outside the capital are deprived of support when it comes to the various needs of students; **proposes mobile teams** organised by local authorities and available to all schools in the county that do not otherwise have experts available. This is a real need that can be met by the local government, not just free student transportation. And she emphasises the great need to work with teachers, already in initial education, and in the long run on the topics of socio-emotional and inclusive learning - "If they are not good, they can not provide a safe and supportive environment for children."

#### **Part 4: DEVELOPING AN ENCOURAGING ENVIRONMENT FOR INCLUSIVE AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING FOR DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS - EXAMPLES AND GOOD PRACTICES**

It is not necessary to design new curricula, it is more important to look at the existing ones and see how to combine the curricula of subjects and interdisciplinary topics (e.g. the 2 + 2 outcome method works for this educator). The same educator suggests all the methods and techniques that affect the behavioural part that encourages them to act (quick strategies to encourage and return to the purpose of why you are doing something, and sometimes it is okay to give up; for example, in public appearances when someone blocks before the performance - helping students to reach the end. Such moments are crucial where we can encourage them - again the importance of communication.

The principal of the school - participant in the interview points out: the need to give space to the child so that he can show himself in what he is good at, empowerment in topics where they are not good, feedback. It is great courage when students recognize that they have a mental health problem, but what then - to whom to send them when there is a lack of experts. Topics and techniques that prove to be good in this school: teamwork, relationships, clear rules, confidentiality, equality, importance of relationships, good classroom climate, mediation topics, sitting in a circle - clear communication, empathy, assertiveness, self messages.

The pedagogue of the vocational school points out that they see the best results in mediation, in the subject Communication in the work environment - students learn how to present themselves to the employer (interested in the topic); students love the methods of Interviews, research, group work, peer learning. "They're not used to being asked, they just listen to what's wrong, they don't feel at all that they value that attitude about themselves."

A researcher at the Institute for Social Research points out that it is important to raise awareness that students are at a disadvantage situation and all the factors that make them vulnerable, and to be very aware of their needs, how to meet them - awareness is needed both among students and among teachers, but also in local education authorities. These are not only free transport, buildings, but also support for inclusion and emotional learning. It is important to make sure that, in the best of intentions, children are not further stigmatised in their efforts to help them - also a topic important for initial teacher education, working with sensitivities. A shared understanding of what a motivated child is. Also, it is necessary to raise awareness of the problem in a comprehensive way to understand what vulnerabilities are, to understand how to support these children and what are the consequences if it is not addressed, and what are the benefits if it is addressed (both as part of initial education and as "education package ", empowerment for the whole school).

## ***5. Conclusions and recommendations***

### **I. Discussion of findings from both national desk and field research**

A review of all collected data and existing documents governing the rights of all students, especially vulnerable groups, gives the impression that in our country is strongly regulated and the recognition and monitoring and realisation of the rights of vulnerable groups. In the education system itself, this does not come to the fore, which is confirmed by the answers of all participants in the survey. The impression after all the interviews and focus groups is that participants feel disappointed and helpless when it comes to the inclusion of vulnerable groups, but also a general sense of well-being of all stakeholders in the educational process. When asked about the impact of the pandemic, teachers in particular point out that they were overwhelmed, that they saw the huge consequences of online teaching on both knowledge and mental health of students, and that they did not have the necessary system support but managed as best they could. It is often mentioned in the answers that all additional engagement (that working on socio-emotional development and inclusion is) depends on the will of the teacher whether he or she wants to work with students on these topics (with a lack of time and a crowded subject curriculum) through various extracurricular activities and projects. Participants agree that teachers miss additional knowledge and



training in this area, and training organised by the Agency and the Ministry mostly deal with the contents of individual subjects. Mental health problems are more often, students need more and more support, and schools lack a professional service that could better respond to these problems. It all mostly comes down to individual teachers or principals who provide support to students (with apprehension whether they provide good support at all), but the whole system does not have the capacity to respond to all school requests, so often when a student asks for help, the school has no one to refer him to.

Teachers' mental health has been mentioned several times as a prerequisite for working on student well-being - "If they are not good, they can not provide a safe and supportive environment for children."

And when it comes to drop-out itself, given that its rate in Croatia is extremely low, it is interesting that the surveyed teachers see it as a success because they do their best so that the student does not give up and finish school, and stakeholders see it differently: students are often given very low criteria and expectations just to finish school, but that's no way to empower them for further life and does not achieve something positive for their well-being in the long run because they have *paper* but not other necessary skills needed for their well-being. The best term that explains the situation with drop outs in Croatia was given by one stakeholder working with students: "Our students **mentally drop out** of school."

As one of the problems that demotivates them, the students singled out the fact that they are asked for their opinion through various surveys, but later they never get feedback or see changes: "We talk all the time, we have surveys every year and then they ask what we need, what we could change in school. But nothing ever changes." They also single out the problem of relationships with teachers who often do not respect them and openly show who their favourite students are, which demotivates them all. In general, the prevailing attitude among students is that they have no power over what happens to them, nor do they see themselves as active stakeholders in school life.

**An online survey** showed us among other things that students and teachers disagree when it comes to communication, support and equal opportunities provided to students, but they agree that school teaching is inclusive and the atmosphere is good. Teachers believe that the pandemic negatively affected the motivation in 80% of students (only 40% of students think the same). There is a similar result about the negative impact on grades. Thirty percent of students stated that they had no contact with teachers and colleagues during the pandemic, and 40% felt partially excluded. Teachers, 70% of them state that they were in regular

contact with students, and 30% partially, which indicates an unequal view of the frequency of communication. While teachers feel that some students have been partially excluded (50%, students say 40%) for several reasons equally, students single out the lack of resources at home. Although they believe that education in their school is inclusive, 40% of students think that not all students in their school have the same opportunity to succeed, while teachers think that everyone has an equal chance. A number of 20% of students think that teachers do not pay attention to their problems, and 30% that they do not help them with problems; 50% believe that teachers fully encourage their strengths and potential, and 50% do not use any form of support in school.

It is concluded that all the listed challenges mentioned by the participants can be divided into 2 categories:

### **System problems**

- initial teacher education does not include work on the topics of socio-emotional learning and inclusion, **teachers do not feel competent**
- neglected **mental health** of teachers
- large gaps in knowledge after a pandemic as well as impaired mental health: insufficient work is being done to deal with these **consequences of a pandemic**
- **lack of support for students and teachers** (lack of professional service in schools, mental health experts, support available only around large cities, education organised by the Ministry and the Agency initially related to school subjects, education of various organisations are usually paid, and schools have no financial resources)
- often unclear or delayed reactions and **instructions from the Ministry**
- **overcrowded subject curriculum**
- **non-introduction of Civic Education** at the state level (decisions at the local level)
- too many students with difficulties in one class (non-compliance with the norm) - **impossibility of individual approach**
- **problems of vocational schools** (image in society, underestimation by students, non-harmonization of enrolment quotas with market needs, abolition of general education subjects in vocational schools, deprivation of students for scholarships because financial plans for the new period were not adopted on time)

- local communities focused on building arrangements and providing transport - ***It's the only way they see inclusion.***

### **Problems at the school level**

- **poor cooperation with parents** who do not show interest in getting involved in school life
- teachers are **not motivated** for additional education, an active minority is always involved
- **relations** between teachers
- **attitude towards the student** as an object
- recognizing always the same vulnerable groups while others remain unrecognised
- **low motivation** of students to engage in activities
- **low expectations** of teachers from certain groups - so called *self-fulfilling prophecy*
- **different views** of teachers and students, which are equal chances for all students and on the needs of students
- some students do not use any support at school when they have a problem
- student needs are **not taken into account** when making decisions

### **Benefits highlighted by participants:**

- **very rapid teacher adjustment** at the beginning of the pandemic
- **better relations in the school team**
- the society **values education** and live school more
- recognized that **technology cannot replace human** (teacher)
- **better digital literacy** of students and teachers
- some **useful online tools** have been identified that will continue to be used
- online education for teachers - **easier participation** for teachers from all over Croatia
- Croatian schools have a professional service **located in the school itself** (although the needs are much greater than the number of employees)
- **online teaching is better for some students** - those who deal with anxiety and stress around public appearances - "Some students shine."

## II. Recommendations on what to include on the curriculum

- look at the existing materials because there is already a lot of it, it is just not used (in the Croatian curriculum of cross-curricular topics *Learn how to learn* and *Personal and social development*)
- combine 2 + 2 outcomes: 2 from the subject curriculum, two from the interdisciplinary
- include topics that teachers will first address their socio-emotional competencies: first we need to empower their mental health and motivation
- concrete examples from the practice of children's and teachers' problems, which will show how other teachers have come up with some problems
- need to involve vulnerable groups in activities (they are often left out) and to be aware of vulnerable students who are not so visible
- talk more about unequal starting positions and the vulnerable groups that arise from it
- how to follow the school rule and requirements and be supportive in some sensitive situation
- include topics how to help students with mental health topics without doing any harm (teachers do not have enough competencies and support)
- involvement of parents in activities and whole school approach
- give importance to the voice and participation of students, motivation of both teachers and students
- to give space to the students so they can show themselves in what they are good at, empowerment in topics where they are not good, feedback
- to raise awareness among students and teachers that instead of looking for reasons for the lack of protection of their right to education, young people most often associate dropping out with their own shortcomings or the shortcomings of their families
- PATH-RASTEM program : 1) understanding feelings and developing self-control, 2) interpersonal problem solving, 3) peer relationships/friendship and 4) developing self-respect in children
- to include topics: peer violence, mental health, development of relationships and trust, awareness, acceptance, conversation culture, problem solving, emotions, desires and needs,

good classroom climate, mediation topics, empathy, assertiveness, "I" messages, confidentiality, equality, the importance of humour and relationships with students;

knowledge in the field of choice theory, preventive work, supervision, motivation techniques and psychotherapeutic methods, communication, working with children at risk, techniques and methods of motivating students for schooling (Berc, Majdak & Bežovan, 2015)

- to include methods: teamwork, sitting in a circle - clear communication; handicrafts, outdoor classrooms, project days, implementing students' ideas (eg painting walls); more practical classes, less theory; letting students work on their own to solve problems and only subsequently offer help if needed; all the methods and techniques that affect the behavioural part that encourages them to act (quick strategies to encourage and return to the purpose of why you are doing something)

- what students said: they need a nice board plan so they can learn more easily, that teachers themselves record the videos they send them and do not download the finished ones; to work more on topics: dealing with sadness, stress, fear, anger; self-confidence, fear of public appearances; give students the right to a break; clear criteria; that workshops are tailored to the needs of the class (often those who don't need them participate the most); empower them to seek help and introduce them to whom they can turn; "Teachers may say that we are all equal and have the same opportunities, but from our perspective we don't see it that way."; "We talk all the time, we have surveys every year and then they ask what we need, what we could change in school. But nothing ever changes."

- [look at Jones et al (2013) recommendations earlier in this report]

- [look at Participants recommendation within *Let's talk project*]

Through the online questionnaire, students showed the most interest in the topic of self-confidence, but marked all topics as necessary.

## 6. References

1. Berc, G., Majdak, M. & Bežovan, G. (2013). Perspektiva stručnih suradnika o ispadanju učenika iz srednjih škola kao novom socijalnom problemu. *Revija za socijalnu politiku*, Volume 22. Retrieved from <http://www.rsp.hr/ojs2/index.php/rsp/article/view/1162>
2. Bouillet, Dejana: Some aspects of collaboration in inclusive education - teachers' experiences - In: CEPS Journal 3 (2013) 2, S. 93-117 - URN: urn:nbn:de:0111-opus-79956 - DOI: 10.25656/01:7995. Retrieved from [https://www.pedocs.de/volltexte/2013/7995/pdf/cepsj\\_2013\\_2\\_Bouillet\\_Some\\_Aspects\\_of\\_Collaboration\\_in\\_Inclusive\\_Education.pdf](https://www.pedocs.de/volltexte/2013/7995/pdf/cepsj_2013_2_Bouillet_Some_Aspects_of_Collaboration_in_Inclusive_Education.pdf)
3. Brkić, M & Perak, J. (2022). *Research LET's TALK: developing gender sensitive mental health program for young people (preliminary results)*. Zagreb: Forum za slobodu odgoja.
4. Cedefop (2020). *Vocational education and training in Croatia: short description*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Retrieved from <http://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/121008>
5. Cefai, C.; Bartolo P. A.; Cavioni. V; Downes, P.; Strengthening Social and Emotional Education as a core curricular area across the EU. A review of the international evidence, NESET II report, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2018. doi: 10.2766/664439. Retrieved from [https://nesetweb.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/AR3\\_Full-Report\\_2018.pdf](https://nesetweb.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/AR3_Full-Report_2018.pdf)
6. Chzhen, Yekaterina; Gromada, Anna; Rees, Gwyther; Cuesta, Jose; Bruckauf, Zlata (2018). An Unfair Start: Inequality in Children's Education in Rich Countries, Innocenti Report Card no. 15. Retrieved from <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/995-an-unfair-start-education-inequality-children.html>
7. Dobrotić, I. et al. (2022). *Basis for the development of a National Action Plan for the Implementation of the European Child Guarantee in Croatia*, policy brief. UNICEF. Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org/croatia/media/9896/file/Policy%20Brief%20-%20EU%20Child%20Guarantee%20in%20Croatia.pdf>

8. Dragojević, O. (2019). *Istraživanje stavova učitelja, nastavnika i stručnih suradnika o inkluzivnom odgoju i obrazovanju*. Zadar: Sveučilište u Zadru. Retrieved from <https://zir.nsk.hr/islandora/object/unizd%3A5589/datastream/PDF/view>
9. Farnell, T. (Ed.) (2022). *Obrazovne nejednakosti u Hrvatskoj: izazovi i potrebe iz perspektive dionika sustava obrazovanja*. Zagreb: Institut za razvoj obrazovanja. Retrieved from [https://fso.hr/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Obrazovne-nejednakosti\\_online.hr-F.pdf](https://fso.hr/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Obrazovne-nejednakosti_online.hr-F.pdf)
10. Hrgović, I. (2019). *Međupredmetna tema Održivi razvoj u odgojno-obrazovnom sustavu Republike Hrvatske*. Zagreb: Sveučilište u Zagrebu.
11. Ilišin, V. & Spajić Vrkaš, V. (2015). *Potrebe, problemi i potencijali mladih u Hrvatskoj*. Empirijsko istraživanje. Istraživački izvještaj. Retrieved from <https://www.bib.irb.hr/845219>
12. Jokić, B. & Ristić Dedić, Z. (2021). *Nacionalno praćenje učinaka pandemije bolesti Covid-19 na sustav odgoja i obrazovanja u Republici Hrvatskoj - prvi rezultati*. Retrieved from [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1nViuAi1IJ-A89fUCWNbE5crQyy4kbjIX/view?fbclid=IwAR1aTaWpjQYNnzbfdY3313FUO-ZN2EuEkXq\\_yD4lSozjbLAjxLIYasg3wuw&fbclid=IwAR31Pbm7Atp1sfTIPjXfuqWddDBjMJIbAGYfZcQvbwCBs81191t8blmjdKw](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1nViuAi1IJ-A89fUCWNbE5crQyy4kbjIX/view?fbclid=IwAR1aTaWpjQYNnzbfdY3313FUO-ZN2EuEkXq_yD4lSozjbLAjxLIYasg3wuw&fbclid=IwAR31Pbm7Atp1sfTIPjXfuqWddDBjMJIbAGYfZcQvbwCBs81191t8blmjdKw)
13. Ljubetić, M. & Maglica, T. (2020). Social and emotional learning in education and care policy in Croatia. *International Journal of Evaluation and Research in Education (IJERE)*, Volume 9. No. 3, pp. 650~659. Retrieved from <https://ijere.iaescore.com/index.php/IJERE/article/view/20495/13024>
14. Muslić, Lj. (Ed.) (2018). *Zdravstvena pismenost odgojno-obrazovnih djelatnika u području mentalnoga zdravlja djece i mladih: Istraživanje prepoznavanja depresivnosti i spremnosti na pružanje podrške i pomoći*. Zagreb: HZJZ. Retrieved from [https://www.hzjz.hr/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Zdravstvena-pismenost\\_publikacija.pdf](https://www.hzjz.hr/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Zdravstvena-pismenost_publikacija.pdf)
15. *Nakon Rijeke građanski odgoj u škole uvelo još 9 gradova i 3 županije: 'Djeca postaju tolerantnija, empatičnija i sklonija kritičkom razmišljanju, a postižu i bolje rezultate u školi!* (2021). Gradonačelnik.hr. Retrieved from <https://gradonacelnik.hr/home-glavna-vijest/nakon-rijeke-gradanski-odgoj-u-skole-uv-elo-jos-9-gradova-i-3-zupanija-ucenici-postaju-tolerantniji-empaticniji-i-skloniji-kritickom-razmisljanju-a-postizu-i-bolje-rezultate-u-skoli/>

16. *Program potpore u odgoju i obrazovanju pripadnika romske nacionalne manjine za razdoblje 2021. do 2023. godine.* (2021). Vlada RH. Retrieved from [https://mzo.gov.hr/UserDocImages//dokumenti/Obrazovanje/NacionalneManjine/Program-potpore-romi//program\\_potpore\\_u\\_odgoju\\_i\\_obrazovanju\\_pripadnika\\_romske\\_nacionalne\\_manjine\\_2021-2023.pdf](https://mzo.gov.hr/UserDocImages//dokumenti/Obrazovanje/NacionalneManjine/Program-potpore-romi//program_potpore_u_odgoju_i_obrazovanju_pripadnika_romske_nacionalne_manjine_2021-2023.pdf)
17. Rumberger, R. W. (2011). *Dropping out: Why students drop out of high school and what can be done about it.* Harvard University Press. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674063167>
18. Lecheval, A. et al. (2021). Croatia\_Global education monitoring report: *Information gathering template prepared for the Global Education Monitoring Report 2021 - Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia - Inclusion and education: All means all* [pdf].
19. Šimeg, M. (2019). Za razredništvo je potrebno stalno usavršavanje. *Školski portal*. Retrieved from <https://old.skolskiportal.hr/clanak/12521-za-razrednistvo-je-potrebno-stalno-usavrsavanje/>
20. Tot, D. (2012). *Kvaliteta i unapređivanje kvalitete rada škola - Ranjive skupine učenika i kvalitetna škola* [ppt]. Retrieved from [www.azoo.hr](http://www.azoo.hr)
21. *Understanding and preventing early school leaving* (2015). School Education Gateway. Retrieved from [https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/en/pub/viewpoints/experts/understanding\\_and\\_preventing\\_e.htm](https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/en/pub/viewpoints/experts/understanding_and_preventing_e.htm)
22. UNESCO (2018). *Global Education Monitoring Report 2019*. Retrieved from <https://www.sdg4education2030.org/global-education-monitoring-report-2019-unesco-november-2018>
23. Vlada RH. (2021). *Nacionalna razvojna strategija RH do 2030. godine*. Retrieved from <https://hrvatska2030.hr/>



## **7. Annexes**

Online research\_students

Online research\_teachers



The BE-IN project is co-financed by the ERASMUS+ programme of the European Union. Its content reflects the views of the authors, and the European Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein. Project Number: 2021-1-IT02-KA220-SCH-348DE244.

