

# STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION

| START THE CHANGE PROJECT - SYNTHESIS REPORT

**START THE  
CHANGE!**

# IMPRESSUM

## TITLE

Students' participation  
START THE CHANGE PROJECT - SYNTHESIS REPORT

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**START THE  
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# INTRODUCTION

The Forum for Freedom in Education (Croatia) together with the partner organizations: INOVA+ (Portugal), MCEC (North Macedonia), Network of Education Policy Centers NEPC, SIRIUS (Belgium), the Ivan Meštrović Primary School (Croatia) and Agrupamento de Escolas Josë Estêvão (Portugal) and the Nikola Karev State Municipal School (North Macedonia) are implementing the project Start the Change within the Erasmus+ program (K3, Social Inclusion).

The aim of the project is to strengthen the resilience of youth by supporting them to be healthy, self-confident, fulfilled, broadminded individuals who create and foster healthy relationships, develop their abilities and be actively engaged in their community regardless of their backgrounds and the possible challenges they face. Providing opportunities for young people to express their own world perspective and experience being heard and seen by their teachers as well as supported in initiating creative and innovative projects through which they can express their own talents, values and potential for growth strengthens their resilience and reduces the risks of manipulation, extreme attitudes, relationships and attitudes that are harmful.

The policy objective of the project is to empower schools, teachers and parents to support and acknowledge the voice of students and their active participation in the life of the school and their local community in the three implementing countries (Croatia, Portugal and North Macedonia).

Therefore, the first cluster of the START THE CHANGE project investigated the perspectives of young people themselves on how they perceive their school community, their position in it and whether they are being listened to and seen or not. These findings were the starting point for developing the second cluster of START THE CHANGE materials and training curricula for teachers and parents to empower them to together with young people create positive changes in their schools and learning spaces. In the third cluster, the START THE CHANGE project seeks to empower young people to create and lead with the support of their teachers, voluntary initiatives that will contribute to solving the problems that were previously identified by young people. While in the fourth cluster, the partner organization in cooperation with different stakeholders in the three countries and at the EU level is developing further recommendations for strengthening the students' voice and participation in their schools and educational systems at the policy level.

The key focus of all clusters of the project is **the promotion of the students' voice and participation** as a growing number of researchers show that it supports the opening up of spaces and capacities for marginalized youth to play key roles in the positive changes in schools and learning spaces, support more socially just school environments and ensure that disenfranchised youth are included in the decision-making processes and foster positive youth development around agency and civic engagement.

**The synthesis report** provides key information from the National Policy Road Maps from Croatia, North Macedonia, and Portugal, which outline the country-specific policy issues concerning students' participation at school.

## **Four main areas will be addressed through the Synthesis Report:**

1. The importance of students' participation
2. The problems and challenges in students' participation
3. The actions and activities in dealing with challenges in students' participation
4. The recommendations for enhancing students' participation based on national policy road maps.

It is important to note that even though the methodology of designing national policy road maps was the same within the project, the national policy road maps differ in two aspects: (1) the specific national context; (2) the approach to implementation and enhancement of students' participation at the local level. Further diversity in national policy road maps is related to the extent of the review of the literature, as well as the clearly presented conclusions from relevant national research, law, and policy documents in the area of child participation.

# THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) at the most general level defines child participation rights, specifically in Article 12, which provides the basic framework for students' participation. Therefore, within all national policy road maps, the focus is on "students' participation" which describes the state of affairs regarding children's participation and realization of their rights to participate within the educational systems in different countries. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasizes childhood as not only preparation for adulthood but also as a period in which children should be treated as individuals with their own rights, as equals with adults and as active participants in school and community development, which will enable them to develop into capable and responsible citizens.

Furthermore, at the international level, there are several agencies and documents that focus on ecological strategies to empower youth, as a preventive and timely approach. Specifically, UNESCO (2017) revealed the urgent need to shift our lifestyles and the way we think and act regarding global issues, such as climate change. UNESCO (2017) suggests that education is the stand-alone goal and, simultaneously, a means for attending to all the other sustainable development goals.

Students' participation is also reflected in national laws and policies, stating in a formal and declarative way the importance of this topic in the everyday life of children. In some countries laws that enable students' participation in schools are relatively newly enforced or still in the process of implementation (for example in North Macedonia), and in other countries the existing laws and policies need stronger operationalization in practice (for example Croatia).

Overall, as research<sup>1</sup> shows, the benefits of students' participation can be manifested in the following ways as Yamashita, Davies, and Williams (2010) outline:

- **Personal and learning outcomes** for students - students feel happier, more self-confident and more in control of their learning; participation enhances communication skills and general learning competence; the improvement of skills and competences in the area of democratic citizenship such as critical thinking, autonomy, and responsibility. Students' engagement is increased when their voices were heard and respected. Likewise, student engagement is linked positively to desirable learning outcomes such as critical thinking and grades.
- **School and classroom outcomes** manifested in curricula and school management and in a change in the attitudes and behaviour of educators. Activities such as the development of curriculum and assessment, empowered and more influential school council, and changes regarding meal providers, can enhance the participation of students. Furthermore, students' participation helps adults to decentre, i.e., to understand the students' perspective and to gain a better insight into the problems that children are facing. When it comes to the best interests of the child, consultation with students increases the probability of making decisions that are in their best interests. Student participation in the school raises the need to balance power and responsibility between adults and children within a school so that students can work in partnership with teachers, school leaders and consultants.

<sup>1</sup> The list of references is available in national policy road maps. In the Synthesis Report the overall conclusions will be presented without individual citation using Yamashita, Davies, and Williams' (2010) outline and grouping of outcomes as a framework.

- **Outcomes outside the school** – students become more engaged in their communities, they are more ready to volunteer or participate in elections, there are also beneficial impacts on families and improved relations between families and schools. Students' participation at both the school level and the educational-policy level creates a healthy basis for a democratic and participative society.

The above mentioned three groups of outcomes that Yamashita, Davies, and Williams (2010) outline are interconnected and influence one another. Students who participate in school life feel like a central and essential part of it, they feel that educators care for them, and they reciprocate with their active participation, which further leads to the continuous development of the school. Ultimately, the inclusive school climate and culture that is created contributes to the improvement of interpersonal relationships between children and adults.

Another important aspect and benefit of students' participation is also the positive influence on the social inclusion of young people. Participation in school life helps students develop self-confidence, a sense of identity and belonging. Belonging to the school and involvement in school life can also positively influence prevention of youth radicalization.

In conclusion, enhancing individual civic attitudes (citizen identity; individual autonomy; human rights), interpersonal relationships (communication; dialogue) and social and intercultural relationships (democracy; sustainable human development; globalization and interdependence; peace and conflict management) are skills that not only foster human development but can also help to change the way people connect, see each other, and become more empathetic. All of the above ultimately helps to build democratic and inclusive schools as part of promoting active citizenship together with enforcing European values and fundamental rights.

# THE PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES IN STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION

In national policy road maps, different country-specific problems and challenges were identified, however, some of those problems and challenges are to some extent general.

- **The regulation of students' participation in national laws and policies and curricula.** In Croatia students' participation is well regulated by the strategies and laws and the legal framework and strategic goals provide possibilities for students' participation. However, the research results show that it is discreetly present in practice, which indicates that there are certain challenges within the organization of schools and relations among school actors. Only in the last couple of year has the concept of actively including students in school planning been regulated in national laws and strategies in North Macedonia. The Law on Primary Education (Official Gazette of Republic of North Macedonia, no. 161/19 and 229/20), for the first time, regulates student organizations and participation in school communities (Article 68). Considering that the incorporation of provisions for organizing students is relatively new in the Primary Education Law, the legal requirement to establish a students' parliament has only recently begun to be mandatory. A similar Law on Secondary Education is being drafted and is expected to be adopted by the end of 2022. In Portugal, since 2017/2018 the school curriculum has included a subject called citizenship education. This formal subject was created after the emergence of the National Citizenship Education Strategy (República Portuguesa, 2017) and has a core of contents that should be explored intentionally with students from kindergarten to high school.
- **The form and level of students' participation.** The general conclusion is that meaningful and active participation remains rather low in all countries. The research shows that teachers do not promote dialogue and they mostly use the Q&A method, students' representatives are only formally included in the decision-making process and their proposals have no weight. It was also noted that there is a need to enhance the quality of communication between students and teachers, as well as to develop critical thinking and to co-create knowledge in the cooperation process with their teachers. The schools are more advanced when it comes to the technical and procedural aspects of the student participation process, however, the overall quality of participation and influence is relatively low. The class community/student community are the most common forms through which students present their views. Students believe that they can influence the initiation of a change in the schools and feel a responsibility to be active. However, students fear that if they openly voice their opinions, they could end up in trouble with the school. Furthermore, even though there are national associations and councils, students' participation remains at the level of information and consultation. The students' participation is acknowledged as important but there are no developed mechanisms to involve them in the decision-making processes.

- **Implementing students' voice in the educational system.** The voice of the learner (child/student) is usually largely excluded from the design and implementation of a curriculum. Promoting students' voices is also a means for attaining sustainable development through the introduction of pedagogies that empower the learners and learning contexts. To foster students' voices, schools need to enhance changes in the mindset and school culture, engaging in a holistic (whole school) and ecological approach (involving all school staff, students, and the community).
- **Education for democratic citizenship.** The democratization of the schools is relatively neglected and deficient and the process is often inverted and turned into a process of disciplining students. Several studies into the political literacy of high school students in Croatia show that the citizenship competence of students remains low. More specifically, their participation is limited to humanitarian actions and volunteering. These results suggest that the educational system does not equip students with the knowledge and skills for participation in a democratic society.

Furthermore, educators also do not gain the adequate initial education in areas of civic rights, child rights and child participation. Even when there are fragments of the curricula that cover children's participation, they are concentrated mostly on general knowledge and less on skills and ethics.

# THE ACTIONS AND ACTIVITIES IN DEALING WITH CHALLENGES IN STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION

All three countries proposed and described models and activities that can answer some of the main challenges in students' participation.

## Croatia

**The democratic school model** proposed by Baketa and Pažur (2017). The model includes the democratization of four basic components (educational activities, educational content, school governance and extracurricular activities, and interaction with other spheres of social life), individual steps and examples. The main goal of this model was to "increase participation of all actors within the school, to open the educational process in relation to students and parents and to strengthen cooperation with the community" (Baketa and Pažur, 2017: 7). Among numerous proposed steps the model also contained the specific steps related to – the empowerment of students for participation and cooperation, the enhancement of teacher education in participative methods, and the development of a democratic school culture. This model is comprehensive and represents some sort of ideal type within the existing legal framework. Thus, without individual assistance and mentoring, it was difficult to expect that schools would introduce this kind of structural change. This leads to the conclusion that it is necessary to try to implement an incremental approach, address a few important issues and provide individual assistance to selected schools.

## North Macedonia

The **Youth Ethnic Integration Project** (implemented by the Macedonian Civic Education Center and the Youth Education Forum), through the Bureau for Development of Education, works with Civic Education teachers and school support staff to support students to express their needs and concerns and achieve positive change in the community through conducting student initiatives. All primary schools are expected to go through the process of capacity building and mentoring support by mid-2022. The project also works on connecting students with the municipality and organizing youth-led community actions for the improvement of certain aspects of communal life, that were both selected by students and implemented in collaboration with the municipality. According to the **Law for Youth Participation and Youth Policies** (Official Gazette of Republic of North Macedonia, no. 10/2020), each municipality should form/establish: a) a local youth council, b) a local youth parliament and c) a youth centre.



It is important to note that the Law defines young people as 15 to 29-year-old citizens of North Macedonia, and as such is relevant for students in secondary schools and above. The local youth councils were expected to be established within 1 year after the passing of the Law in January 2020, while any existing local youth councils with non-expired terms were expected to be transformed according to the new requirements of the Law. The Agency for Youth and Sport and the Prime Minister's advisor on youth policies, with the support of the local OSCE Mission, have been conducting informative sessions with the municipalities about the requirements of the new Law. About 2/3 of the municipalities have been informed about their role in the process of establishing the local youth councils and a small minority has started the procedure.

## Portugal

**School-Wide Positive Behaviour Interventions Support (SWPBIS)** – the conceptual perspective integrated into the promotion of positive behaviours (Sugai & Horner, 2020), has been contributing to the body of research on the establishment of a school culture, with different levels of social and behavioural support (Cruz, 2021). These interventions are more effective when combined with the organization of school systems and the monetization of resources that facilitate the sustainability of actions (Sugai & Horner, 2020). The involvement of all stakeholders in the school community and all school contexts should be a central objective for building the foundations for understanding the importance of promoting positive behaviours, students' participation and agency and democratic skills, through processes of support, monitoring, training, and feedback (Deltour et al., 2021; Sugai & Horner, 2020). SWPBIS has been designed to establish support for social culture and individual behaviours and organizes a three-tiered system of support for all students, increasing the intensity according to the students' needs. The system is built around a primary intervention, known as universal prevention, targeting all students in the school. Secondary interventions are designed to reduce or eliminate risk factors for a reduced number of students, by providing them with tailored interventions. Tertiary interventions are aimed at reducing the severity of behavioural problems in students with identified risk factors (Sugai & Horner, 2009). In this way, SWPBIS is a flexible, contextually, and culturally preventive system for the school, with the goal of creating a positive and safe environment and school culture that reinforces students' positive behaviours (Deltour et al., 2021). To do so, an important component of the framework is the data collection of all students and decision-making regarding the evidence (Sugai & Horner, 2009).

# THE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENHANCING STUDENT'S PARTICIPATION BASED ON NATIONAL POLICY ROAD MAPS

Within the overall goals focusing on promoting and enhancing student participation and ensuring schools as a safe and empowering environment for students' participation, each of the participating countries developed specific goals/objectives at the national level, with recommendations. Furthermore, all recommendations in the national policy road maps were operationalized through specific actions including the identification of key stakeholders. All national policy road maps are available in the Appendixes.

The following table shows the specific national goals/objectives and recommendations (table 1).

**Table 1:** Overall goals, specific goals and recommendations

	Croatia	North Macedonia	Portugal
<b>Overall goals</b>	<p><b>Ensure schools are a safe and empowering environment for students' participation</b></p>	<p><b>To enhance student participation in education</b></p>	<p><b>Promote active student participation in schools and local communities</b></p>
<b>Specific goals/objectives</b>	<p>Enhance the competencies of educators for students' participation</p> <p>Develop a culture of dialog in schools</p>	<p>To ensure student participation in the development of curricula</p> <p>To ensure the implementation of participative school governance</p>	<p>Ensure schools are empowering an environment for student participation</p> <p>Develop active citizenship competencies of students</p>
<b>Recommendations</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Improve the current framework of pedagogical competencies to include students' participation based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child</li> <li>2. Provide continuous professional development on students' participation and active citizenship to educators</li> <li>3. Develop guidelines for inclusive and student-centered school development plans</li> <li>4. Ensure inclusion of student-led activities in the school curriculum.</li> <li>5. Facilitate students' participation and ensure its development from a mere formality to a meaningful process, with the focus on student councils</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Adopt the bylaws for including students in curriculum development</li> <li>2. Raise awareness among stakeholders of the importance of including students in the development of the curriculum</li> <li>3. Training students</li> <li>4. Raise awareness among school staff of the importance of student participation</li> <li>5. Provide educators with continuous professional development about student participation and participative school governance</li> <li>6. Provide programs for school staff and students about school committees and councils to improve their understanding of the characteristics and functions of those bodies</li> <li>7. Facilitate student participation and ensure its development from a mere formality to a meaningful process (creating an encouraging environment)</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Provide continuous professional development about student participation to educators and school leaders</li> <li>2. Raise awareness among school staff of the importance of student participation</li> <li>3. Facilitate the implementation of student-led actions at the school level</li> <li>4. Facilitate the implementation of student-led actions in the area of sustainable development at the community level</li> <li>5. Provide programs about citizenship and sustainable development to students</li> </ol>

Summarizing national policy road maps, several key areas for enhancing students' participation can be defined. However, the specific country context and frameworks must be taken into consideration. In this sense in North Macedonia, there is an emphasis on creating bylaws to support the implementation of the newly enforced law on primary education with a focus on students' participation in curricula development. As confirmed by the UNESCO GEM 2021 regional report for Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia confirmed that students' participation in curricula development is a very rare form of student involvement and was reported only in Moldova. In Portugal, the proposed framework of the SWPBIS model is seen greatly as a tool for the enhancement of students' participation. In Croatia, the focus is on education and the continuous professional development of educators in the topic of child participation to enhance the shift from formal to meaningful participation.

- 1. Raise awareness of the importance of students' participation across all levels of the educational system.** Awareness-raising activities should be implemented on all levels: from policymakers at the national and local level, members of academia and researchers, educators, and children.
- 2. Ensure the quality implementation of legal regulation of students' participation** by developing laws and bylaws for including students in various aspects of the education system and school life, from curriculum development to classroom activities. Existing laws and strategies should be also reinforced with tailor-made guidelines and models that fit specific contexts at national and local levels. Furthermore, at national levels, there is a need to consider, summarize and put into use all activities, projects, and guidelines from different stakeholders (government, civil society organisations and the academic community) to create a joint pool of available resources. Furthermore, the focus should also be on monitoring the implementation of laws, bylaws, etc. and the evaluation of the implementation.
- 3. Provide continuous and comprehensive learning about child rights, participation rights and democratic society, for the professionals who will be working directly with children.** At the university level in the study programs for educators and other professionals that work with children (such as social workers, pedagogues, psychologists, doctors, etc.) the emphasis should also be made on practical participatory skills and methods in working with children.
- 4. Provide continuous professional development of educators in student participation, active citizenship, and participative school governance.** Even though there is a growing body of research that clearly indicates the benefits of students' participation on the positive development of children, a positive school culture, improved relationships between adults and children and the positive organizational development of schools, there is still a need for continuous activities to raise (greater) awareness of students' participation as a child's right that is not negotiable or optional. This also implies the improvement of the current framework of pedagogical competencies to include students' participation based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- 5. Provide continuous and comprehensive learning about children's rights, participation rights and democratic society, at all levels of education (from kindergarten to university levels).** The education of the above-mentioned topics should be integrated into all levels of education, which will allow the enhancement of competences (knowledge and skills) for students' participation.



**6. Development of democratic culture in schools that enables continuous dialogue among all stakeholders.** In this sense, there is a need to ensure schools become empowering environments for student participation, which can be reached by nurturing a culture of dialog and participative school governance. Furthermore, there is a need for students' participation to become more inclusive and student-centered.

**7. In order to ensure the quality implementation of legal regulations, provide opportunities and resources for students' participation in the education system generally, and specifically in everyday life in schools.** At the level of the education system, students should be more actively involved in the process of designing curricula by including students in working groups at the national level together with adults. In this process thorough organization and comprehensive support should be provided for the students. In everyday participation in schools, students should be respected as important partners in school governance. The organization and work of students' councils should also be enhanced to become meaningful for students and to allow students to have influence in decision-making processes in schools. There should also be more support, in both relationship and spatial dimensions, for student-led actions at the school level.

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