THE VOICE OF CHILDREN

CREATING SPACE AND STARTING THE CHANGE

Manual for adults

START THE CHANGE!

Munivrana, Perak, Pavlović

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IMPRESSUM

START THE CHANGE!

The manual guides us in how educators and children together can co-create a beautiful world of empowered humans that are able to pursue their lives actively in society, with understanding and thoughtfulness for all.

As the manual gently reveals, the place for us to start the transformation of our society is within ourselves as adults and educators. By integrating expert opinion from psychiatrists, educational researchers, historians, philosophers, developmental psychologists, child rights experts, political scientists, management theorists and more this handbook shows us how to foster students as active participants in their world. Filled with testimony from children, young people and educators and quotes by thought leaders from Rousseau to Freire to Henrietta Fore we see how our children and many of our greatest thinkers align with this fundamental idea that transforming society begins with inner transformation. The great treasure is that the manual also offers educators provocations for deep thought and reflection and invitations for exercises within and outside of the classroom.

This magical mix of detailing insightful theory, highlighting visionary leadership and offering self-reflective practice creates an opportunity for educators to recognise where they are on the journey of shifting their mindset from one in which adults are and should be in control of the school environment completely to one where we are able to release our angst, control and worry and begin to trust in the wisdom of children, themselves and collaboration to ensure that everyone in the school environment is able to grow and develop healthily.

It is a visionary work that we welcome into the world of student voice and participation with open arms.

Mialy Dermish, SIRIUS – Policy Network on Migrant Education

This manual, though, is not only for educators and those working in schools, any adult interested in building a trusting partnership relationship with a child will find it handy and inspiring, and we would like to invite parents, uncles and aunts, grandparents to reach out and read it, there is much to learn from it."

Lana Jurko, Network of Education Policy Centers

We thank the Forum for Freedom in Education´s volunteers Maja Šarić and Katarina Petrović for their assistance in preparing the school stories.

STUDENT VOICE TOOLBOX FOR TEACHERS

Our manual gives you various theoretical models, methods and discussions about strengthening young people's voice. The practical tools are divided into 4 key dimensions: expert opinion, inspiration, exercise and story from a child's perspective.

LEGEND:

EXPERT OPINION

INSPIRATION

EXERCISE

STORY FROM A CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE

I. THE VOICE OF CHILDREN - WHY?

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO "HAVE A VOICE" FROM AN EARLY AGE?

It means having a sense of initiative stemming from the belief that others will hear us and that we will be able to influence our surroundings. Parents who find this important allow their children this kind of expression from the day they were born, while teachers do the same from the first day of school: a voice equally important and as valuable as their own. They also respect that "voice" as their own.

THERE ARE THREE WAYS TO "GIVE CHILDREN A VOICE":

1.
Assume that what children think and have to say is equally important as what you have to say.

2.
Assume that you can learn from them just as much as they ca learn from you.

3.
Enter their world through play, activities, discussions: don't wait for them to enter yours in order to make contact.

"If for some reason you are not able to do these three things, it's time to focus on yourself and do something about it - in order to find your own voice and give that gift to the children and young people you work with!"

Dr.sc. R.A. Grossman, Ph.D., psychologist, Massachusetts

Children who have a "voice" are children with a strong sense of identity. These are the children who stand up for themselves when necessary. They speak openly and are not easily intimidated. They accept the inevitable frustrations and failures as an integral part of life and move on. They are not afraid to try new things and take certain appropriate risks. Talking to them is interesting.

TOOLBOX

**EXPERT OPINION:
On the voice of students**

"Student voice is giving students the ability to influence learning to include policies, programs, contexts and principles."

Dennis Harper. 2000. Students as Change Agents: The Generation Y Model. Olympia, WA: Generation Y.

"Student voice refers to those pedagogies in which youth have the opportunity to influence decisions that will shape their lives and those of their peers either in or outside the school settings."

Rebecca E. Wolfe, Adria Steinberg, & Nancy Hoffman. 2013. Anytime, Anywhere: Student-Centered Learning for Schools and Teachers. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

"Student voice is a concept and a set of approaches that position students alongside credentialed educators as critics and creators of educational practice."

Alison Cook-Sather, 2020

> *"Student voice can range from the most basic level of youth sharing their opinions of problems and potential solutions, to allowing young people to collaborate with adults to address the problems in their schools, to youth taking the lead on seeking change."*
>
> Dana Mitra. 2009. "Student Voice and Student Roles in Education Policy and Policy Reform." In D.N. Plank, G. Sykes, & B. Schneider, eds. AERA Handbook on Education Policy Research. London, UK: Routledge.

> *"Student voice can broadly be defined as the process of consulting with students to enter a dialogue which may concern teaching and learning or other matters pertaining to classroom policy and practice."*
>
> Morris, 2020

> **CHILD AGENCY (action, encouragement and motivation for active participation)**
>
> *"The role of the individual in forming his/her experience of the world is active, that is, 'people are carriers of their own experience, and not just the ones experiencing it. "*
>
> *Bandura, 2001*

INSPIRATION: Eric's story

Trond Waage is a UNICEF child rights expert, currently residing in Florence. He previously spent 7 years working as the Norwegian Ombudsman for Children. One day, a former student of his called him. He was a high school principal at the time, and told him that he was having major problems with one of the second-grade classes. (Norwegian equivalent to the final grade of lower secondary school). They were loud, impossible to handle, disobedient and would often disturb the work of others. He asked for Trond's help.

When Trond came to the school to help and meet with that class and parents, he realized that there was nothing he could do. The students from that class didn't listen to him at all, showed no respect for him and didn't want to converse. Their leader was a boy called Eric, who kept his feet on the desk and twisted everything Trond said. Upset, he told them: "All right, it's your life, your decisions." Miserable and disappointed, he sat down with their parents and everyone agreed: "It is what it is, there isn't much to do."

On his way home, he stopped at a gas station for some coffee and was served by that same boy - Eric! At the age of 15 and a half, he managed a shift at the gas station, served meals and coffee, issued bills and was polite. Shocked, Trond asked him how come he was that different. Eric told him:

"Trond, it's simple. At school, no one ever addressed me with respect. When I don't feel respected, I don't behave responsibly, that's why. It's very simple."

Trond was deeply impressed by this experience and he often consulted Eric in his later work as the Ombudsman.

EXERCISE:
My voice

Aim: raising awareness on our own journey of finding voice self-reflection

10-15 min   **self-reflection**   **Pen and paper**

Think back to when you were a child.

How much "voice" did you have? To what extent were you allowed and able to to express yourself freely? Where and with whom?

Who loved listening to you, whom could you speak to about yourself and everything that was happening to you?

Name the part of yourself that you were free to express?

(in terms of feelings, thoughts, attitudes, behaviours, words, personality traits...)

_____

_____

_____

What were you not able to or not allowed to express and show?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

What were the reasons for that ...? (e.g., you feared embarrassment or punishment, no one behaved like that or no one recognized or listened to that part of you, adults couldn't devote enough time to you, etc.)

In what way and to what extend has that shaped you as the person you are today?

STORY FROM A CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE: My dream, school student, 2nd grade of high school

I am at a children's playground next to my building. I am sitting on a bench and thinking. In the background of my thoughts there's children's laughter and clamour: "I'll go first!" Basically, everything you can hear at a children's playground. I decided to ask them if they were looking forward to school. What answers do you think prevailed? Most of them stated that they didn't want to go to school and that they wanted to continue playing. Now, here comes another question. Why do children, as soon as you mention school, immediately think it means the end of playing? Maybe because they've heard it from older children who go to school or because that's what their parents are telling them. Why would children be denied of play if they go to school?

Everyone knows that school is an "educational institution", etc. But what if we added the adjective 'fun' to that definition? I think it would make everyone more interested, but maybe not. Finally, we come to the main topic. What is my dream school like? Close your eyes and imagine the following situation. You are entering a school... Wait a minute, how did I imagine you reading with your eyes closed? Well, let's just pretend that your eyes are closed. Let's start over. You enter a school, you hear various voices, these are students in the hallways of the school, a real school, not some virtual one. Students comment on the beginning of another school year, on their adventures during lockdown and summer holidays, as well as their experiences with online learning. All right, enough of imagining, you can open your eyes now.☺ As you may have noticed, the relationships at that school are very good, they are great. Between everybody. All right, of course, we shouldn't expect that, but at least there are no bad relationships or quarrels; those who don't like each other, don't talk. Can you hear the school bell? No, of course you can't hear it, but at least pretend to hear it, thank you! Students enter the classrooms. Today we have one of the new subjects: 'Thinking'. It is a subject that gives everyone the right to express an opinion without being mocked and to present some fun games that he/she likes. Then we have: 'Showing'. It is a subject that consists of doing good deeds, helping people and animals. Last but not least, we have a subject called 'Understanding'. It is a subject in which a student helps his classmate understand another subject. As we all know, a peer can explain something to another peer better than the teacher. These subjects should help the student to understand that helping others is good and that good things happen to those who do good things. The school would be organized in a way that everyone can find a place to think, to have fun, to relax and to socialize. Teaching would be easier for teachers because these new subjects, especially the subject Understanding, would make students realize that it is not easy for teachers either. Everyone would love going to school. It may sound impossible, but we should never say never.

I hope you liked my dream school. It's not too much, but it's pretty good and different from the others, isn't it? We all know that it's a school from dreams, that dreams don't last forever and that we have to wake up at some point. But maybe at some point this could change, we'll see...

CHILDREN AS BEINGS DIFFERENT FROM US?

From a developmental perspective, children could be seen as "unfinished beings", the "becomings", or as "beings" that they already are. More recent trends and children's studies perceive children and young people as active subjects who have their own understanding of the world in which they live and who influence its creation (Alanen & Mayall, 2001). Although they are developing, changing, and learning, their value at all times is "in the present", it consists of what they are, of the perspective they have in the present and it is important to appreciate them as they are.

As "becomings" young people are developing, changing, learning.

As "beings" young people and their perspective are valuable in the present at all times.

As adults, we are often (somewhat understandably) focused and burdened to "guide", clarify and correct children's thoughts and perceptions, in order to make their thinking as similar as possible to ours, and to "get them on the right track". Although guidance and teaching are valuable practices, they can also be used to deny and diminish what children are, what they feel and see.

"We recognize children as competent humans who have the inherent right and capability to contribute to decisions that affect their lives. Children are key sources of knowledge and experts on their own lives, they are our best source of advice for matters affecting them." (MacNaughton et al, 2003)

DO WE UNDERSTAND WHAT IT IS LIKE TO BE A CHILD?

Remembering what it was like being a child is not an easy task. Physical, emotional, hormonal and psychological changes are so dramatic that it seems like that being was of a different species! If you had the experience of living with a baby, you know that these little beings are a bit like "beings from another world". They feel and express themselves in their own way, they have their own rhythm, and we have to fully adapt to them at that stage in order to respond to their needs, so that they could survive and get what they need.

As they grow up, little by little, we "invite" them into our world, the world of adults, but they will still remain a different "species" for a very long time. Very often we as adults use some common phrases to describe children and young people.

"SHE SEEKS ATTENTION"

"HE SCREAMS AND SHOUTS"

"HE IS PLAYFUL"

THAT'S HOW GOOD HE IS"

"I SEE HIM, BUT I DON'T HEAR HIM"

"SHE IS ABSENT MINDED"

"SHE DOES EVERYTHING HERSELF, AS IF SHE WERE AN ADULT"

"HE IS WILD"

"DRAMA QUEEN"

"HE/SHE JUST CAN'T..."

"SHE IS NICE, SHE IS ALWAYS OBEDIENT"

"PIECE OF WORK"

"HE'S NOT INDEPENDENT"

"SPOILED"

"SHE IS IMPOSSIBLE."

"HE IS WHINING"

These are just some of the phrases that demonstrate how much we, as adults, are unable to understand the world of children, and how much we expect them to function in the same way or in a way similar to ours.

And there are, of course, all those non-verbal behaviours, such as silence and ignoring, throwing objects, shouting, slamming the doors, unusual creations and so on, which present us with challenges and require us to step forward in understanding, as well as in communicating.

Maturity and adulthood, independence, calmness, control, and decency are just some of the characteristics we persistently glorify and strive to achieve as soon as possible, in order to reduce our discomfort and the realization that growing up is a slow process that may be encouraged but cannot be forced.

However, it's not just babies or pre-schoolers, for example, who are dramatically different beings from us. Adolescents, in their particular phase of life and maturation, can equally shock us and drive us insane. Whether it manifests as social withdrawal, cynicism, passivity, drastic changes in appearance, new interests, or as aggression, defiance, poor school performance, experimenting with alcohol and cigarettes, sexuality... The behaviour by which they are trying to (re)build and redefine themselves and their relationships can worry us and make us try to "correct" or "fix" them, to threaten or blackmail them... without wondering what kind of world we adults have created and what options we have offered them.

It may be difficult for us to face our childhood, our adolescence, our needs that have or have not been met, all that we have been allowed or not, and what we have not received or experienced.

If we looked a little deeper, we might find a trace of the child's emotions and desires in ourselves, conditions that we may have forgotten or buried, but to be completely honest, have never lost.

A CHILD'S MIND

Although children's brain reaches 90-95 % of its final mass by the age of 6, it's intensively reshaping and maturing until the mid-20s. Old "connections" in the "grey matter" are erased, new ones are established, and it is a process affecting the ability of the child and young person to make decisions, judge, learn, build relationships, and experience the world around them.
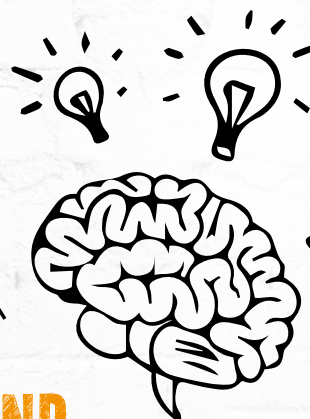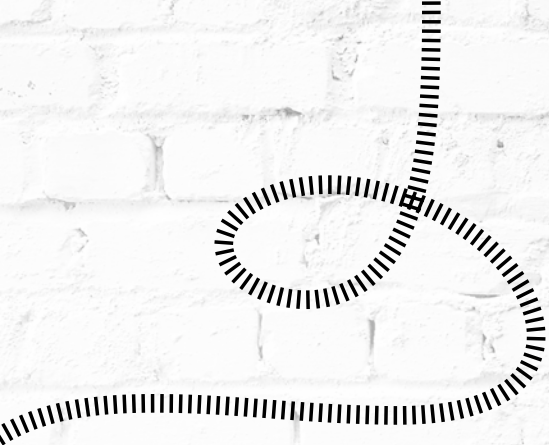
TOOLBOX

**EXPERT OPINION:
8 important factors that help with children's activity**

Here is an example from the field of "adolescent brain", a term used in the research domain dealing with functioning and learning of adolescents. To understand what helps students to "get involved" and to "be active", it is important to look at their perspective on school experience.

In simple terms, in order for them to "activate" and learn better, teenagers find these 8 factors important (source: whatkidscando.org/index.html):

1 that they feel well and safe (physically, mentally, emotionally)

2 that they find the topic important (it should be practical and life related)

3 that there's action and exercising

4 that they learn something new through it

5 that they have an available mentor

6 that it is something applicable

7 that they can reflect on what they gained from that experience

8 that they can plan further.

In fact, they become "big", yet remain "small" to some extent and not realizing that will make us do unjust and wrong things in the upbringing and approach to young people. The changes first occur in the "back" of the brain, while the changes in the "front" (prefrontal cortex) happen until adulthood. Thus, when making decisions and taking stands, teenagers are much more influenced by the amygdala, the part of the brain associated with impulses, instincts, and emotions.

"Teenagers are working with brains that are still under construction. That's why sometimes it will seem that they think and behave 'in a mature way', but at other times it will seem as 'just very impulsive and emotional' thinking or behaviour"(Armstrong, 2016).

By asking them for their opinions, by establishing a dialogue based on respect and understanding, and by talking to them about their attitudes and decisions, you support their mental development and "creation of good connections" in their minds, which are developing and learning about themselves and the world.

EXERCISE: How do you see children?

Aim: raising awareness on our own ability to listen to children

self-reflection

Read the following statements from children and see if you can "relate to them" or you want to "teach them a lesson" and correct them as soon as possible ☺.

The sky is green.

He did it to me first.

I don't want to go to the kindergarten.

I don't feel like studying.

I don't feel like doing anything.

I want more chocolate.

I don't need a jacket.

I want a tattoo.

STORY FROM A CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE: My dream school 2 student, 2nd grade of high school

My school is unique and beautiful, and my imagination makes it ideal. No child is completely satisfied with their school, but always dreams of "its" school. A school from imagination. Wishing for an ideal school.

As you approach the school, you hear a cheerful song. The feeling is the same as when watching the most cheerful musical in the theatre. At the school entrance, there is a friendly doorman who kindly opens the door to every student. The school is beautiful, although it looks completely ordinary. It has colourful walls, beautiful and large windows, student graffiti and pictures of famous fairy tale heroes. There are also photographs of famous writers whose quotes adorn the school walls as well.

The greatest wealth of the school is its interior. It spreads over five beautiful and spacious floors that can be reached by elevator, as well as by stairs. On the first floor, each teacher has his/her own office, and on the second floor there are classrooms for countless students. The third floor would be reserved for physical activities, and above it, there would be a library with all the books in the world. The top floor would serve as a place for relaxation and socializing between students and teachers.

In that ideal school, teachers are never angry or listless; they are always in a good mood, smiling. The ideal school would be full of learning and experimentation, so students would not have to go home empty-headed with a ton of homework. The ideal school deserves the ideal equipment, so the school would be equipped with a lot of IT equipment, functioning and ready for use. After an introduction to its interior, the school deserves students as well. The ideal school has ideal students. Mutual respect, tolerance, understanding, and solidarity are the principles of behaviour of all students. There would be no violence at school and proper educational disciplinary measures would be taken if such incidents occur. I would like all the children to enter the school with a smile and for everyone to greet each other. It would be wonderful to see that children love every class and that their classes do not pass in anticipation of the school bell. The ideal school would ensure peace and safety for children. It would not create pressure or fear, but the feeling of home. I want us to forget about the reprimands and the bad grades, and to work with all children according to their abilities and aptitudes. I want a school that will help us form opinions. I want a school where observations and opinions can be freely expressed. A school that will encourage our virtues and talents. A school that will inspire us. A school that will give us wings and help us realize that the only the sky is the limit for enthusiasm and strength of our souls and youth. I want a school that will nurture our humanity, kindness and generosity, as well as the other virtues that we don't even know about, yet make us human.

People are living beings with a highly developed brain capable of abstract thinking, speech, problem solving, introspection and many other things. These things need to be taught in the school, in the institution that raises us and in which we spend more time than at home with our parents. Teachers have to be the people who are there for us. They have to be friendly. Being a professor is not easy, especially if you're trying to calm down a class full of students with raging hormones! On the other hand, being a student is also not easy, especially when you are forced to sit in classes that you may not be interested in for a few hours every day. But it is always good to find a compromise and to be in a nice and healthy relationship. Such a relationship would be most common in my ideal school.

Maybe it's a dream, but maybe it's the near future, who knows! Maybe we are getting closer to that goal each day. Maybe we are getting closer to the dream of an ideal school each day.

HOW THE VOICE IS RELATED TO THE WELL-BEING AND NEEDS OF CHILDREN

"Your generation (the children of today) is facing a series of new challenges and global changes that were inconceivable to your parents. The climate is changing beyond recognition. Social inequalities are deepening. Technology is completely changing the way we see the world... Families are moving more than ever... Childhood has changed, and we need to change our approaches in working with children. "

H. Fore, UNICEF Executive Director

The greatest experts in psychological well-being and mental health of children always say that it is extremely important to understand the child's needs and to strive to provide each child with what it needs the most in order to grow, develop, be happy, and become a healthy and fulfilled human being who builds relationships and contributes to the community.

In simple terms, competent parents (caregivers, educators, teachers) feel and respond to children's needs. Children's needs, though, should not be confused with their current desires.

Poetically speaking, we will often hear that they "need affection" and that they "need attention", but as soon as you try to define what that is exactly, you discover a whole universe of needs.

In young children, touch, feeding, comfort, pleasure, movement, a unique combination of physiological needs and the need for tenderness and acceptance are crucial. But when physically restrained, even these young beings will quickly let you know that their freedom is immensely important to them.

Likewise, even at such young age, when they feel humiliated and disrespected in any way, a sea of tears and howls will let you know that they are suffering and demanding a minimum (and sometimes a maximum!) of respect.

We return to the key individual psychological needs: **love**, **respect**, **freedom and fun**, of course never forgetting physiological or **physical needs**, as well as the **need for safety**. In addition, it is important to understand that we are social beings and that our needs are met in a social context and contact, i.e., that it will be difficult for us to be "happy" if others around us are "sad", not only because we need others but also because their well-being is inextricably intertwined with ours.

THE MOST IMPORTANT CHILDREN'S NEEDS

PHYSICAL NEEDS

Although it may sound shocking, even in the 21st century we are unfortunately witnessing a world where the basic physical needs of children are often not met, whether at home, at school or in the community. It is not only due to the social or economic disadvantages that many families face but also to the fact that the whole system and society are not sufficiently attuned to children, and due to the adults' frequent lack of understanding - many children are deprived of quality nutrition, sleep, exercise, housing, health services and experiences needed for a healthy development.

SAFETY

Children need to feel safe and have their own stable physical and emotional space at home, in the classroom and on the playground. When they feel frightened or threatened, they will ask us to comfort them and show them that they are safe with us. This need is primarily met when a child has harmonious family relationships in which adults express attitudes and behaviours that are consistent in the context of a familiar routine and place of residence. This gives children a sense of predictability and permanence in a constantly changing world. But children also want and need to feel safe in their kindergarten, in their school, on the playground, on the street. This need becomes extremely important during and after disturbing and traumatic events or crises, and it is up to adults to understand the "language" that the child is using to express that he or she is deeply worried, upset, insecure or frightened. In such cases, it is of the utmost importance that adults become the main source of safety, taking care of themselves while simultaneously taking care of the needs of the child.

LOVE

Young children are characterized by the fact that their need for love comes first. They love us, they trust us and parents or guardians are the most important people in their world. For that reason, they will try to do everything to adjust to us. Sometimes that means they will be "naughty" or "silent". But if we keep in mind that this is the way they meet their need for belonging and love, it is up to us, the responsible adults familiar with how needs function, to adjust ourselves to them and to allow those needs to be met. By listening to children, we show them our attention and love, help them appreciate relationships and make friendships more easily, and make them feel valuable and connected to others throughout their lives.

RESPECT

It is important to mention another big and key psychological need, the need for competence: power, importance, respect. It manifests differently at various stages of development, but it is important to us throughout life, and it has a special place at a young age when a child builds an image of himself or herself, as well as self-esteem and self-confidence. By listening to the child's voice, encouraging its expression, and acknowledging its views, we strongly impact the fulfilment of this need, resulting in child feeling valued, respected, strong, and less likely to become a victim of violence, manipulation and abuse or feel inferior as an adult.

FREEDOM

Freedom and autonomy are crucial for our mental health; having a feeling that we can decide, change, start and quit, choose, act, influence. That we can do something but don't necessarily have to, that it's our choice. However, some fear freedom and opt for more security and less freedom, or maybe they don't know what to do with freedom, because they don't have much experience with it. Freedom is, of course, relative, and highly personal.
But if we want to be genuine, authentic, and grown up in the full sense of the term, we need to experience freedom, we need to know how to handle it. How free are children, especially in the educational system? What do they get to choose and on what do they get to decide? And why are we surprised when they become "passive", "inert", "indecisive" and "without initiative"?

Where does the reasonable boundary of freedom and obligations/responsibility lie? These are all important questions to which educational systems will surely need to find proper answers in the future.

FUN

Certainly, a very important but often forgotten or suppressed need of us all, and especially children, is the need for fun. Although we associate fun with play, mischief, laughter, and often "disobedience", it is woven into our entire organism and we try to satisfy the need for it through all of our interactions. It is extremely important to enable children and young people, but also ourselves, to meet this need, because it is a prerequisite for our progress and growth. You may wonder how that is related to your growth. In Croatian language, the verb zabaviti se (to have fun) includes the verb baviti se (to do). By observing this word, we can see that in order to do something and be good at it, we need it to be fun. Fun is also the source of creativity that helps in the learning process in all domains, as well as of independence and responsibility for personal development. As long as we keep it away from classrooms and schools, or believe it has no place there, our potential, as well as the potential of children and youth, will not fully develop.
Try to remember, what helped you learn better and overcome the challenges? Did you have fun doing it or did you have a feeling that you have to do it? How do you integrate fun in learning and development today? How do you bring fun into your work and among your students?

TOOLBOX

EXERCISE "Children's autonomy at school"

Aim: to reflect on your own school and places of student autonomy

We believe that in your school there are "areas of children's autonomy", i.e., areas in which children can show independence and freedom of choice, decide on something or have some influence over something while having fun at the same time.

Take a look at these four areas and provide a few examples for each of them:

CLASSES

EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

SCHOOL SPACE AND ORGANIZATIONAL ASPECT

SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

Is there an area that doesn't include children in the decision-making process, although it could? In which areas do you think that would be possible?

adult's needs, children's needs and how are they related?

When we take a closer look at all these needs, we see that they are almost impossible to fulfil without paying attention to the voice and actions of the children themselves. Children show us and tell us, in a verbal or non-verbal way, what is it that they need and in what way.

BUT DO WE KNOW HOW TO LISTEN TO THEM AND RECOGNIZE WHAT NEEDS LIE BEHIND OF WHAT THEY ARE TELLING/SHOWING US?

By not listening to them and not respecting their voice, we are actually not responding to their real needs but to our fantasies and ideas of what they need, and those arise from our belief that it is us, not them, who know better what they need, want and can. We are guided by the idea that it is our duty and task to do everything in our power to get them on the "right path" tailored to our ideas of what is right or good for them. By thinking that we are "taking care of them" or "doing things for their own good", without carefully listening to them, we are actually not in contact with them, we do not connect with them and we are sending them a message that their world is not important to us, as much as we think we are doing it all for their
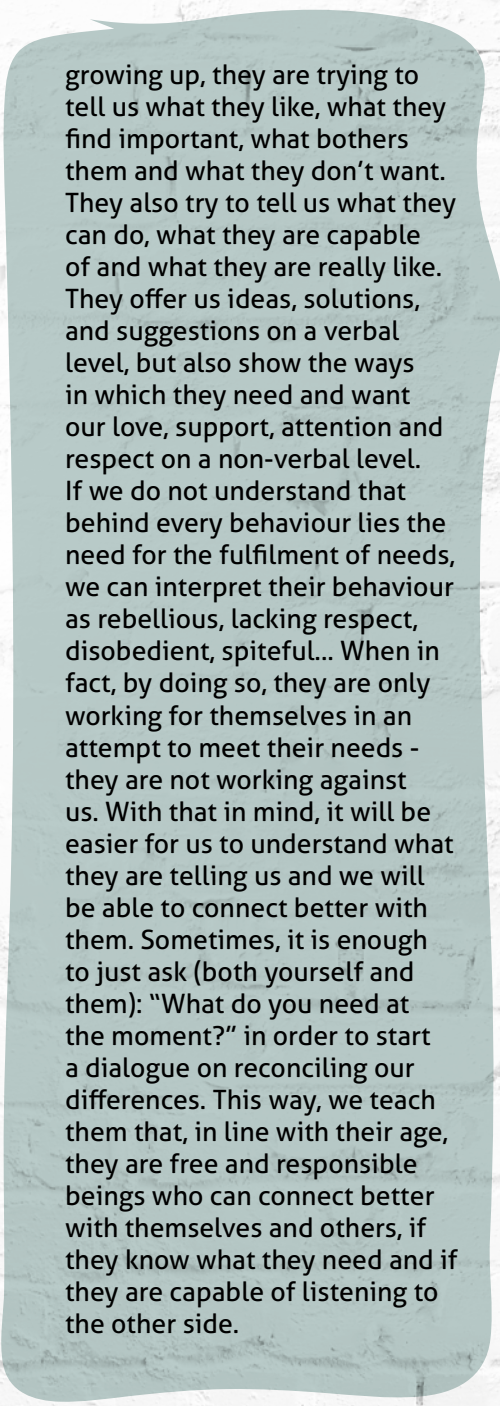
own good. While doing so, we forget how much we ourselves object and get angry when someone else tells us how we should live our lives.

There is a number of reasons why we are not listening to their voices. Sometimes we are simply stressed out, in a hurry, and sometimes, instead of turning to them, we turn to "experts" and publications on that topic, looking for answers in simple and ready-to-use solutions. Sometimes we do not like their suggestions (we consider them childish and unrealistic), but the reasons for not listening to them can also stem from old habits and attitudes that we never questioned, in our unconscious desire for children to have an experience similar to ours, or even in our selfishness, egoism and narrow-mindedness.
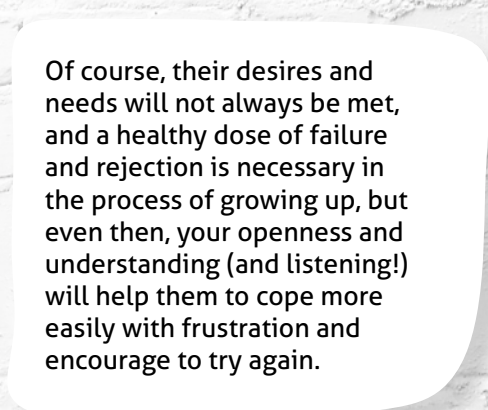
WHAT CAN CHILDREN TELL US ABOUT THEIR NEEDS?
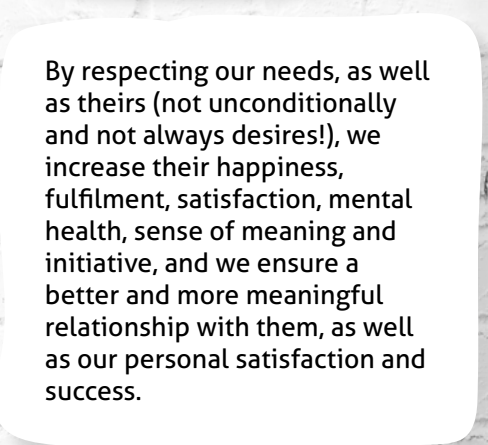
Even as babies, they show us when they are hungry or thirsty, how many hugs they need and whether they want to be carried, whether they are physically comfortable or uncomfortable and what kind of support they need. Throughout the process of

growing up, they are trying to tell us what they like, what they find important, what bothers them and what they don't want. They also try to tell us what they can do, what they are capable of and what they are really like. They offer us ideas, solutions, and suggestions on a verbal level, but also show the ways in which they need and want our love, support, attention and respect on a non-verbal level. If we do not understand that behind every behaviour lies the need for the fulfilment of needs, we can interpret their behaviour as rebellious, lacking respect, disobedient, spiteful... When in fact, by doing so, they are only working for themselves in an attempt to meet their needs - they are not working against us. With that in mind, it will be easier for us to understand what they are telling us and we will be able to connect better with them. Sometimes, it is enough to just ask (both yourself and them): "What do you need at the moment?" in order to start a dialogue on reconciling our differences. This way, we teach them that, in line with their age, they are free and responsible beings who can connect better with themselves and others, if they know what they need and if they are capable of listening to the other side.

Of course, their desires and needs will not always be met, and a healthy dose of failure and rejection is necessary in the process of growing up, but even then, your openness and understanding (and listening!) will help them to cope more easily with frustration and encourage to try again.

By respecting our needs, as well as theirs (not unconditionally and not always desires!), we increase their happiness, fulfilment, satisfaction, mental health, sense of meaning and initiative, and we ensure a better and more meaningful relationship with them, as well as our personal satisfaction and success.

EXPERT OPINION: Students and teachers - what do we need in the school?

W. Glasser, author of the Choice Theory and Quality School explains that the needs are shuffled daily, in accordance with our circumstances, experiences, as well as the roles and relationships that we have. For example, while we are working, the most prominent are our needs for competencies and "circulation" in an activity we find important. But after work, we meet with our friends and our needs for fun and belonging rise to the top. Or, maybe after work we take a walk around a park, because the need for freedom or calmness is at the top. We always satisfy our needs, but the way we do it varies from person to person and therein lie our diversity, as well as potential conflicts.

But the analysis of needs (Lojk, 2018) revealed that some of our roles are exceptions, especially when it comes to upbringing. These certainly applies to the roles of parents, but also to the role of the teacher. In this role, the order of needs is quite stable and unchanging, unlike the order of children's needs that changes as they grow older.

If we put the needs of both teachers, children and adolescents in the context of relationships, we can understand better what is happening and why we are more or less satisfied. Bosiljka Lojk (2018) sees the need for competence and respect as the primary need of teachers. This need is often accompanied by the question: Am I competent and successful? On the other hand, adolescents, to whom the need for power comes first, are guided by a constant desire to prove themselves, they want to be capable, important and successful. And therein lies the power of teachers - if we know what drives them, then we can create conditions in the classroom (thus directly affecting our need for power) that will allow them to feel powerful, competent and worthy of our respect. We turn them into our allies, having in mind that they cannot take away our power, but we can certainly take it away from ourselves and declare them "impossible to handle".

TEACHER
Respect/Ability
Love
Fun
Freedom

CHILD
Love
Fun
Freedom
Power/Ability

ADOLESCENT
Power/Ability
Freedom
Fun
Love

Unlike the teachers who work with adolescents, primary school teachers usually do not face such challenges with their students because the primary need of younger children is the need for love and connection: they love, want to be loved and will do anything to feel a sense of belonging. This makes it easier for primary school teachers to satisfy their own need for power and competence, because students mostly obey and cooperate.

Another important need that is present among teachers is the need for acceptance and connection: "I know that I won't be successful unless they like me", which often clashes with the adolescent's need for freedom, that is, independence, autonomy, and the possibility of choice. Given that the autonomy is important to them, they can interpret your need for belonging as "choking" or "patronizing". The teacher satisfies the need for belonging and connection in a way that allows adolescents as much freedom as possible, within clearly defined frameworks of the school system, class rules and personal boundaries. **By including students in the rule-making process and allowing them to co-decide in areas of their direct interest**, we work on our need for belonging and on their need for freedom. Because how could we not love and appreciate the person who offers us the freedom we value so much.

Another important need of younger students is the need for fun; their basic activity is playing and they are always exploring something. Providing them with fun makes it is easier to involve them in the learning process and achieve closeness and contact with them.

Understanding the division of needs is a foundation for creating conditions in which children and adolescents will be fulfilled and happy in healthy, active and adequate ways. However, we have to keep in mind that, in order to create these conditions, we have to be aware of our needs and satisfied with the way we are fulfilling those needs with them by our side.

EXERCISE: My needs

How do I meet my needs in the classroom (power/respect/competence; belonging/love; fun; freedom)?

Can I feel even better in classroom? How?

What can I do to be more satisfied regarding to students? What would I do different?

Do I let my students know what is important to me?

How can I adapt to them in order to make us all feel good?

Am I open to hearing and seeing what is important to them?

By raising awareness of the needs and ways of meeting them, we directly influence a better relationship with students and ensure conditions for their development and strengthening of their voice and involvement, because we are able to see their potential and opportunity for progress.

EXPERT OPINION: All the benefits of strengthening the voice of children at the school level, for children and adolescents themselves

Studies have shown that the benefits of paying special attention to strengthening the voices of students, as well as to their involvement in decision-making in schools are numerous:

- Increased engagement and motivation, self-confidence and communication skills (e.g. Mitra, 2004)

- Better peer relationships and better relationships between different age groups (grades) (Quinn & Owen, 2016)

- Better co-operative skills and accepting other people's ideas (recognized by students) (Thomson, 2012)

- Development of "leadership" and citizenship competencies (e.g. Walsh, Black, Zygnier, & Fernandes, 2018).

- Development of autonomy, responsibility, creativity, reflexivity, and leadership initiative, along with stronger communication skills (Sharma-Brymer et al., 2018), as well as strengthening collaborative and negotiating skills (Bourke & Loveridge, 2018; Fielding, 2016, 2018).

- Stronger sense of self-control (Mitra, 2018) and better academic results (Cook-Sather, 2018).

- Positive impact on identity building and self-confidence, sense of belonging, integration and strengthening motivation (Cook-Sather, 2018).

- Greater sense of responsibility and justice, commitment and concern for the welfare of the school and the wider community (Gordon, 2019; O'Neill, 2018; Seale, Gibson, Haynes, & Potter, 2015).

- Advancement of classroom policies (Matthews et al., 2018), improved curriculum (Brooman, Darwent, & Pimor, 2015), building strong relationships inside and outside the school, problem-solving skills, mutual learning and development of democratically stronger communities (Fielding, 2016; Mayes, 2018).

INSPIRATION: How to better hear the voice of children and adolescents?

Before we focus on aspects of the "voice of children" and "children's initiative" in the educational context, let's dedicate a moment to that first experience of the "voice" we gain (or lose) within our family. We all have the experience of being "silent" without wanting to or when we were not asked anything.

However, this is a story that begins in early childhood and is transmitted to the communication processes in the society as a whole.

SO, HERE ARE SOME TIPS FOR ADULTS WHO WANT TO BETTER HEAR THE VOICES OF CHILDREN WHILE THEY ARE STILL YOUNG:

1. When they are telling you something, stop moving around and doing other things: listen carefully to what they are saying, even for a short while, when you really can and when they can get your "undivided attention".

2. Respect what they are telling you: even when you don't understand it or when you disagree. By giving them time and space to share with you what they find important, you strengthen their voice.

3. Let them speak for themselves: whenever possible, do not speak for them. The author highlights an example of a parent-student meeting during which children (not parents!) shared some of their concerns and problems in class, and the teacher showed understanding and let them know she heard them. A very rewarding experience for everyone!

4. Call them "experts" for something they're good at: they are delighted when that's recognized. The author cites the example of her daughter, who was an "expert" in finding the car in the parking lot at the age of 4, and remembered names better than anyone at the age of 9. The self-confidence they will feel shall give them more "voice".

5. Listen without "correcting" and criticizing: you don't have to teach them something right away, you don't have to be right. Instead, listen and ask: "How can I help you?". By doing so, you show support and love, and allow them to express themselves rather than having to defend themselves.

6. When they confide something disturbing to you, take a pause and count to three. Be sure to thank them for what they have told you, for their trust. No matter how angry you are and how much you want to yell at them, scold them or "teach them a lesson", such behaviour could cause them to shut you out forever. If you want them to confide in you when they are worried, scared, hurt, and angry, you need to open that space to them, instead of closing it.

Rachel Macy Stafford, educational rehabilitator, author of „Hands free mama"

EXERCISE: Do I know how to look at the world from a child's perspective?

Choose one behaviour or characteristic that you have an issue with: of a child you work with, a child that you know or of your own child. Something that really annoys you or that you find difficult to deal with. What is it? Describe in detail what it looks like:

_____

_____

And now describe your reactions, thoughts, and feelings regarding that behaviour. What do they provoke in you and why do you think that is?

Ask yourself:

"Do I understand this child's life and how he/she spends his/her days? How does that child feel about his/her life and what would he/she like to be different?"

Can you try walking in the shoes of that child or adolescent? Feel what it's like to be in the skin of someone who behaves and feels that way. What does he/she need? What doesn't he/she still understand? What else is he/she confused about? What would he/she tell you if he/she could?

How can you help?

WHAT IS THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE VOICE AND THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN?

The right of the child to participate/be involved is granted by the **Convention on the Rights of the Child (Art. 12, the right to express a view on all matters affecting the child)** and it is a principle that pervades all areas of the child's rights.

It will be a long time before children gain a more significant voice in society.

However, we can say that there is some initiative to make children's voices heard, but it usually concerns children in a better position: more educated or more dominant children, belonging to the higher social classes. The voice of the excluded, quieter children and children with unfavourable social background is barely ever heard.
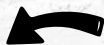
HOW WERE CHILDREN PERCEIVED THROUGHOUT HISTORY?

21st century — PARTICIPATING

19th - 20th century — RIGHTS VULNERABILITY

18th century — INNOCENCE

16th - 17th century — IMPULSIVE NAUGHTY

Middle Ages — PROPERTY

In the Middle Ages, they were considered as property of their parents (more precisely, of their father); they were lucky if they survived until the age of 6 and at that age they would already start helping and working. They could often be seen, but not "heard". Childhood was not given much thought.

During the 16th and 17th centuries, certain efforts were made to raise and re-educate children; they were considered "impulsive", "naughty", "not yet human beings" who needed a "firm hand" and guidance to get on to the right path.

A major turning point occurred in the 18th century, under the influence, among other things, of artists and philosophers such as J. J. Rousseau: the understanding of childhood as an age of innocence, purity, inspiration and acceptance of our natural and animal sides as valuable and important aspects. We can say that we have grasped that children have a "soul". In the words of Rousseau, "Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things, everything degenerates in the hands of man."

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, laws began to change, children's rights were recognised, and children were gradually retrieved from the world of work and massively included in the education system, somewhat similar to the present one.

Some even think that we have somehow excluded children from the society and the world of work and put them in the "waiting room".

The awareness of the "vulnerability" of children started growing after World War II. The number of women entering the labour market increased and children were "abandoned".

In a way, we are witnessing a newer phase: we are discussing the idea of a "participating child", a child who is the subject, not just the object of upbringing; the

authority of parents is somewhat lost, children challenge rules and negotiate everything, and they are less "disciplined and obedient". However, this privilege does not apply to all children, but is reserved for that minority of children who are given a "voice": for example, children with a higher level of education, wealthier children, children who are members of the majority population (Understanding Childhood: A Cross Disciplinary Approach, Kehily, MJ, 2013).

However, one of the biggest challenges for teachers and educators remains the same: how to hear the voice of (every!) child?

TOOLBOX

EXPERT OPINION: What does the Convention on the Rights of the Child say?

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) emphasizes "participation" as one of the 4 fundamental principles of children's rights (remaining principles include the right to life and development, non-discrimination, and the best interests of the child). This right also has its place among civil rights (rights to privacy, information, freedom of thought, conscience and religion, freedom of speech, freedom of association...).

Special Article 12 The Convention emphasizes that *the child has the right to express his or her views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.*

Here is an explanation of this article (from Vranješević, Dermish, 2020):

• **Every child can express his or her views (vision, feelings, needs) in accordance with his or her age and abilities.** The role of adults is to find a way of communication through which the child will express itself. The main question for adults is not: Do children understand what they were asked? but: What do we need to do so that they can understand us better? Would they understand better if we gave them more information or if we asked them in a different way?

• **Children need to express themselves in all matters affecting them directly.** Studies show that the range of topics that children would like to express themselves on is far greater than the range of topics on which adults consult with them. For children, everyday topics (such as: where to go, who to hang out with, what to do) are just as important as longer-term goals (such as: which school to enrol in, which courses to take, which extracurricular activity to choose). This does not mean that they don't find the long-

term goals important, but that they find daily decisions, which adults often do not even think about, equally important (Kelley, Mayall & Hood, 1997). Basically, adults should broaden their view of topics and decisions affecting children. There are many decisions directly affecting a child that adults are unaware of. Children are members of our society and therefore it is important to ask for their opinion on many more topics! („Kids these days...", 1999 : 136)

- **Children should be able to express their opinion "freely"** And it is the role of adults to create both a safe and stimulating environment for that.

- **Child's opinion is taken into account and respected (according to his or her capacities).** This does not necessarily entail fulfilling the child's wishes, but taking them into account whenever important decisions concerning them are made. This also means that adults are responsible for explaining to the child how they will take their opinion into account, as well as in which case they will not act according to their wishes (just as when talking to an adult).

EXPERT OPINION: What do children and teachers say?

In 2017 and 2018, the research "Participation of children in the educational system" was conducted in 50 schools, headed by Ivana Jeđud Borić, Ph. D. (in cooperation with the Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences and UNICEF, Croatia).

Teachers and students were asked the following questions:

- *How do children (students) and adults (teachers and professional associates) perceive school?*

- *How do children and adults perceive children's participation in school?*

- *What are the forms and levels of student participation in school?*

- *What is the role of student councils in relation to children's participation in school?*

- *What is the role of adults regarding student participation in school?*

- *What encourages and what hinders children's participation in school?*

Here are the summarized conclusions, and a part of it is also available in the 4th section of the manual (alongside recommendations). You can find a reference to the text of the Report and find out more in the section Bibliography.

How did children and teachers answer?

BOTH ADULTS AND CHILDREN ARE SATISFIED WITH THE SCHOOL AND DISSATISFIED WITH THE OVERLOAD OF TEACHING CONTENT. The source of satisfaction are school relations and school organization, while the sources of dissatisfaction, alongside the increasing workload, stress and bureaucracy, are (in)possibilities of schools in rural areas, lack of hot water, paper and hot meals, as well as rude and unfair actions of certain teachers.

PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN IN SCHOOL IS CONSIDERED VERY IMPORTANT, BUT UNDERDEVELOPED. Children point out that their voices are irrelevant and not respected, while adults point out that they do not have a clear framework for children's participation in the educational system.

THE KEY TO CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION LIES IN THE HANDS OF ADULTS. Adults decide on mostly everything: they create programs and school activities in which children can participate, but rarely get to decide on something, they are reluctant to join student councils, and adults tend to choose "good and exemplary students".

CHILDREN ARE AWARE OF THE EXISTANCE OF STUDENT COUNCILS BUT ARE NOT FAMILIAR WITH WHAT THEY ACTUALLY DO. Although their potential is enormous, it usually comes down to a formality.

IT IS GOOD WHEN A TEACHER IS IN A "GOOD MOOD" AND THE STUDENTS "DON'T CAUSE PROBLEMS". When one of those elements changes, teachers sometimes "abuse their power". This negatively affects the feeling of trust and connection, and consequently the participation of children. Children have a great need for the teachers to treat (love) them all equally, but they notice that teachers tend to take batter account of the opinions of the *excellent, obedient* and so-called *teachers' pets*.

The message that all research participants conveyed is that children's participation in school is important and desirable, but that the CURRENT WAY OF WORK AND LIFE IN SCHOOLS DOES NOT ENCOURAGE THE ESSENTIAL PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN in deciding on relevant topics. Everything is subordinated to the achievement of academic success, which pushes the creation of good relations between teachers and children, a key factor in encouraging children's participation, into the background. Both adults and children are ultimately dissatisfied with this. The authors point out that "the relaxation of forms (and formalities) in schools would open up opportunities for dialogue between children and adults, as well as for meaningful participation of children." The big question is what this "relaxation" implies and how to achieve it.

**EXERCISE:
On children's
participation**

- What do you think about the basic human rights of children?

- When you look at the current situation of children in your country and compare it to the Convention on the Rights of the Child: which children's rights are more, and which are less fulfilled?

- What does the term "children's participation" or "children's inclusion" mean to you?

- Which areas entail the children's participation at the school you work in?

**INSPIRATION:
Do you know what
UNICEF's vision of the
"Child Friendly City" is?**

"*A child-friendly city* is fully committed to the realization of children's rights under the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Among other things, it guarantees the right of every young person to: influence decisions concerning the city, freely express an opinion about the city he/she wants, actively participate in the community life, be an equal citizen with access to every public service, regardless of his/her origin, ethnicity, religion, income, gender or disability. "

HOW WILL THE VOICE HELP CHILDREN BECOME ADULT MEMBERS OF SOCIETY?

By trying to "protect" young people and avoiding topics we don't feel comfortable and safe with, we are actually ignoring the problems. In addition, we send them a message that we are unable to deal with the issues to which we are both exposed on a daily basis, but also that we do not trust their ideas, reflections and actions. Nevertheless, young people are witnessing all this and sometimes it is difficult for them to understand the world and take a stand in relation to social problems, which creates the foundations for civic illiteracy, discrimination and even radicalization and violence.

To what extent are we able to prepare young people for the society and the adult life that awaits them? And what is it that awaits them or is already here? How willing are we to hear the opinion of young people regarding current social issues? Can we discuss the issues that our societies and the planet are facing with young people as equals?

Observing developments in the country and the world, we see some new (and some old) challenges that young people will face, that they are already facing, and that they will need to ask us about.

At the global level:

- we are facing one of the greatest health crises in history, the global **COVID-19 pandemics** which, in the time of compiling this manual, is still ongoing and is taking tens of thousands of lives daily,

- as well as digitalisation, social networks and the "availability of information", the line between true and false, important and irrelevant, verified and unverified, **real news and fake news is becoming increasingly difficult to discern**

- privacy is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain, and the room for manipulation and **online violence** is increasing significantly, as well as the associated mental health problems among young people

- simplified, ingratiating and short-range statements and "promises", which can also be described as **populistic**, are flourishing and garnering more and more public attention, especially those playing on emotions and moods.

- although some parts of the world are richer than ever, many children face economic crises and inequalities, and despite the "development of the modern world", **child**

poverty is omnipresent, from the extreme one to the one which simply significantly changes the opportunities and possibilities of the child to develop his or her potential and influence family stress

- children are more aware than adults that **life on Earth, ecology and the environment are important topics**, and yes, they are also aware of the consequences of human (primarily economic) activity and the consistent denial of responsibility

- even today, inequalities, racial and gender-based violence, **disregard for human rights**, and violent conflicts over different values are so widely spread and omnipresent that we owe children a meaningful answer to why that is so and what adults do about it, we are obliged to hear their thoughts and help them search for answers

- ...and although we are technologically more advanced, **mental health problems** and problems in relationships are widely spread and adults not knowing to deal with emotions or life stresses are numerous

At the European level:

- we are facing the arrival of higher number of refugees for years due to war conflicts in the wider area (but also due to extreme poverty and climate changes)

- research shows growing tensions between the majority and minorities in many countries, violence, and radicalization on both sides

- in the educational context, intolerant attitudes and behaviours, as well as violence based on belonging to various communities and groups, are becoming increasingly apparent

- extremist violence (the so-called 'far-right' and 'far-left'), terrorist attacks and nationalism (ethnic nationalism and separatist nationalism) are more common

- some countries struggle with transition problems, changes in political systems, dramatic examples of corruption, showing signs of leadership crisis

- we are facing demographic challenges, outflow of young people to "richer" countries, as economic disparities between countries are still huge

- The European Union, as a community, is experiencing numerous crises that manifest in the value disunity of its members and in its questionable readiness to respond to crises in an adequate and timely manner

What will we tell young people regarding these topics, and more importantly, what will they tell us?

Will we ask them at all?

How do we explain to them that, as a society, we are not that advanced in preserving the health, well-being and prosperity of people, especially children?
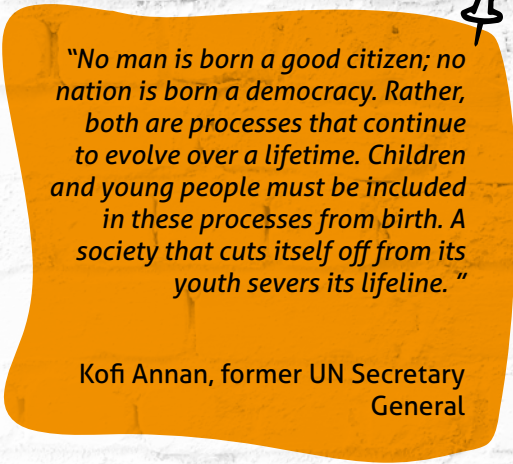
There is no right way to teach democracy unless we also practice it.

Eric Hofer

Will you introduce these social problems and challenges into the classroom and **enable students to discuss these topics openly**, with a series of arguments and counterarguments?

Even if you are not teaching citizenship education or if you do not have any special training in that field, you will not be able to avoid it. Discussing all these topics with students is also a powerful learning tool for any subject, because the facts that students adopt while actively involved in an interesting discussion or activity are much better remembered and understood, and behaviours change accordingly.

LEARNING ABOUT THE SOCIETY THROUGH CIVIC AND CITIZENHSIP EDUCATION

Which topics are important to discuss with children and young people, in order to explore their thoughts and to enable them discussion and personal development?

Using various models of citizenship education, you will come across various definitions of topics, the most comprehensive one perhaps being the global Sustainable Development Goals. Those 21 goals are really an inexhaustible source of very wide-ranging topics that are very interesting and can be connected to our lives in countless creative ways.

In accordance with the curriculum of citizenship education in Croatia, we usually talk about 6 dimensions, that is thematic areas:

(1) SOCIAL through which **social and communication skills** important for relationships with other people and non-violent conflict resolution skills are developed. Non-violent communication, emotion management, conflict resolution, teamwork, volunteering, and adherence to the principle of solidarity are promoted.

(2) **HUMAN-LEGAL** through which one learns about rights and responsibilities and how to protect one's own and other people's rights. **Human dignity**, knowledge of international and domestic standards and mechanisms for the **protection of the freedoms, rights and responsibilities of individuals**, as well as suppression of degrading treatment, are promoted.

(3) **POLITICAL** through which one learns **how decisions, laws and other regulations** are adopted in the society, who is involved in this process and how, what can we do to participate in these processes and how state administration, local and county self-government are organised. Politically aware active citizenship, **participation in decision-making and democratic community governance** are promoted.

(4) **CULTURAL** through which one gets to know one's **own culture**, recognize the contributions of different cultural influences on the community, get acquainted with **other cultures and develop mutual respect**. Cultural diversity as a component of a common homeland identity, **intercultural sensitivity and dialogue**, as well as attachment to the principle of unity in diversity are promoted.

(5) **ECONOMIC** encourages reflection on **work, financial management** and everything related to the economy and money. **Socially sensitive and responsible economy** and knowledge-based entrepreneurship, **protection of workers' and consumers' rights** are promoted.

(6) **ECOLOGICAL** directs us to the importance of sustainable development and **preservation of natural resources**, promoting sustainable development, rational and responsible use of natural resources at all levels, understanding global interdependence in planet preservation and commitment to a holistic approach to sustainable development.

TOOLBOX

FROM A CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE. The 'Not Yet' generation

If you ask children, they will say: "We are not yet full-fledged human beings. We are not yet adults. We don't have much value yet, we don't participate in society." It's as if they are a 'Not yet' generation. It probably doesn't feel good to be, let's say 15, and not to feel like a full-fledged human being after almost 10 years in the educational system due to the system itself. And it seems that, perhaps unconsciously, we support this kind of a feeling and experience. Trond Waage, UNICEF, 2005.

EXERCISE: Topics for discussion with students: dimensions of civic and citizenship education

For each of these 6 dimensions, think about how familiar you are with the voice of students on that topic and how often they have the opportunity to think, act, and create in accordance with that dimension within the school?

Which of these dimensions do you find particularly interesting, and which do you recognise as your areas of interest within which you would like to work with students?

What questions could you ask them in order to hear their voice on these topics?

(1) **SOCIAL:** suggestion: ask for their opinion on domestic violence and its causes

(2) **HUMAN-LEGAL:** suggestion: ask them to list human rights they know and evaluate whose rights are most endangered

(3) **POLITICAL:** suggestion: ask them what politicians do and what are they supposed to do

(4) **CULTURAL:** suggestion: ask them which cultures they have encountered besides their own and which ones would they like to meet

(5) **ECONOMIC:** suggestion: ask them what they think about wealth and poverty, and why there are so many differences between people

(6) **ECOLOGICAL:** suggestion: ask them why humans destroy the nature and could this problem be solved

"Here is an example, when there was a climate strike, the students really wanted to join and there are many students who pay attention to that and whose goal is to change something. And when there were protests, they told us that we had been manipulated, that we only wanted to skip classes, and it was only one class... Yet, when teachers need that one class, we need to adapt."

high school student's quote

INSPIRATION
"In my shoes" - the Nursing school Vrapče project

"We don't have the right to express our opinion or to say that we have problems; we don't have much life experience, but we do have problems and we would like someone older to listen to us. We like talking to our peers, but it feels really good when someone older listens to us with the respect for our problem, and gives us advice. We don't like the fact that it's a common practice in Balkans that the elders don't respect us but that we must respect the elders. "

The above statement of a student attending the Nursing school Vrapče, Zagreb, Croatia is just one of the statements expressed by the students of this school that participated in the focus group in late 2019. It is an attempt to describe how often adults ignore them, both in school and in the society in general. These young people readily and argumentatively shared the problems they were facing at school and the way in which they experienced the consequences of objective problems related to the spatial limitation of the school. These problems result in an overload of teaching schedules and exercises, which was further expressed during the strike of educators.

After sharing their problems out loud and in a group, these young people decided to launch a project - a panel discussion "In my shoes" - with the support of their mentors and the school headmistress. As part of the project, once a month, the students of this school present their accomplishments and problems to their teachers and discuss how to continue with the accomplishments and how to solve the problems with them. These young people were further educated through the seminar "Young people starting the change!" which helped them to develop their project idea in detail and present it to the headmistress and others in their school. The idea was accepted, the project "In My Shoes" was planned in detail, but then the pandemic started and the school closed. However, within the project "Start the Change" and after the school lockdown ended, the project continued and in the spring 2021 two panels with teachers and students took place. Some changes are already taking place. Most importantly, noone gave up on this project regardless of the crises. Quite the opposite, they believe that their voice is now more important than ever because learning to represent yourself and your needs, the needs of your peers, as well as developing empathy for others through such projects is the only thing that can allow them to get out from the whole situation as better people.

EXERCISE: Is your school ready for the voice of children?

- Do you see students as allies and partners in the process of their education?
- Do you want them to be involved?
- Are you listening to them?
- Are you open and willing to change?

II. WE DO NOT LISTEN TO CHILDREN BECAUSE...:

DO WE THINK THAT LISTENING TO CHILDREN IS THE SAME AS GRANTING THEIR EVERY WISH?

Obstacles to (active) child participation when it comes to decision-making in the educational process arise for different reasons. Some of them are connected to the beliefs and values of adults, and some are structural (we are talking about an adult-centric system).

The most common beliefs, we can even call them delusions, that cause the marginalization of children are (Vranješević & Dermish, 2020):

"ADULTS KNOW WHAT CHILDREN NEED BETTER THAN CHILDREN THEMSELVES"

This attitude reflects a deeply ingrained idea of children in the society: immature, unreliable and incompetent to share their perspective. The most significant child development experts (constructivists like Piaget, Bruner, and Vygotsky) studied children closely and learned that they were: active creators of meaning, explorers, and partners in the interaction. They realized that children are certainly not passive recipients of the external influence; they learn actively and create their world in collaboration with adults. Thus, the current age and capability of a child are definitely not arguments for not listening to them, which is especially true for middle childhood and adolescence, when the most advanced functions necessary for active participation are being developed. All research and consultations with children in elementary and high schools show that the vast majority of students is exceptionally capable of discussing the curriculum and learning process, although, of course, younger students are not always able to express themselves using the same language as the adults.

"CHILDREN DO NOT ALWAYS MAKE DECISIONS THAT ARE IN THEIR BEST INTEREST"

"Protection is more important than participation": this argument is responsible for one subtle form of discrimination against children, the well-known: "we do that for their own good" when adults presume that they are the ones who know best what is necessary for the protection of children (their best interest and safety), even without talking to the children. This originates from our belief that it is our duty to protect children and be responsible for their well-being. However, at the same time, we are not aware, or we forget what our responsibility actually is. **We cannot live their lives and make decisions for them - that is not our responsibility.** Our responsibility is to provide them with the possibility and support to learn and develop responsibility for their own lives. To teach them to take responsibility for themselves and their decisions. By believing that it is our duty to take care of them instead of them taking care of themselves (even when it is not appropriate), we are sending a message to ourselves and to them that we do not believe in them and that we do not believe that they are capable, and therefore deny their freedom, potential, and capability.

"CHILDREN'S DECISION-MAKING WILL LEAD TO ANARCHY"

The belief that we cannot take into account the opinions and needs of every child, so there is no point in consulting them. Teachers rarely ask children about different aspects of the school life because they think that, if they ask them, they will have to address everyone's needs (Vranješević, 2012). This is a reflection of the lack of understanding of the consultation process because expressing an opinion is not the same as participating in decision-making. **Consultation simply means that children's opinions will be seriously considered when the decision about something is being made, in the same way that teachers', parents', etc. opinions will be taken into account.** It also means that, if the decision is not in line with children's wishes, it will be reasonably explained to them. This process gives adults a perspective; it allows them to step out of their role, narrow views and old habits, and actually make a decision that is in child's best interest. This does not represent the loss of authority but rather a contribution to mutual respect and cooperation, which leads to a better relationship between teachers and children, increasing their motivation for learning and participation.

"CONSULTATIONS WITH STUDENTS TAKE TOO MUCH TIME"

Many people will say: "We do not have time for this." When child participation is not considered an integral part of education and school experience, it is considered an extra burden and activity that takes up too much of our time. This is essentially tied to the instilled values, norms, and rules that schooling is based on: "Are children's opinions really important?" **We need to ask ourselves: how much is this practice of consulting children connected to the practice of consulting parents and teachers? Does the school consider itself "a learning community" that changes, evolves, and grows or not?**

"WE DO NOT NEED TO ASK THEM ABOUT THE THINGS THAT DO NOT CONCERN THEM DIRECTLY"

This argument is also fundamentally discriminatory against children because it implies that only adults know the right answers. **Adults believe that many school experiences do not concern children: for example, the teaching content, subjects, handbooks.** They are also not asked about other school aspects, such as: school code of conduct, functioning of school services, evaluation of teachers and their work, evaluation of school programs, cooperation with parents, professional development of teachers, etc.

"ABOVE ALL ELSE, STUDENTS HAVE TO STUDY/LISTEN/BE GOOD AT SCHOOL"

We all have an idea of what students/children should be like. **The most common one is that students should be obedient, that they should study and be quiet. Our expectations towards them stem from that.** If they do not meet the beliefs and expectations we have, we accuse them of not being good students and being "impossible to work with". At the same time, we do not question our expectations of them, which they failed to meet.

Also, we do not question how we shared those expectations with them or if we even did it. And the old folk saying goes - "I cannot know what you think unless you tell me." To hear and acknowledge their voice, we have to re-examine our expectations and our ways of communicating to them what we find essential.

"AFTER ALL, WHAT IS (ACTIVE) CHILD PARTICIPATION?"

Do we understand what child participation really means? In the UNICEF Analysis of the state of child participation in Croatia, Day et al. (2015) state that the experts who work with children and young people are familiar with children's rights and their participation, but **they do not have the specific knowledge and skills to create conditions for child participation and encourage it.**

Talking about the state of children's involvement, Ombudsperson for Children states that still: "(...) the problem is the absence of knowledge and understanding of the purpose of the child's right to participation in society, as well as the low qualifications of adults for communicating and working with children towards the realization of this right. It is necessary to change social attitudes treating children as passive objects shaped by decisions made by adults, and to create room and atmosphere allowing for children's participation, which is the responsibility of adults." (Summary Report on the Work of the Ombudsman for children, 2019).

Curiously, research shows that students achieve better results in schools where teachers are clearly and actively involved in the adoption of school rules and procedures, in the creation of school practices and politics, in quality management, etc.

"They listen to better students more than they listen to others. When they have an idea."

elementary school student's quote

TOOLBOX

EXERCISE: How do I imagine a perfect student?

- Obedient?

- Good?

- Smart?

- Polite?

- _____ ?

And how do I imagine an "impossible" student?

- Is it the one squirming?

- Is it the one disrupting the class?

- Is it the one speaking without permission?

- Is it the one not studying?

- Is it the one talking back?

- Is it the one not listening?

- ...

REMEMBER! THE "CHALLENGING" STUDENT WILL BECOME LESS CHALLENGING WHEN YOU GIVE UP ON EXPECTATIONS AND JUDGMENTS

What do you think? Where did your expectations come from?

"PE teacher wears the same sneakers outside and inside. We are not allowed to do that."

elementary school student's quote

INSPIRATION: SCHOOL STORY: "Teach the Teacher"

Under the Teach the Teacher program, Australian Mount Waverley Secondary College from Melbourne encouraged its students (11- and 12-year-olds) to create a questionnaire and survey all the students in their school in order to find out what they thought made a good teacher. They asked the teaching staff those same questions. Their answers were quite similar! Enthusiasm, patience, empathy, passion. These adjectives were featured in all of their answers. Afterward, the same group of students presented the results, focusing on positive aspects and on those that need improvement. One of the conclusions entailed the creation of a student forum that could provide teachers with feedback. Another big step was that students and teachers worked together to create a survey ready to be used at any year level in the school and in all subject areas, with questions about the school environment and possible improvements. Teachers have to survey at least one of the classes once per semester. After collecting all the results, they discuss them at the teacher assembly and share with students.
This action made way for many other programs, such as the Mount Matters program, students for students, in the same school.

"Student voice is at the heart of the efforts to build stronger teacher-student relationships."

https://www.teachermagazine.com.au/articles/building-strong-student-teacher-relationships

WHAT IF WE DO NOT HAVE A VOICE EITHER?

It is interesting to see how much voice and impact we have, and how much it is encouraged by the communities we live and work in. Do we have anything to communicate to children and young people?

Of course, every relationship is different, so with some people, we might feel free to speak or ask for something, and they will hear us, while it might be more difficult or impossible with others. It has a lot to do with the character of the other person, as well as how comfortable we feel in the role of someone who takes up his/her space, raises his/her voice, and asks for something.

On a larger scale, it is related to the nature of the community in which we participate (organization, family, system) and the nature of the society. In simple terms, in societies that do not have a long tradition of democracy, it will be considerably more difficult for individuals to stand out, express themselves, and "raise their voice". Naturally, it is also related to being a part of a social group whose voice is systematically taken away (the youth, the elderly, women, persons with disabilities, minorities, etc.).

In its more natural and healthier form, our "silence" is there because: we want to give space to the other person, we want to learn something, we want to put other's needs in front of our own, or we see that the other side does not have the capacity. However, in its less positive form, our voice is

not heard because, in some way, we are not seen; we deny ourselves that space or someone else does it to us, and then, out of fear of consequences... But the truth is that it is often desirable and enriching to express ourselves.

TOOLBOX

EXERCISE: How much voice do I have?

SILENCE

VOICE

Do you consider yourself to be a person who "has a voice"? A person who speaks freely and who is heard (if not always, then at least often)? What about your impact? How much impact do you have?

Think about the people you are close to, groups of people you spend time with, contexts in which you live and work.

Can you say what you need?

Can you refuse what you do not want?

Does anything change (for the better) when you ask for what you need, or when you say what bothers you?

The answers to these questions will tell you something about the voice and impact that you have.

Here is a little "Impact Quiz" that may not cover all the aspects of life, but might familiarize you with the topic of your voice and impact at your workplace:

EXERCISE. Quiz: Do you have a voice - an impact at your workplace?

Decide to which extent each of these statements applies to you:

Rarely?

Moderately?

Sometimes?

Often or Very often?

The statements to which you replied "Rarely" or "Sometimes" show the areas with room for improvement.

1. I can offer good and clear arguments.
2. I like to compliment and notice when someone did something good.
3. I talk openly about my feelings and reactions with other people.
4. I like to prompt my colleagues to see how great a particular possibility is.
5. I can give clear and concise suggestions.
6. When someone's support is important to me, I will offer something in return and negotiate.
7. I show and tell others what I need in a clear way.
8. When something is discussed, I stick to the topic and share the relevant ideas.
9. I ask others to participate in the discussion.
10. I check if we understood each other well.
11. When we are different, I try to find mutual values and interests.
12. I use metaphors, analogies, and figures of speech to grab the attention of others.

INSPIRATION How to be "heard"? (source: Mindtools)

Here is some advice to help you have more voice in your environment, especially at meetings.

How can you be "heard"?

(advice for challenging meetings and more)

Be aware of your value. You are here because you are a part of the team; you are needed, your experience and opinion are important.

First, you can pay more attention to others and what they are saying; you can agree with them and then add to it or encourage those who wanted to say more but were interrupted.

Show non-verbal signs of attention, look, listen, stay focused.

If you are anxious, express your opinion as soon as possible. It does not mean that you have to be the first or the loudest one, but if you are amongst the first people to speak out, you will be able to relax and listen to others more easily.

If it is difficult for you to be the first one to open up, ask some questions, learn more.

If you are an introvert, use your strengths: prepare yourself in advance, have some interesting facts up your sleeve, listen to others and summarize what has been said.

If you want to be sure that they will hear you out, you can ask them in advance to include you in the agenda or to announce that you certainly have something to say. Alternatively, you can ask to write down your thoughts and send them in writing.

Do not apologize ("I am sorry, but I would say..."), but start clearly ("I think that...", "It's important here to...", "I would add...") and end without stalling.

Instead of "I do not agree", try saying: "My perspective on that is a bit different...".

Here is some more advice for **online meetings** so you could be more relaxed and say what you want more easily:

- Test the technology before the meeting, camera, microphone, logging in, so that you do not have to stress out about those things.

- Minimize distractions, organize your workspace and background, turn off all other applications.

- Maintain contact by looking at the screen, as similar as possible to a live meeting (in-person). The *gallery view* option, where you see all the participants simultaneously, also helps to make the situation more natural.

- Check the rules set by the facilitator in advance: should you turn off your microphone when others are speaking, should you use chat for comments and questions, or should you raise your hand or turn your microphone on to say something, etc.

These ideas do not have to be reserved for formal meetings only; you can use most of them when discussing something in informal gatherings.

**EXERCISE:
My impact on teaching**

Think of an occasion when you as a teacher had an opportunity to influence a decision in your school or a decision made on a higher level concerning your teaching, profession, work environment, student's experience in that school.

What was that experience like? How did it affect you as an expert?

If you do not remember that kind of opportunity or never had it, how does that affect your work and your perspective as an educator?

FROM A CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE

Focus groups with children, research within the project "Start the Change" in 2020 (Kovačić, Baketa, 2021):

On attempts to influence the decision-making

Children distinctly state that both they and former generations tried to fight for changes in the past (mainly regarding excursions, food, or reorganization of work assignments), but the success of those attempts was limited, and it depended on teacher's sentiment:

Whatever we say, teachers have their minds made up and we automatically do not have a say... or a right to protest something.

They point out that it bothers them when they do not know when or why they will be "turned down". Indeed, school representatives often hear them out, but they usually leave it at that; there are no actual outcomes or explanations for the refusal of their suggestions or for the reasons those suggestions could not be implemented. Students claim that this makes them reluctant to even try to make a change, as they feel that the school cares about their opinion only in the nominal sense.

We can complain as much as we want, but usually nothing change.

DO WE HAVE MANAGEMENT MODELS THAT ENCOURAGE HAVING A VOICE AND INITIATIVE?

We are now getting to another potential obstacle to strengthening children's voice in schools: if the institution did not (adequately) develop the environment, opportunities, and processes for active participation of teachers, parents, and children in decision-making, it is a little bit **hypocritical to expect** children to **"express themselves", "say what they think"** and **"get actively involved"**.

Although it is evident that there are many pre-defined, established, and prescribed things in the system, how many opportunities for joint decision-making and creating the school of our dreams are being missed because of this absence of consultation, "lack of time", unilateral decision-making, individual interests, or indifference to changes and innovations?

How do you perceive the leadership of the institution where you work? And what about your own leadership when you are in the classroom and/or with students?

At first glance, these questions might not seem related to the voice of students. Still, when we look closely into the leadership methods in our environment, we realize that there are methods and styles of leadership in which the individual's voice is not permitted or heard. Perhaps only a specific opinion or an opinion of a small group of specific people may be heard. Naturally, those are the people who are (knowingly or unknowingly) in a position of greater power.

Just like the dysfunctional families that hurt and humiliate their members, some organizations (or whole systems) can be based on **"invalidation"** (not-seeing, diminishing the importance) of some of their members.

Paradoxically, in every research, the children are the ones saying that their voice is not important in the educational system dedicated to them. That is especially true when it comes to marginalized children, children with disabilities, members of minorities, "unsuccessful" children, children from low-income families. Children with "invisible" or "less apparent" problems. They will usually say nice things about their classmates, peers, teachers, head teachers, school. But when they are asked if they are allowed or if they can say or influence

something, they will regularly say "no" or "only when it comes to trivial matters".

Why is that so? That is a question for sociologists, historians, or maybe even political scientists and psychologists. However, it is highly probable that the whole (educational) systems established by generations before us, were created for a different era, when there was less pedagogical knowledge, when it was considered necessary to "serve" children the knowledge, lead them through life, train them to "fit into" the world of adults. The children themselves are usually surprised by the "old-fashioned" and "regressive" ways of thinking of some of their teachers who "do not get" what ecology or gender equality are, or who YouTubers are, etc.

In an "adult-centric" system, classes are adapted to adults, the type and duration of the lectures they prefer, what they want to say and teach, how they like to test and measure knowledge, and how they discipline students. Ultimately, even they themselves are often not satisfied with this approach.

TOOLBOX

EXPERT OPINION: MANAGEMENT STYLES

When it comes to leadership/ management styles, each principal and (head) teacher can recognize their own practices in some of the known styles derived from expert literature (e.g., *Managerial Grid by Blake and Mouton, 1964)* and re-examine how open he or she is to listening to an individual voice, i.e. the voice of a student.

PRODUCE-OR-PERISH STYLE:

in which you want to achieve the set professional goals but perceiving the wishes and needs of individuals as less important; you are not particularly inclined to "listen". People prone to this management style feel a great responsibility to fulfil obligations and complete tasks, but at the same time do not devote much time to individuals, their relationships and cooperation. Paradoxically, this can results in lower performance, which then, in turn, usually forces them to deal with relationships a bit (or only further increase the pressure).

COUNTRY CLUB STYLE:

the voices, needs and desires of just about everyone are rather important to you, or at least those which are expressed, and you will do anything to meet them, not wanting to offend anyone. You appreciate a good atmosphere, as well as pleasant relationships, and you would do anything to make everyone feel happy and satisfied. On the other hand, professional and educational goals can therefore suffer or be delayed; a lot of time is spent communicating and avoiding some necessary occasional conflicts. Using this style, you will probably want to hear everyone's voice, but you will probably still hear only the voice of the "louder" ones, and then hesitate for a long time to do something. You might also avoid some constructive conflicts that could facilitate listening to those neglected voices.

IMPOVERISHED STYLE:

we believe that this style if fairly rare because, by definition, working in the education system entails involvement and exposure on a daily basis, and there is little that can be "avoided". Still, when that style is implemented, even just temporary, the result is the lack of interest for the tasks, plans, goals, as well as individuals and their needs. We hope that there are as few such leaders and experts as possible (although we know there are some), or that this is just a temporary situation in which we are preoccupied with some private problems we are trying to solve.

TEAM STYLE:

ideally (and we know it is not always easy), you are guided by important educational and professional goals, while listening to and respecting the needs and capabilities of members of the collective, class, community. You have clear goals, deadlines and direction, but you understand and it is clear to you that all this is impossible without the contribution of every team member. And that is why it is important to understand, listen closely and take into account their needs, attitudes, suggestions and ideas as much as possible. Also, you will not hesitate to listen to very different opinions, respect the "quieter" members, and listen to the feedback and even criticism of your own work.

Of course, we can also talk about the fifth style, which is something in between all this: a few goals, a little understanding, all together a lot of compromise, with a minimum of energy expended. It can occur as a result of fatigue, some current crisis, or a conscious decision to somehow balance everything, get no complaints, but still get something done.

What is also the reality of contemporary management is **"administrative management"**, which leaves very little autonomy to individuals and even institutions, with everything boiling down to rulebooks, laws, and procedures. There are very few "voices" here, from both adults and children, and the opportunities for personal development and empowerment are mostly missed.

Although documents are a necessity and provide a framework for any professional activity, without their regular questioning, research and "updates" in line with the voices of the people who make up the community, they usually become a kind of weight and a "something written" that no longer corresponds to the current reality and needs.

INSPIRATION: STUDENT VOICE AT A MEETING

How familiar are you with inclusive meeting management practices?

Good management is strongly linked to the procedures and ways we run individual processes.

Meetings are an opportunity and often the only contact members have (e.g. in the Student Council, the Parents' Council, the Teachers' Council) with the possibilities of influencing, expressing opinions and possibly accessing decisions.

A fairly common complaint comes from children, who find those procedures unclear, difficult to follow and often feel that they cannot fully participate. But the same complaint comes from adults, as well!

Here are some ways in which you can make sure everyone participates more actively, including what you can do before, during and after the meeting to make the whole participation and decision-making process more transparent, clear, and stimulating.

In addition to the Student Council, this also applies to the Teachers' Council, the Parents' Council, the School Board and all meetings where decisions are made, or important issues are discussed. This is especially important if there are new members or if new and unfamiliar topics are brought up.

Before the meeting:

☑ It is important that everyone receives the agenda and the work plan

☑ If there is an important meeting where decisions are made, it is good to hold smaller meetings beforehand to discuss important

issues. Those smaller meetings might entail students discussing those issues with other students or their class teacher / counsellor, etc., or teachers discussing issues in teams, etc.

☑ More experienced team members, or those who lead an activity, or have an important suggestion, should meet with others beforehand and explain to them what the issue is about and should be achieved.

☑ In the case of a Student Council, the person mentoring the work of the Council should meet with the students before the meeting and oversee at least the first few meetings of the Council.

☑ It is important that meetings are held when everyone can participate.

At the beginning of the meeting

☑ It is good to introduce new members and offer them support and clarifications. In the case of Student Councils, it's good to have mentors in the beginning as well. This role can be rotated and it would be good to take into account the gender distribution of the role of mentor.

☑ All members should meet and introduce themselves, and, for example, have visible tags with their name and class/body they are representing

☑ All discussed documents should be summarized with bullet points covering the main ideas and recommendations and handed out.

Reaching decisions at the meeting

☑ After making a proposal, and before reaching decisions/ voting, it would be good to take a break so that they could talk to each other, e.g., students with mentors, or ask for support and clarification

☑ Whenever possible, proposals should be distributed to members in writing

☑ It might be good to clearly define how each part of the meeting is going to be done, e.g. more formal part and more informal - brain storming part

☑ The person heading the meeting should follow each item on the agenda and/or decision with a clear summary of what has been decided, what will be done and who will be responsible for it

Language and phrasing

☑ It is recommended to avoid slang, abbreviations and obscure expressions, initials, acronyms, unless it is something already known to everyone and explained in writing.

☑ Proposals and decisions should be stated in a very simple and clear way.

☑ The functions and roles of individuals, working bodies and institutions mentioned in the meeting need to be explained

☑ Everyone should be able to ask for any clarification needed - name, title, word, phrase - and get a serious answer.

After the meeting:

☑ At the end of the meeting, the person heading the meeting should summarize the most important decisions and plans regarding the activities to be undertaken, who will do what and state the due date.

☑ It would be good to have additional consultations after the meeting, especially if it is a Student Council, where mentors can meet with students or groups of students and explain or comment on what happened at the meeting. People participating in the Council activities should consider all this as their duty.

EXERCISE: STUDENT VOICE AT 5 SCHOOL LEVELS

If we look at any school in a holistic way, we can see at least these 5 LEVELS:

CURRICULUM (subjects, school curriculum, extracurricular activities, professional development, hidden curriculum, textbooks, and other teaching material)

SCHOOL CULTURE (language and communication, student socialization, relationships)

SCHOOL LAYOUT (space design and content, use of space)

SCHOOL MANAGEMENT (school policies, employment, special professional training)

LOCAL COMMUNITY AND COOPERATION WITH PARENTS (cooperation with families and the wider community)

Ask yourself how democratic your school is regarding each of these school aspects. How much voice do students and teachers have? What about parents? Are all these aspects "strictly defined", "pre-set" and "fixed"? If so, does it suit everyone? Can anything be done regarding that?

How active is your school's Quality Team?

Are all teachers given the opportunity to somehow participate in the quality assessment process and offer suggestions for improvement?

"We can try to solve a problem, but we can't solve it because we don't have the support of our teachers."

high school student's quote

MOST IMPORTANTLY THOUGH – HOW WE SEE RELATIONSHIPS WITH STUDENTS?

He is an interesting teacher, wants to know about our opinions and perspectives.
(Student, Croatia)

Regardless of the content, subject matter or curriculum, **relationships are at the core of every class**. Teachers' relationships with students, as well as students' relationships with each other. There is no progress without good and quality relationships. Or better yet: **"Serious teaching is not possible without relationships"** (*Upbringing though the Eyes of a Psychotherapist*, Lojk).

It is a common belief that teachers are the ones who transfer knowledge and that the students are the ones receiving it. And that would function great if we were one-dimensional beings. But we are not. Quite the contrary; we are rather complex, internally motivated beings full of various beliefs, feelings, expectations, different and sometimes outwardly unusual behaviours and thoughts that make a lot of sense for an individual who satisfies his or her needs that way.

This should be kept in mind when working with children and young people, as the teacher-student relationship is most often disturbed when we are not aware that the student behaves in a certain way "for his or her own interests", to meet his or her needs, and not "to spite the teacher and his authority". Although very often we interpret it that way. Also, teachers always react from the perspective of their role, which students can interpret as if the teachers do not respect and appreciate them or as an act of injustice. In this dynamic, they should be taught not to be on opposite sides, but in different roles, which need to be aligned (Lojk, 2018).

Jasper Juul and Helle Jensen (2017) state that parents and educators often lack the ability and will to talk to children and young people in a way that would first focus on who that child really is and how that child perceives own life and the world. But it is a more common practice for adults to speak to children and young people, question them, criticize them, demand something from them, teach them, reproach them, and explain something to them, thus moving away from relationships and creating additional constraints and resistance. *The openness, interest, and empathy of professionals seem to diminish in the same extent the children's behaviour is categorized as annoying, problematic, or bad.*

On the other hand, one of the most valuable abilities of adults in communicating with children and young people is the *ability to consider the current quality of the relationship more valuable than their intention or goal, and the conversation process itself more valuable than the content.*

Adult guidance (Juul and Jensen, 2017) consists of several important dimensions.

YOUR AUTHENTICITY
- how capable and willing are you to express and show your thoughts, emotions, perceptions, values, goals and boundaries? Do you show them who you are?

GENUINE INTEREST FOR A YOUNG PERSON -
how interested are you in who a young person really is?

RECOGNITION
- can you praise and acknowledge a young person's behaviour?

INCLUSION OF THEIR NEEDS, WISHES, DREAMS AND GOALS
- do you consider the opinions of young people as equally important and are you interested in involving them in joint research and decision-making?

RESPONSIBILITY
- can you, when appropriate, leave it to young people to make important decisions?

EMPOWERMENT THROUGH CONFLICTS
- do you truly accept the fact that conflicts are an important dimension of relationships and do you have the basic skills needed to resolve them?

Adult guidance also depends on the age of the child. As children grow up, get to know themselves and the world around them, take responsibility and become independent, adults need to redefine guidance - as the time passes, a caring and advisory role, as well as the encouragement of independence, become more important than intense guidance.

Let's get loud!

Jennifer Lopez

TOOLBOX

FROM A CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE: Focus groups with children, research within the "Start the change" project (Kovačić, Baketa, 2021): Relationships with teachers

Children show a wide range of thinking and experiences when it comes to relationships with teachers. One part describes their positive experiences in great detail, stating that teachers are generally in a good mood, that they are sympathetic, that is, that they treat students nicely *(Teachers are more sympathetic in high school than in elementary school. There will always be someone who got up on wrong side of bed, but that is not our fault. Still, they are sympathetic).* They also cite large differences between teachers. While some are open to communication, entertaining and respectful, treating

students as friends, others explicitly show that they have favourites. That bothers students quite a bit.

On the positive side, almost all students highlight the work of teachers who put more focus on discussions, debates and exchange of opinions (*There is a subject called 'Human Rights' and it is taught really differently: the teacher talks to us and we do not have to write at all. And that is amazing*). They feel that this approach serves them much better and makes them feel appreciated. They especially emphasize the importance of an interesting approach to the subject matter. One teacher really stands out because she often has extracurricular classes in which she illustrates the subject matter rather vividly and uploads her presentations on the Teams platform. This reduces student stress, they say, and encourages thinking much more than learning by heart, which some teachers insist on.

But opinions differ when it comes to the relationships between the teacher and students. While some think that the teacher-student relationships are very good and see no problem in them (*Well, I would say that the relationship is really OK*), others are extremely critical. Upper grades students (high school) are usually the ones who strongly believe that some of the teachers are behaving completely inappropriately towards them. They point out the fact that it is not uncommon for them to be insulted or that those teachers create a very bad atmosphere with their gestures, facial expressions, and comments (*I feel like crying. I came here to learn that. Not to be insulted. Or, Their sarcasm can turn into an insult*). In particular, they state that

some of the teachers often react inappropriately; they sigh and rolls their eyes, which students perceive as passive aggression. It is precisely this behaviour of teachers that results in "toxic classes" or "negative energy", in the words of respondents. Also, students believe that teachers like to rise above them.

When we talk about exercising personal rights, students think that there are double standards. When they complain about a teacher to their head teacher, usually nothing happens. Yet, if a teacher complains about a student, then the student is immediately summed for some kind of conversation. When asked whether they communicated their dissatisfaction with the existence of double standards to anyone, students revealed that they do not have much confidence in the administration (*Who should we turn to? Let's be realistic. Those in charge don't even know what they want. The decide one thing in the morning, and then change it in the afternoon*). They especially dislike teachers who constantly tattle on students to their head teachers, pedagogues, or principals.

I certainly want all of us to hear our young people, because despite numerous youth related policies, the voice of young people is not heard; they unfortunately remain silent, and this could become their permanent state or something worse.

A teacher

**EXERCISE:
My teachers**

Think about your school experience, the teachers who you still remember as people next to whom you felt content and competent, but also recall the teachers who made you feel discontent and incompetent? Use the table below to note down their actions that made you feel that way.

CONTENTMENT

_____
_____
_____
_____

DISCONTENTMENT

_____
_____
_____
_____

Try to notice how they differ. What made you feel content and competent in their presence? What made you respect them? What did you believe then?

And now contemplate on how you perceive your role as the teacher. How do you perceive the role of a student?

I SEE MYSELF AS...

_____
_____
_____
_____

I SEE STUDENTS AS...

_____
_____
_____
_____

Your student experience, as well as those feelings of (dis)contentment and (in)competence with your teachers, are all indescribably important for redefining and upgrading your role as a teacher and can be important resources for a better understanding of your students and achieving quality relationships with them. **And don't forget!** You are able to understand their role because you've been through it. You know what was missing, what made you feel (dis)content and what you wished was different. You can use it in your classroom, as it will give you an advantage in better understanding yourself and your students.

> **"I like that professors treat me the same now as they did when I had a different hair colour."**
>
> *high school student's quote*

INSPIRATION: Classroom: the world in a nutshell

Each classroom is a community in itself, and in a way "the world in a nutshell", like all other communities - families, professional communities, peer groups - consisting of different individuals, rules, dynamics. Upon entering the classroom, each teacher takes on the role of the class leader responsible for leadership, because he or she is the person who has the most experience, knowledge, skills and influence for personal well-being, as well as the well-being of students in that classroom.

A common trap that almost every teacher "falls into" is the idea that

his or her professional duty and obligation is to "force" students to listen, be calm, perform their duties, and be obedient, and that belief, in turn, is the reason children are expected to behave that way. Yet, very often these expectations are shattered into a thousand pieces, because the picture changes just by entering the classroom. There are students who sit and listen, yawn, laugh, sleep, who know something regarding the topic and behave responsively, but there are also those who roll their eyes and throw papers at each other. There are also those who laugh all the time, as well as those who are rebellious and do not respect the class rules.

Faced with the reality of the classroom, the teacher sometimes wants to "get his power back", and he or she will do so through punishment, rewarding, coercion, shouting, criticizing, and will leave the class dissatisfied and exhausted, perhaps disappointed in the students. But more importantly, he or she will leave the classroom not knowing what it is that the students have been trying to express by such behaviour, because he or she did not give them the freedom and space to express their opinions. And that vicious circle will be repeated from one class to another.

But by changing the interpretation of the situation and our (sometimes unrealistic) expectations, we realize that we can still understand the needs of students, know how to connect with them and support their freedom and power within the given framework and circumstances, clearly and transparently refer to the rules, criteria and our needs arising from our professional role, and provide them with a sufficient level of fun and play in the classroom. And then **we have a great chance to start perceiving them as allies and partners in that whole process.**

EXERCISE: My relationship with students

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

I love my subject; I believe that it is interesting, and I am constantly upgrading my knowledge (internal motivation)

☐ **YES**   ☐ **NO**

I love interacting with students (need for belonging and fun) and I often change things up in my class-room (need for freedom), it enter-tains me (need for fun) and I like new challenges in working with students (need for power)

☐ **YES**   ☐ **NO**

I encourage students (need for belonging) to reflect and express their views (need for student pow-er). I encourage students (need for belonging) to think critically (need for student power) and I include new teaching methods in my work (need for competencies/power, fun, freedom), which include collabora-tive learning, debates, research and project methods (student needs for entertainment and freedom and competencies/power).

☐ **YES**   ☐ **NO**

I look students straight in the eye (perception of myself as a good teacher) when I talk and I often smile (need for belonging and love), which is also important for me to get from my students (need for student belonging)

☐ **YES**   ☐ **NO**

I find it important to know (percep-tion of myself as a good teacher) how they understand the subject matter (the need for students' com-petencies/power), and I check this with them in class (the need for belonging).

☐ **YES**   ☐ **NO**

I am interested in (perception of myself as a good teacher) student feedback regarding my way of pre-senting the subject matter (need for belonging and need for student power) and I feel confident enough to acknowledge their criticism (need for competencies)

☐ **YES**   ☐ **NO**

I find my relationships with students (need for belonging) more important (perception of myself as a good teacher) than the subject matter I need to cover (need for power);

☐ **YES**   ☐ **NO**

I prepare my lessons (need for teacher power) so that I can be as flexible as possible (need for freedom), should that be needed; I am open to their questions, comments, criticisms and suggestions (need for student power) and I take them into account when preparing future lessons (need for teacher power).

☐ **YES**   ☐ **NO**

I familiarise students with my assessment methods (need for belonging, expectations), and allow them (perception of myself as a good teacher) to negotiate their academic success (student need for belonging, freedom and power).

☐ **YES**   ☐ **NO**

I include them (perception of myself as a good teacher) in methodical joint teaching (students' need for freedom, belonging, power, fun).

☐ **YES**   ☐ **NO**

"We realized that experts at all levels (schools, science, the Ministry) who share power with students, listen to them, seek and respect their suggestions, are more inclined to create conditions and opportunities where those without a voice can get a voice, where the powerless can gain power ... and make space for hope. "

(Freire, 1994)

III. WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU GIVE CHILDREN A VOICE:

COMMUNICATION BECOMES MORE OPEN

The topic of "voice" and "initiative" is inextricably linked to the topic of communication, stereotypes, and prejudices.

If you want to "give more voice to students", start student initiatives in school, support them in their ideas and projects, and you will inevitably find yourself talking to them.

Sometimes you may feel like you do not even know how to talk to them, but this could be a good sign that can lead you to question yourself, your way of communicating and building relationships with young people.

And what is considered important when communicating with young people?

Most authors agree that the important thing is to be yourself! The term "authenticity" is often used in the sense of: being what we are, saying what we think, expressing ourselves sincerely, but staying respectful of others and appropriate to the situation. But what does that actually mean, and is it that simple?

What is the actual ratio of freedom and honesty in expression on the one hand (which young people love very much), and of thoughtfulness and moderation that allow you to guard boundaries and show respect (to which they are very sensitive) on the other?

Of course, it is good to keep your communication straightforward, and talk to young people as we would with anyone else. We can also express respect for children and young people by not using rude, degrading, or cynical language that young people can sense.

They can quickly detect everything "fake" and quickly figure out that you are insulting them (even if you do it unknowingly): on a personal level or on the level of stereotypes towards the group they belong to (by origin, socio-economic status, place of living, family characteristics, interests, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, etc...).

Therefore, if as a teacher or an expert in education you have not yet addressed your own stereotypes and prejudices, do it as soon as possible, be aware of them and work on them, in order not to insult (probably unintentionally and unknowingly) many young people who do not fit into "your value framework" in some way.

TOOLBOX

EXPERT OPINION: What research tells us?

Research shows that teachers play a significant role in the development of stereotypes in their students and that they treat them differently based on their own prejudices. Although at first, we might say that we do not have stereotypes and prejudices against children and young people, the way we behave often says otherwise. One of **the most common stereotypes and prejudices** we have against children and young people is that they are **unfinished beings**, which we "must" shape so that they could participate in society, as well as the prejudices arising from **different expectations from girls and boys**. Research also shows that **teachers value girls differently than boys**, favouring boys who are considered to be more intelligent and who achieve better results in STEM areas, while girls are very often stereotypically

considered better in humanities and arts. Guided by these ideas, we *a priori* believe that they have different academic potentials and capabilities, so we provide them with different kind of support, opportunities, praise, and the right to voice!

Our expectations of children and young people arise from the following hidden and unconscious prejudices and stereotypes:

- children are *tabula rasa;*

- children are emotionally maladaptive and do not know how to manage their emotions and behaviours;

- girls are quieter and calmer in class, while boys are louder and more disobedient;

- boys are more intelligent than girls and have higher potential for success;

- they do not know what is good for them;

- every child can be obedient and "pay attention in class"

It is important to face your own stereotypes and prejudices, and to be aware of the way you communicate, because all of the aforementioned affects the formation of relationships and provision of opportunities to children and young people for their initiatives, actions and progress. And thus, we deprive ourselves of the possibility of a better connection with them and a more pleasant school environment.

INSPIRATION: Communication and I

In simple terms, you are good at communicating if you know how to express yourself (verbally or non-verbally), say and show what you want or do not want, stand by it, and explain your reasons. Also, not being afraid to show that you do not know or don't understand something or that you are insecure is a strong and encouraging message for young people. So is the acceptance of personal prejudices and active work on "breaking" them. We all have the right to spend time exploring, reflecting, and searching, and this is something that young people can easily relate to.

"The problem with that teacher is, for example, that she asks for our opinion and when we give her our opinion it is considered to be wrong. Her opinion is the only opinion that matters and that's that."

high school student's quote

And what is also important, if not more important, if you really want to "give children a voice", is being able and knowing how to listen. If you are open minded and without prejudice, you are able to listen to what a child or a young person is trying to tell you, even if they do not always know how; if you can "read between the lines" and pick up the unspoken and sometimes the invisible, you can consider yourself a "master" of communication and a person in whom young people will gladly confide and with whom they

will gladly spend time with. But luckily, even if you have not mastered these skills yet, you can acquire them!

Become curious, be interested in what they have to say. You will undoubtedly hear new and original things, ideas, and insights. If you come across intolerant and/or violent attitudes, stop and try to find out what lies behind them, which emotion, or experience, but make sure to introduce some rules regarding the manner of expression that involves insulting or hurting someone based on their belonging to a certain group.

Ask appropriate, open-ended questions. (What do you think... How do you see... How would you... What is it that...?) and then patiently wait for answers, without rushing, without criticizing and without correcting them. Sometimes when you are listening, it is enough to keep silent, to be there, to say "I understand".

Develop special methods for the quieter, more introverted students who usually have a rich inner world and who will need a different way to express themselves, such as writing or being creative. Encourage them and commend them for their openness, honesty, different opinions, emphasizing that we are all different and that we have the right to think differently. Do not be afraid of conflicting opinions and be prepared for potential disagreements, between you and them or just between them.

EXERCISE: The jigsaw teaching technique

The jigsaw technique is a method of organizing classroom activities in a way that increases group cohesion, joint mastering of school materials, more direct and better communication, importance of group work, common goals and group responsibility, mutual support, and patience. Ant those are not the only benefits - stereotypes and prejudices are reduced, students care more about each other and show mutual attention and respect. At the individual level, students develop better communication and presentation skills, become more open to diversity, develop self-esteem and self-confidence and are more compassionate and supportive.

At the beginning of the class, students are divided into several, ideally six-member groups.

The lesson to be covered in class is then divided into six parts and given to each group. Each student receives a piece of information about the lesson which, as pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, must be put together with other students' pieces in order to get the whole picture, i.e., the whole lesson. Each student in the group prepares his/her part of the lesson and presents it to other members who do not have access to his/her lesson material. Once all the students have presented their parts of the lesson to the rest of the group, they decide together which information is most important, write a joint conclusion and then have a class presentation.

It is advisable that students are rotated between different groups, so as not to create the idea that one group is better than another, and so that students get to know each other better, and learn to cooperate with everyone in the class and not just their friends.

FROM A CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE
Focus groups with children, research within the project "Start the change" (Kovačić, Baketa, 2020):

On online teaching during the pandemic

Children unanimously confirm that remote teaching during the pandemic "did not work". They describe it as disorganized, difficult, burdensome, and stressful. Students explain what online classes were like by describing that teachers mostly sent assignments and YouTube videos without explaining the subject matter *(I think I missed a lot during online classes. They were supposed to explain new topics, but instead they acted as if we already knew everything.)*. During the implementation of remote teaching, what particularly stands out among related issues is the fact that teachers did not respect deadlines, as some sent assignments in the morning, others in the afternoon, and then remembered that they left something out. Sending assignments was the only thing the teachers were doing *(Most students did not have time for themselves because they constantly had to do their homework, study, and complete assignments. Students did not have time for anything other than school)*. According to students, teachers were unaware of how much online teaching burdens them and that they were deeply hurt by that fact. Besides, they did not believe them if they had problems with the internet connection.

STUDENT VOICE AND EMPATHY: MORE COMPASSION

Learning to stand in somebody else's shoes, to see through their eyes, that's how peace begins. And it is up to you to make that happen. Empathy is a quality of character that can change the world.

Barack Obama

Do you see empathy as an important characteristic of your class, classroom, subject? How do you develop empathy in children?

How is student voice related to this?

The connection between student voice and empathy is two-way and very strong. Student voice is stronger in an emphatic classroom, and conversely, by strengthening student voice you have a chance to create an empathic environment.

If empathy means seeing the world through the eyes of another person, then it is really important to see the world through the eyes of children. And to make sure that they see the world through ours. This also implies

understanding their emotions, even if we do not have similar life experiences. By suppressing condemnation and judgement, we become open to others and to those different from us, and for adults this means, among other things, opening to children of different ages. Can we be compassionate and benevolent despite many mutual differences?

Do not fix, feel.

Empathetic children interact great with others and know how to resolve conflicts. They stand up for what they consider right and are sensitive to injustice. According to some authors, the problem is that today's use of technology greatly reduces live communication which leads to an increase in narcissism and a decrease in empathy (Borba, M. 2017). As if the world is becoming impersonal, even cruel. Which leaves us with the question of **how to promote and teach awareness, understanding and sensitivity to others.**

If we want children to understand that "we are all human beings, sharing the same fears and worries, deserving dignity," it is important to teach them to accept differences, to be understanding and to communicate with people different from us. Empathy can be learned, so even though we already have the genetic foundations for it, it will not develop to its full potential without the appropriate experience and education.

When the class (and school) is empathetic, students trust each other, have good relationships, and understand other people's perspectives. They feel safe, they are allowed to try, take risks, make mistakes and feel free to focus on learning.

TOOLBOX

INSPIRATION: Learning empathy in class

SHOW EMPATHY

Show that you empathize, that you wish to understand and to connect with very different students. They are observing you and, in some sense, they want to be like you and learn important life skills from you. If you look them in the eye, listen to them, make sure that awkward conversations are confidential and held one-on-one, or show them with words and actions that you care about them, they will feel that you respect them.

TRY TO HEAR THE VOICE OF EVERY STUDENT

Recognize as many opportunities as possible to explore their opinions on a certain topic and encourage those who speak less. Hearing the thoughts of their colleagues makes them connect with them better, understand them better, and it gives them a chance to face disagreement with more tolerance.

CELEBRATE AND COMPLIMENT COMPASSION

When you hear that someone is behaving empathetically and supportive of their colleague, highlight their actions and their names, and compliment them!
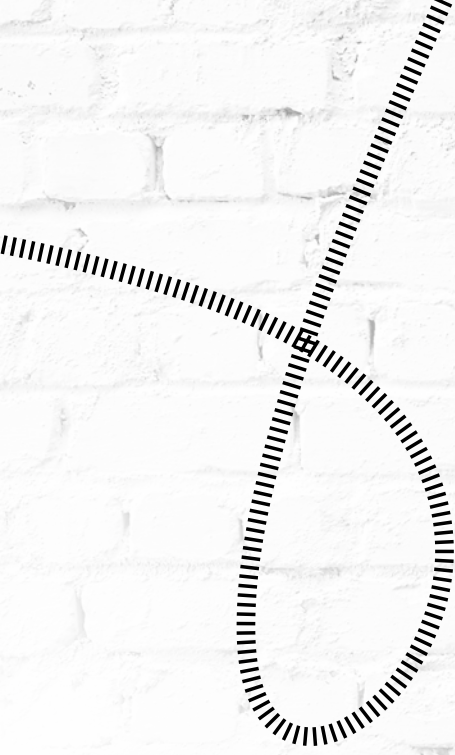
DEVELOP THEIR EMOTIONAL LITERACY

Children are unlikely to show empathy if they do not recognize their own and other people's feelings. First of all, help them develop a vocabulary for emotions. Once they have learnt how to recognize their feelings and talk about them, it will be easier for them to talk about how they experience things, how it affects them; they will connect with others more easily and talk about how they deal with emotions or a certain life situation. At the same time, they will discuss various topics within different school subjects more easily, because they will feel much more free to express themselves.

One example of the handout on emotional literacy is the following: Feeling *(add angry or sad or afraid or happy, etc.)*

GET TO KNOW THEM

Above all else, a nice way to show empathy is to get to know the students well: what makes them happy, what they enjoy doing, what they are afraid of, what their strengths are, what they dream about. Encourage them to talk about that.

SAFETY AND THOUGHTFULNESS

It is important that every student feels valued and respected. Work on making everyone in the class feel part of that open, inclusive and supporting community. Work on making everyone aware of how important it is to take care of each other, teach them to approach and offer help to a colleague who is struggling with something or feels left out.

Feeling

In which situations did I feel that way?

What caused that feeling?

For each of those situations: how did I behave and what did I decide?

How did I cope with that feeling and what helped me?

Example of a dictionary of emotions and their intensity

How strong is your feeling?

Ask students to help you with the expressions they use and fill in the table together!

IIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIII

intensity of a feeling	happiness	sadness	anger	fear	shame
High	Excited	Depressed	Furious	Terrified	Worthless
	Overjoyed	Exhausted	Enraged	Frightened	Embarrassed
	Brilliant	Terrible	Betrayed	Panicky	Appalled
	Fantastic	Pathetic	Insane	Shocked	Devalued
	Great	Hopeless	Frantic	Paralysed	Humiliated
	…	Sad	Played	Intimidated	…
		…	…	…	
Medium	Happy	Crushed	Upset	Scared	Guilty
	Cheerful	Lost	Angry	Threatened	Ashamed
	Great	Melancholic	Offended	Unpleasant	Inadequate
	Amazing	Let down	Indignant	Cautious	Disgraced
	…	Pressured	Hurt	…	…
		…	…		
Low	Comfortable	Unhappy	Tense	Cautious	Funny
	Content	Down	Sensitive	Nervous	Silly
	Nice	Sad	Irritated	Worried	Unmasked
	OK	Disappointed	Upset	Insecure	Exposed
	Fine	Dissatisfied	…	Anxious	Uncomfortable
	…	…		…	…

Source: West, J. (2012)

INSPIRATION: The language of empathy

Besides applying it, it is also important to teach the language of empathy, that is, the skills of empathic listening, to students.

Following phrases and sentences encourage empathy and expression:

> *Did I understand you correctly...?*
>
> *So, you feel...*
>
> *Sounds like you are...*
>
> *I feel that you...*
>
> *What you are trying to say is...*
>
> *I see that you find this important because...*
>
> *Thank you for sharing that with me...*
>
> *Your face tells me that...*

INSPIRATION: Use literature

Through literature, fiction and real-life stories, you can encourage students to talk more about themselves and what they care about, and to connect with others better in class. You can also achieve that very different students, coming from different backgrounds, meet up and share their experiences. If they feel safe in class, they will be able to recognize themselves in characters and situations that they may not have experienced before. By doing so, they will be able to put themselves in the shoes of others, review and analyse decisions, motives, and feelings of others, as well as to participate in discussions more easily. This will also help them to become more aware of their personal experiences in which they felt similarly, thus, to develop additional relationships skills.

These open-ended questions can help you encourage a stronger student voice and empathy in the classroom:

Can you relate to the problems of the main characters?

Does this character remind you of someone close to you or of yourself?

Which events influenced this character and in what way?

How would you react if you were in a similar situation?

Who is your favourite character and why?

Would you act the same as he/she at that moment ...?

Which character do you relate the most to and why?

What would you ask him/her and why?

Bearing in mind the age of your students, talk about the problems that are discussed (or not discussed) around the world. This will give them a valuable and important opportunity to become more compassionate and to stand up for a fairer society. They will want to stand up for those who are disenfranchised and speak out about it. This will very likely result in some ideas for extracurricular activities and school projects.

By sharing power with students, by listening to them and seeking to follow their advice, we have learned that educators, researchers, and policy makers are more likely to promote contexts through which the voiceless have voice, the powerless have power and from such spaces hope can emerge.

(Freire, 1994).

LEARNING: VOICE AS A KEY ELEMENT OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN THE 21ST CENTURY

As it has been pointed out several times, teachers have one of the key roles in supporting children and young people in their personal, social and cognitive development. Their role, as well as the role of students, has changed throughout the history of the progress of society and new scientific theories of child development. In the 16th century, education was seen as the creation of an obedient and eloquent individual with encyclopaedic knowledge, while today, the emphasis is on comprehensive education that serves the development of a comprehensive person, as the creation of an active citizen competent in decision-making and co-decision (Vidulin-Orbanić, 2006.). As early as the beginning of the 20th century, E. Durkheim defined education as guidance of young people by the older generations with the aim of developing physical, intellectual, and moral qualities required of them by the society and the environment for which they are preparing (Mialaret, 1989).

Today we know that it is important to have both personal and social competencies in order to achieve academic success. We know that the learning process is about 50 % cognitive and about 50 % emotional. Whatever they learn, regardless of the subject, students should be able to:

- **Know themselves and their capabilities**

- **Express themselves and communicate**

- **Develop relationships with others**

- **Collaborate with different peers and adults**

- **Understand the perspectives and feelings of others**

- **Deal with emotions such as anxiety, fear, sadness, anger, shame...**

- **Be persistent and creative**

- **Think critically and make arguments**

In order for students to develop all these skills, it is necessary to allow them to be who they really are, express themselves freely and have a voice in their environment. If this is not the case, then it all comes down to obedience and fitting into the expectations of the environment, which is harmful for the well-being of students and, in the long run, for their success.

Students usually have an attitude about what they are learning, starting from whether they want to learn it, whether it is important to them and what would help them to learn it. Imagine how enriched would the teaching process be if we at least listened to what they have to say and acknowledged employable ideas and suggestions!

TOOLBOX

EXPERT OPINION:
From a comparative research on the voice of students in Croatia, Portugal, and North Macedonia (Kovačić, Baketa, 2020)

School year 2019-20 was marked by the Coronavirus pandemic that forced schools to make big changes. In addition to the technical changes related to the transition to online teaching, schools were forced to change the patterns of teaching and pedagogical process, and to ensure the implementation of their function, both educational and pedagogical.

Interviews with students conducted in three states reveal that the crisis caused by the Coronavirus had a rather negative impact on their perception of the lesson quality. Students have listed numerous challenges that they have faced, and which mostly affected them negatively.

One of the potential ways to mitigate or annul the negative effects of this unprecedented challenging situation was to involve students in this inevitable change.

Co-creation of the teaching process shared between educational staff and students, which included remote teaching, could have brought numerous benefits to both students and teachers. Primarily, organizational aches that made it difficult to follow the lessons could have been avoided, and additionally, this crisis could have been used to

promote student ownership over some segments of the educational process.

Recommendation: Teachers should actively involve students in the co-creation of teaching and educational process, question their ideas and suggestions, modify teaching processes, and enable students to feel "ownership" over their education. Schools need to actively invest in teacher competencies in order to introduce more creativity, innovation and courage in the teaching process and in their approach to students.

EXERCISE:
Do we listen?

To what extent did you listen to the voice of students during the transition to online teaching? Did the students express what is it that they find difficult, that they like, or that they need? Were they heard and did they manage to somewhat influence the teaching process?

Examine the statements about the Vision and the Mission of your school. Do they reflect the importance of students' voices in any way? Can the importance of the voice of young people be articulated through the school's Mission and Vision? How? Why?

How do students participate in the creation of the school curriculum?

"I used to be shy and didn't want to talk in front of people, but now I want to work on that and never give up."

student's quote

INSPIRATION:
Listen to learn, acknowledge to improve.

The Springfield Renaissance School in the U.S. noted that student participation decreased significantly during the transition to online teaching. Emotional difficulties, as well as the lack of systematic support and structure that the school offers are difficult to compensate at home.

This made the principal of that school recall how she had previously addressed issues such as racial discrimination among students by organizing student assemblies and speaking out publicly about her own experience and the difficulties she had faced as an African-American. Based on the positive results of those assemblies, she decided to apply a similar method during the pandemic.

With the help of other teachers, she organized meetings with students during which they mutually expressed their emotions and listened to what the students were interested in. They decided to introduce students' experiences in classes that encompass students' reflections on the current situation, and to use various assignments to heal the trauma that affects the generation forced to study at home.

http://www.howyouthlearn.org/

The Ibn Batouta Elementary School in Lebanon has launched a project aiming to teach seventh- and eighth-graders how to conduct scientific research, hence exposing students to new methods of learning, *encouraging them to think "outside the box"* and gain problem-solving skills. Although the students were very enthusiastic about the project, upon its completion they have admitted *that* **the hardest part was being asked to think**, which is not particularly surprising considering the fact that, so far, they were *used to having their knowledge "served on a platter"* but emphasises the importance of implementing such and similar projects.

In order for project to be successful, students had to be informed on what scientific research is all about; problems that they perceive in their environment were discussed with them, as well as the ways that research will help them solve those problems.

The second step was introducing students to different methods of data collection, such as interviews and surveys, and the third, also the most demanding step, was to select research topics. Here are some of the topics that those students chose: relationship between students and teachers, favourite school subjects, characteristics of teachers, and books in the school library.

Students then had to choose a research method, collect data, analyse it, write their conclusions and recommendations, and finally present them to their peers and teachers.

Upon the completion of the project, many positive changes were noticed in the school: several teachers became more self-aware and decided to make some changes in their work, as well as to improve their relationship with students, students launched a bake sale to raise money for new library books, and most of the students who participated in the research concluded that they have gained greater self-confidence and perseverance through this experience.

CREATIVITY: THE POTENTIAL OF HAVING A VOICE IN CREATION AND EXPRESSION

Creativity is a characteristic of every human being and it helps the learning process in every field. It is connected to knowledge and expertise, as well as confidence and freedom of expression. It is also a dynamic and fun way of communicating with others that comes naturally to young people. There is always a question of how is it that a large number of children and young people don't have many opportunities to create something new by themselves, to gain practical skills and be creative in school. The answer perhaps lies in the common belief that creativity

is related to art, literature and/or talent, and that it is not an integral and essential part of our growth and development, as well as of active participation and contribution to society.

Carl Rogers (1961) sees **creativity** as a key factor in the picture of mental health and growth.

Abraham Maslow (1968) equates self-realization with **creativity**.

Young (1985) claims that being **creative** implies an open and spontaneous attitude towards life and equates creativity with mental health.

Creativity is primarily a "state of mind", or a way of reflecting on the world around us, and a way of creating new solutions for that same world. In addition, it provides a good basis for forming relationships because it enables perceiving, examining and solving problems (Arar, Rački, 2003).

Creativity is often associated with innovation, which includes implementation of new ideas, and is one of the most required key competences on the labour market. Amsterdam, Copenhagen, and Vienna are examples of cities that have recognized the importance of innovations and have decided to invest additional financial resources in recognition and development of creative individuals.

Two elements are considered as main characteristics of creativity:
1.) A creative individual recognises, sees, experiences, and combines objects and phenomena in a completely new, different and unconventional way.
2.) A creative individual generates new, different and unconventional ideas and works. (Čudina Obradović, as quoted in: Huzjak, 2006).

TOOLBOX

INSPIRATION: Conditions for supporting creativity

In order for a young person to be creative, to express himself/herself creatively and use his/her full potential, it is necessary to ensure the conditions and the environment that support that creativity.

Such environment should offer young people the opportunity to:

- **explore,**
- **participate actively,**
- **take risks and to make mistakes,**
- **express themselves freely.**

At the same time, teachers and other adults should: include young people in the process of setting objectives and expectations related to the implementation of activities, accept the differences between them, try to understand

them, believe in them, cooperate with them, share their knowledge with them and provide feedback on their work and participation.

Therefore, creative teachers come to classes with new scenarios and class material, use scientific journals and artistic texts, are constantly in the process of learning (formal and informal), introduce action research, projects, and workshops into teaching; they discuss their ideas with students, encourage them to actively participate and stay flexible, instigate curiosity, questions, argumentative confrontations and accept new ideas and cooperation with both students and colleagues. All of this can make the school a less stressful place, where students love to learn, and teachers love to teach.

And remember! There is no creativity without support, trust, and a good spirit!

INSPIRATION: Creative methods in the classroom

- **brainstorming – encourages fluent ideas, and seeking original and uncommon solutions**

- **problem solving**

- **research-based learning**

- **puppet teaching - raises attention of students and creates interest for the subject matter, fosters imagination and new ideas**

- **six thinking hats – fosters cooperation, increases creativity, innovation, and productivity**

Think of the ways you can encourage young people's creativity. Children and young people experience many things, many emotions and feelings of injustice, and are very often overwhelmed by the information coming from the media and social networks. Creative expression is one of the best ways to express everything that is bothering them, and to turn all their experience into a tangible output containing a message they want to convey to the world surrounding them.

INSPIRATION: "The Feelings Inspectors"

In March 2020, the Scottish elementary school Bramble Brae, in partnership with the Children's Parliament Association, launched an initiative to develop **a new mental health strategy***. The idea was to involve children and adults from the local community in order to turn the school into an environment where both children and adults would become more adept at recognizing, understanding and dealing with emotions.*

In order to achieve this, senior students became **the Feelings Inspectors** and their role included presenting their own ideas and experiences, supporting younger students, as well as communicating with teachers and parents. **The Feelings Inspectors faced quite a challenge when the school switched to online classes due to the COVID-19 pandemic**, but they did not give up; they shared their feelings about

the lockdown with students, discussing what "the new normal" will be like, what the recovery will be like, etc.

It was precisely that student perspective, gathered by **the Feelings Inspectors**, that directly influenced the decision on how the school and the teachers would help students return to school.

The Feelings Inspectors have continued their work and their conclusions are to be used in the creation of policies against peer violence and for supporting the mental health of students.

FROM A CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE ECO-FRIENDLY LIFE

Eco-friendly life, life for us

People, listen to what I have to say, we really have to find a new way.

Stop leaving your trash behind, before the ozone holes make us blind.

Keep your clothes on even at the beach, or your skin colour will turn to peach.

Beware of the harmful UV ray, or cancer will have an easy prey.

Bacteria and viruses will have their celebration, and our planet will become an abomination.

Lose the phone and the radiation, Facebook lingo has no signification.

Go outside, don't be a slug Take a deep breath, wave to the ladybug.

We are ruined by our sedentary behaviour, healthy lifestyle will be our saviour, work, study, and exercise, let the wise man rise. We must heal our Mother Earth, clean her of all pollution and dirt.

Come to Krk to see how it's done, you'll see that complaining is no fun, we have LED bulbs and smart benches, our eco-friendly troops are in the trenches, we are the nation of e-charging station.

We have no problems with trash, all we have is huge happiness stash, because with nature we don't clash.

Act locally, think globally, be grateful to nature entirely.

Lucija Kvasić, 2nd grade

Secondary school Croatian King Zvonimir, Krk (mentor teacher: Gordija Marijan)

Sustainable Schools for Sustainable Europe project

CHANGE: GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT THROUGH ACTIVE PARTICIPATION

We are aware of the practice of not taking the voice of young people seriously or even ignoring it. Also, young people are sometimes approached with a patronizing attitude, which can frustrate them or simply lead to their exclusion from school activities. On the other hand, students will feel strongly supported if their ability to contribute to the work of school or to solving social problems is recognized. Therefore, it is important to point out the positive effects of active involvement of young people on the young people themselves, on the school and the whole community.

Active involvement of students in the work of the school through school projects opens the possibility for young people to become active in the life of the school community and contribute to its work in a way that makes sense to them, which will certainly positively affect both them and school. Human and social competencies and values of an active and responsible citizen, mentioned in the previous chapter, are mostly adopted by students through direct experience of research on topics that interest them, participation in the local community and active contribution to problem resolution through specific projects.

Students can get involved and participate in the projects in the way they want to, and in the extent that suits them. For some students, this form of participation may be minimal, but the very possibility of involvement can be of great importance.

TOOLBOX

FROM A CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE: Focus groups with children within the project "Start the change" (Kovačić, Baketa, 2020): On Student Councils

Students who participated in the focus groups assessed the Student Council as almost irrelevant (*Its function is to pass on information*). They believe that the Student Council is **just a formality**, that its mode of operation is **restrictive** and that it is more of a space for discussion then a body with an advocacy component. (*At the beginning of the meeting, each representative presents the problems of his or her class. First up are the representatives of first grades and once the higher grades representatives get their turn, no one longer has the will to listen.*) In addition, they think that the real impact lies in the hands of the class teachers, although the

Student Council should have the role of representing the rights of students and being a catalyst for certain changes. Class teachers are the first people to whom the students turn when they encounter a problem, and students see them as an opportunity for not only expressing their opinion, but also for making potential changes. However, in the words of students, class teachers are often averse to students, that is more loyal to the teaching staff than to their classes (*When we have a problem, she is often more sympathetic to teachers then to us*).

Students do not see the point of the Student Council; they consider that body, which meets only twice a year (at the beginning and at the end of the school year), more of a formality than an opportunity for them to advocate for certain changes. They illustrate very vividly that the main topics of the Student Council meetings are discussions regarding soap and toilet paper, and that the true participation of students is relatively limited and disregarded. They feel that the school administration does not confer with them when making decisions that concern them, although it should.

EXPERT OPINION: Different benefits of active student involvementt

For the students

- increases self-confidence
- increases the sense of responsibility
- improves communication and organizational competencies
- increases the feeling of happiness
- contributes to a sense of belonging to the school
- empowers them in the belief that they can **start a change**

For the school

- becomes a safer and happier place
- better communication between students, teachers, and adults
- the needs of all members of the school community are recognized
- differences are respected and embraced

For the community

- young people are encouraged to play a more significant role in the society in which they live
- contributes to the strengthening of a democratic society
- contributes to the development of society in every aspect - cultural, social, economic...

Young people who want to get involved in the work of the school and the community cannot do everything by themselves, they need support, and it would be beneficial to teach them how to get involved. School projects that offer them opportunities to develop the competencies and skills they will need in their further education and life are perfect for this. In this regard, it is desirable to lead projects in a way that makes young people its active agents and not just consumers, thus creating more positive and far-reaching effects.

Different working methods, through which students can learn, develop, and grow, can be applied in **school projects**. Regardless of the topic, young people have the opportunity to develop various competencies by participating in the project, but it is also important to take into account the levels of involvement and assuming responsibility between group members. A gradual increase of the responsibility level that young people have in the implementation of assignments and the work of the group, increases the chances that, by the end of the project, they develop competencies needed for independent implementation of individual assignment and project management.

FROM A CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE
My school of tomorrow (Competition 'I dream of a school', 2020)
A high school student (3rd grade)

ENTERING THE SCHOOL

It all begins with a child entering the school. A child with a simple and sincere heart and an imagination that only a child can have. From that moment, the objective of the school system is to protect that child. To preserve its good and sincere intention, curiosity, playfulness, and a world full of genius ideas throughout the whole process of education. The world needs these kinds of adults. This is the objective of the school of tomorrow.

CLASS TEACHING

That is why the first steps in early childhood education are so important, so we do not lose that child at the very beginning. The first four years would have to be dedicated to play and discovery. The most important activities would include reading stories, writing, playing, working with hands, and even watching cartoons. This would take up most of the day, and the rest of the time children would learn basic maths, writing, reading, and a foreign language. All other subjects would be mastered through play and informal learning. Science and social studies would turn into planting flowers and collecting garbage, art and music would be very

important; students would decorate their classrooms, learn, and create songs, and each school year would end with a big performance event that would showcase all the ideas that sprouted from the children's minds during that year. Of course, a lot of the time would be spent in nature so the classes would finish at 4 p.m.

SUBJECT TEACHING

The first four years would be followed by the four-year transition phase. In this phase, children would focus their listening, writing, and thinking skills on the factual knowledge of the world. Children have already learned how to sit and listen, look, and think, but the difference is that at this point, fairy tales, cartoons and games are replaced by real life stories that illustrate how our world, as well as people living it, functions. These stories would be equally fascinating as fictional ones, so the main task of the teacher would be to never stop telling stories. During this phase, children absorb like sponges, so they would be able to master the basics of all subjects, from geography and history to physics and chemistry. What is important is that there would be no grades because there would simply be no time for them; teachers would be too busy with telling all the stories. Instead, children would get assignments that they would have to complete in order to pass the class and revise the subject matter. Considering that this is a transitional phase, we must not forget that at least half of the time, the child should feel free and have opportunities for individual creation through dance, song, story, music and

acting. In this phase, children would be highly motivated to create, and it is very important that they have the attention of every teacher, educator or psychologist who can help them turn their ideas into reality.

HIGH SCHOOL

All of this is followed by the most beautiful thing, the high school. The high school education would be based on the "Socrates dialogue": the students would listen, but also express their opinions and shape them through discussions with the teacher and the rest of the class. Because of this, there still would not be any space for exams or grades. Instead, students would take initial exams in Croatian, maths, and a foreign language every three months. The main idea of high school would be to teach students how to express themselves and their opinions, but most importantly to create their opinion and have a need for it, through the subjects which students would choose. The students would have to master communication and critical thinking because the curious and friendly child that is still within them would require them to do so. This good child will be crucial for a new world that is currently beyond our imagination, but there will surely a child sitting in a classroom whose imagination does not rest and this school will certainly recognise it.

Bajkuša, M. (ed) (2020) Sanjam školu: razmišljanja učenika:ica o budućnosti obrazovanja. Zagreb: Forum za slobodu odgoja.

IV. IN ORDER TO CREATE A SPACE FOR THE VOICE OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE...:

"He listened to us, he took us seriously, he was interested in our thoughts. He was painfully straightforward, he did not pander anyone, but challenged us all, led us further, made us rethink everything... He did not play the thunder god, wanting to inculcate knowledge in us by fear. He dared to be different. He succeeded in what makes teaching good: he met us at our level - and then taught us something we didn't even know we needed. His knowledge was greater then that of others, his thoughts were stronger, he had more nuances in his expression. And finally, he had that genuine curious spark for learning." (ed. Djuliman and Nielsen, 2007, pp. 117-120)

Once you believe that the child's voice is important in school, that it is even crucial for quality education, for an educational system more suitable for children, and even for your development as a teacher and/or professional associate, **what is the next step?**

The Convention on the Rights of the Child is on your side, as well as the Education Act and the Strategy on Education, Science and Technology. But we are aware

that there are also many factors working against strengthening children's voice. Educational and administrative requirements and pressures, the system as such, schedule of working hours, class schedule, working conditions in your school, responsibilities of children and adults, lack of funds for the realization of children's ideas, the lack of understanding or disinterest among colleagues, even parents. Sometimes it might even seem like the children themselves are not interested in starting their own initiatives or topics.

Is that a reason to give up? Certainly not! ☺

Acknowledging all these obstacles will help you prepare for them better and, additionally motivated and educated, you will easily integrate tools for strengthening the voice of children in your class, work, school.

For starters, we are aware that even we as adults are often not sure whether we have included the children "for real" or only "for decorative purposes". Therefore, we present **several theoretical models** that will facilitate recognizing what is it that you are already doing and what else you could do to strengthen the voice of children.

Next, every school has a **Student Council**, by definition intended to strengthen the voice of students and their involvement in decision-making, which is basically the highest form of children's involvement. However, this is not often the case in real life. Therefore, we also provide **a tool for assessing** the functioning of the Stu-

dent Council at your school, as well as the advice on how to improve its work.

In addition, we will introduce you to **a few simple tools** that can help you strengthen the voice of students during the processing of teaching content, but in a more direct way: by encouraging children to come up with their own ideas and projects, and implement them.

Of course, we also showcase **children's testimonials** on what they see as important factors needed for their (more) active involvement and initiative.

In the end, we address the main question again: what is the role of us as adults and how can we strengthen the voice and initiative of children through our relationship with them?

Is your school ready? ☺

TOOLBOX

FROM A CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE

What do students say they need in order for their voice to be better heard?

Let's consult again the conclusions of the research "Children's participation in the educational system" (UNICEF and ERF, 2018) for a moment and look at what children said about what they need in order for their voice to be better heard:

- **Better relationships with adults** would motivate children the most when it comes to their engagement at school: fairness in approach and assessment, openness of adults, good mood and kindness.

- **Feeling safe and not to being afraid** to express their opinion is important to them.

- **Adult support, as an incentive to participate,** is more important to them than peer support.

- According to the student's answers, engagement at school could increase by:

    - **making a greater number of school subjects elective** (especially in high schools),

    - creating an **atmosphere of acceptance and freedom of expression for all**,

    - applying a work method that encourages **peer-learning and working in small groups**, and

    - creating accessible and adapted **spaces for children to socialize and meet in the school**.

    - In this sense, high school students especially point out the schools' lack of creativity and liveliness, and assert their dissatisfaction with the educational system as a whole.

Finally, one interesting fact, the authors of the research summarized their research conclusions in the following sentence: naglasiti nekako dolje rečenicu

FROM THE VOICE OF CHILDREN TO ACTIVE PARTICIPATION: THEORETICAL MODELS

There are various models of children's participation, but the division into so-called "hierarchical" and "non-hierarchical" (again with the hierarchy ☺!) is particularly interesting.

Hierarchical models view participation "(...) as a progressive flow moving from lower to upper levels". "Climbing" the levels represents a gradual transition in the balance of power in favour of children".

The most famous model of hierarchical participation is the Roger A. Hart's model (1992), the so-called **"ladder of participation"**. Through eight hierarchical levels, children and young people get gradually involved in more complex forms of participation.

EXPERT OPINION: Hart's Ladder of Participation

There are eight levels of children's participation (Hart's model, 1992).

1.) **MANIPULATION** - children participate even though they have no understanding of what they are participating in and what the objective of the event/project/research/program is. They have no understanding of the purpose of their participation or its possible consequences (e.g. adults ask children to design an ideal nook in their school, so that adults can design it based on their ideas, without asking or informing them what have they done with those ideas).

2.) **DECORATION** - children participate by "decorating" an event (e.g. dance or song) without being included in the organization of the event and without knowing the purpose of the gathering (e.g. at this level, children know that they are participating and in what way they are participating, but they do not know why that is so).

3.) **SYMBOLIC PARTICIPATION (TOKENISM)** - children seemingly have the right to an opinion, but almost no right to freely choose a topic or a way of communicating their idea, and get almost no opportunity to express their opinion. At this level, children are used as a symbol, as their presence gives the impression of participation (e.g. participation in conferences or round tables with adults)

4.) **ASSIGNED BUT INFORMED** - children are informed about event/project/research/program they are participating in, familiar with its purpose, know why they are participating and who made the decision concerning their participation, and are assigned a meaningful role. However, their participation is sufficient, they are not involved in the preparation process.

5.) **CONSULTED AND INFORMED** - children are consultants for event/project/research/program designed by adults. Adults run the project, but seek the opinion of children and treat their suggestions seriously (e.g. teachers design an environmental project, they consult with students on ways to preserve the school environment, children are familiar with the purpose of the project and their role in it).

6.) **ADULT-INITIATED, SHARED DECISIONS WITH CHILDREN** - adults initiate an event/project/research/program, but they share decision-making with children.

7.) **CHILD-INITIATED AND DIRECTED** - the event/project/research/program is initiated independently by children. The role of adults is to recognize their initiative, open space for them to act and develop events/projects/ research/programs, and provide logistic support. Adults do not interfere, control or direct their events/projects/research/programs in any way. They are only involved in a supportive role.

8.) **CHILD-INITIATED, SHARED DECISIONS WITH ADULTS** - such participation of children in events/projects/research/programs is very rare, because very few adults are able to recognize the specific interests of children as potentially valuable opportunities for growth, development and learning.

This model can also serve as a tool for professionals in assessing how and to what level they engage students.

EXPERT OPINION: Shier's Pathways to Participation

Based on the previous model, Harry Shier developed his **"Pathways to Participation" model** (2001) for professionals working with children and young people, so that they could assess how open they are to children's participation, determine their current position and raise awareness of the steps necessary to increase children's engagement. "The model is based on five levels of participation, each of which has three stages of commitment called Opening, Opportunities and Obligations. The levels are as follows:

(1) children are listened to,

(2) children are supported in expressing their views,

(3) children's views are taken into account,

(4) children are involved in the decision-making process

(5) children share power and responsibility for decision-making with adults.

The author considers that the first three levels are the minimum that should be obtained in order to act in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)."

Unfortunately, students are expected to recognize and respond to some of our expectations so that they could get through the system more easily, while their potential for change is discouraged and diminished.

A teacher's quote

EXPERT OPINION: Spectrum of Student Voice (Toshalis, Nakkula, 2012)

U.S. adolescent development researchers Toshalis and Nakkula investigate how factors such as social classes, peer relationships, as well as relationships with adults, gender norms, and the media influence adolescent development, their identity, future expectations and aspirations. They have concluded (Zepke, 2017) that teachers who provide students with a choice and opportunities to collaborate, increase their engagement which is an important indicator for creating a democratic environment and a culture of dialogue.

However, they have also concluded that there is not just one form of students' voice or participation. The authors state that student participation lies in a continuum extending from minimal participation (students' voices, expression of students' opinions, asking for students' feedback), through inclusive participation (participation in decision-making meetings, problem identification and problem-solving, although decisions are still made by adults), to full participation inside, as well as outside of school, in

a democratic way (at the level of school, but also outside of it, taking the co-leading role in solving challenges and problems, and assuming responsibility in group processes and implementation of various activities and projects).

The continuum grows as teachers redefine their authority, gain greater confidence in students and enable them a higher level of active participation in school, as well as outside of it.

RANGE OF STUDENT VOICE

| STUDENTS EXPRESS THEIR PERSPECTIVE | ⬅ | STUDENTS ARE PART OF THE ACTIVITY | ➡ |
| STUDENTS AS DATA SOURCES | ⬅ | STUDENTS AS ASSOCIATES | ➡ |
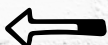
EXPRESSION	CONSULTATION	PARTICIPATION
Share and provide opinions, decide on volunteering, express themselves creatively, answer questions, celebrate, complain, compliment, protest etc.	Students are asked for their opinion and feedback, they participate in focus groups, take surveys, etc.	Students participate at decision-making meeting and events, they are often included in problem detection and intervention planning
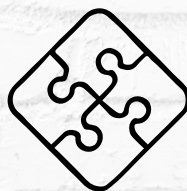
Increase: the need of adults to share authority with young people, show them trust, protect them from quitting, learn from students and deal with disagreements. Increase from left to right: students' influence, responsibility and role in decision-making processes.

STUDENTS DIRECT ACTIVITIES

STUDENTS LEAD CHANGES

PARTNERSHIP	ACTIVISM	LEADERSHIP
Formalised role of students in decision-making process, protocols that require involving students (not only invitating them). Adults are educated on how to cooperate with young people as equal partners	Students name problems, create solutions, organize actions, advocate or educate on changes inside an outside of the school contex	Leadership – (joint) planning, decision-making, taking of significant responsibility for the decision, joint leadership of group processes, joint activity implementation.
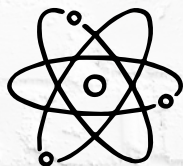
Most of the research activities related to students' voice take place on this side of the spectrum.

Model: Barbara Bray #rethink learning
Ilustrations: Sylvia Duckworth
Research authors: Toshalis and Nakkula, 2012

EXERCISE: Where are we on the spectrum?

Think of one example of how you use or encourage the voice of students in your educational work. Describe what it looks like.

Come up with an idea for how you can further develop the voice of students in your work. Compare your idea with the *Spectrum of Student Voice* and evaluate where it is located.

What can the school do, and what can the competent institutions do, in order to make the voice of students more alive, that is, to move it on the Spectrum of Student Voice?

EXPERT OPINION: Non-hierarchical models

The non-hierarchical models are based on the idea that no form of participation can be superior or subordinate to another. Depending on the circumstances, children's potential is "seen as a process, not an isolated activity or event." (Jeđud Borić, 2017). The non-hierarchical models advocate the idea that active involvement of children in social events implies that both adults and children are emotionally and socially prepared for it, and that it is very important to give children space, trust and respect, as well as to monitor their capabilities.

"In fact, having in mind the individual specifics, competencies and potentials of each child, as well as the child's free will to decide if, when and how to participate, it seems more justified to talk about the 'individual continuum' (Žižak, 2010) of participation, where every child determines independently to what level and how they want to participate. In this sense, we are actually talking about a continuous process of assessment, negotiation and agreement between experts/researchers and an individual child." (Jeđud Borić, 2017).

It would be good to raise awareness, at the national level, of the importance of the voice of young people in initiating change at all levels in society as a whole. Sadly, more and more young people are leaving the country in silence.

A teacher's quote

EXPERT OPINION: Laura Lundy's Model of Participation (2007)

This model of child participation is based on four elements of participation that not only encourage the non-hierarchical active participation of children and young people, but also offer an evaluation of their engagement. The model presented here discusses the most important aspects of child participation that need to be followed chronologically in order to achieve the best results.

SPACE
Children must be given safe, inclusive opportunities to form and express their view

VOICE
Children must be given safe, inclusive opportunities to form and express their view

AUDIENCE
Childrens' views must be listend to by someone who has responsibility for listening

INFLUENCE
Childrens' views must be acted upon, as appropriate

EXPERT OPINION: Student Council: the centre of children's participation in schools?

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE STUDENT COUNCIL?

Certainly, the Student Council comprised of representatives of all classes exists in your school. According to the Education Act in Croatia (Article 71):

(1) A Student Council, composed of students' representatives from each class, shall be established in the school.

(2) Student Council representative participates in the work of the school body when deciding on the rights and obligations of students, without decision-making rights.

(3) The manner of election and the scope of work of the Student council shall be determined in the school statute.

However, the school defines the work of the Student Council through its statute, and this is an example from the statute of an elementary school:

The Student Council:

- ✓ *prepares and makes suggestions to school bodies on issues important for students, their work and results in education,*

- ✓ *reports to the Ombudsman for Children on the problems of students,*

- ✓ *proposes the formation of student clubs and associations,*

- ✓ *gives suggestions regarding the implementation of excursions,*

- ✓ *proposes measures to improve working conditions in the school,*

- ✓ *assists students in fulfilling school and extracurricular obligations,*

- ✓ *proposes measures to promote the rights and interests of students to the principal, the Teacher Council and the School Board,*

- ✓ *discusses the code of ethics of the direct educational operators in the school and the school's house rules before their adoption,*

- ✓ *performs additional tasks determined by this statute and other general acts.*

BUT WHAT IS THE PROBLEM WITH STUDENT COUNCILS?

I was the head of the Student Council at my school for many years. I have noticed that students do not participate actively in society, nor in school. Despite encouragement and support, they rarely present and realize their ideas independently.

A teacher's quote

Let's go through some of **the most common criticisms** levelled at the way Student Councils function in schools:

"ELITISM": they usually include a small number of representatives, namely successful students

"TRIVIAL TOPICS": they deal with relatively basic issues in school (nutrition, toilets, decoration of premises) and are not consulted on important topics; they are usually stuck with humanitarian actions and fundraising for noble purposes

"INSIGNIFICANCE FOR STUDENTS' LIVES ": their work does not seem to be connected with students in general, nor with important decisions and decision-making structures of the school;

"INCOHERANCE WITH THE CURRICULUM": they are usually "non-curricular"; they are not recognized as an important part of what is taught and learned at school

"INEFFICIENCY": they have low actual impact, they usually do not change anything (relationships, approaches, school structures).

What can we possibly do about these problems?

Ideas and possible strategies:

- **Actively involve more students**, and as many different students as possible: make an effort so that the students who usually would not apply do so; limit the term of office so that as many of them as possible can assume that role

- **Refuse to deal with trivial things,** do not just focus on humanitarian activities: get interested in the school's key topics and involve students in them (Charity actions are great, but always ask yourself what you and your actions could change in the system!). E.g., the Council can define its Mission and occasionally refuse to deal with what is not a part of it.

- **Introduce creative ways of opinion polling and analysing needs** of all students, so that the topics that come before the Council are representative

- **Fight for the Council to become an important decision-making body** in the school

- **Explore alternative ways of the Council's functioning** (having one representative from each class is not always the best solution, there are many other solutions), such as special meetings of representatives by age groups; working groups on

specific topics of interest, or a combination of these.

- **Strengthen the Council as a community, as a working group, as a team** - encourage the Council's members to socialize, to get to know each other, and support group cohesion so that they would become stronger and more successful in their work

- **Organize training sessions for the members of the Student Council**, so that they can get acquainted with the possibilities and the ways of participation, as well as with special topics of interest

- **Investigate and point out how the work of the Council is a part of the curriculum** - what children learn and why it matters

- Do not just stick to the terms "student voice", "participation", "representing children" in pre-defined adult topics, but **make sure that students themselves define topics of interest and address them**

- **Allow children to challenge established practices and ways of running the school**

- **Ask yourself how the children in your school affect their neighbourhood, environment and community.**

HOW DO WE KNOW IF THE COUNCIL IS DOING A GOD JOB?

It is always good to look back, say at the last 12 months, and **evaluate** the work of the Council. Here are some indicators that are good to keep in mind.

The first indicator is the very way of functioning of the Council, and we can ask ourselves whether all of the three following elements exist:

1. **They do things independently.** They organize activities, usually social or humanitarian, by themselves.

2. **They ask others (adults) to help them or "to do" something for them**, e.g. when they agree that a certain topic is important and that something needs to be done, they ask teachers, principals, specialist service, the Governing Council for help.

3. **They truly participate in decision-making** - Council representatives participate in a wider range of school decisions, especially the more complex ones.

EXERCISE:

When it comes to what the Council is doing, it is convenient to look back and see what topics the Council has been dealing with, so we present a list ranging from the typical and simpler activities to the more relevant and complex ones. Unfortunately, the more complex topics are usually not discussed much, while most of the topics in the Councils are focused on these first points.

- **Routine topics:** the group deals with operational matters, internal procedures, who attended the meeting, etc.

- **Humanitarian actions:** funds are raised for a charity, the school, some special projects, groups of students, etc.;

- **Social activities:** students organize content for other students, such as celebrations, commemorations, performances...

- **School space and equipment:** students discuss existing and possible spaces (cafeteria, library, hallways, classrooms, equipment...) and work on improvements and enhancements of their use (sometimes related to fundraising)

- **School rules:** students discuss, monitor, decide on and approach others regarding the changes in school rules and policies (e.g. discipline, behaviour, student well-being)

- **Environment**: students develop and carry out activities and programs outside the school and in their neighbourhood related to environmental issues (which usually include more than arranging the school yard);

- **Commitment and advocacy for rights**: students advocate for change on behalf of a specific group of students, sometimes minorities, who need something, want something or feel damaged;

- **Curriculum**: students discuss, monitor, decide and approach others in matters related to learning and teaching (e.g.

grading, school subjects, activities, teaching approaches...) at the level of practices, programs, educational policies...

- **Community actions**: students are involved in important issues of the society and the community that go beyond the school itself; they discuss, decide and act on topics such as employment, safety, environment, etc.

When we combine these 9 topics and 3 types of action, we get a table that you can use for a quick evaluation of the Student Council and assessment of its achievements, as well as to pinpoint the "gaps" in its work:

How? What?	They do things independently	They ask and include adults	They make decisions with adults
Routine topics			
Humanitarian actions			
Social events			
Space and equipment			
School rules and behaviour			
Environment			
Commitment and advocacy for rights			
School curriculum			
Community actions			
Something else...?			

Source: *Student Councils and Beyond*, Connect magazine, asprinworld.com

INSPIRATION:
**Strengthen
personal and social
competencies of
children and young
people through group
work**

PRACTICE COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Prepare young people for going to different institutions and talking to strangers. Young people are often reluctant to talk to strangers and people who represent authority, so role-playing can help them lose their inhibitions related to socializing with adults. For example, through role-playing, you can encourage them to practice meeting with an official, making a phone call or talking directly to a user. Teachers often say that young people do not know how to express themselves - by preparing for just one conversation, young people can significantly improve their communication skills.

ENCOURAGE DISCUSSION AND CRITICAL THINKING

In meetings, reserve time for members of smaller teams to report what they have learned to the whole group. After reporting, it is important to discuss with the group the potential challenges they have encountered and what they could have done differently, so that they could use the information obtained for further steps. Discussions may be short at the beginning of the group's work, but it is important that the facilitator encourages young people to speak and present their opinions. This methodology makes it clear to them that their opinion matters.

ENCOURAGE CREATIVITY

It is important that projects are planned in a way that encourages creativity from the very beginning. Think about how you can encourage creativity, talk about how to increase the visibility of vulnerable groups and the difficulties they face. Think of creative ways to express emotions, values, the purpose of the project. Young people have a need for action, as well as for creativity. They can express themselves through comics, drawings, photographs, videos, stories, songs, etc. They experience a lot of things: numerous emotions, a flood of information to which they are exposed on social networks, a sense of injustice. Through creative expression, they can express everything they experience and turn it into a creatively tangible result that contains the message they want to share with the world.

WORK ON GROUP DYNAMICS AND COHESION

Joint participation in the research of a project idea can certainly contribute to team building and development of group dynamics. Work on each project with children and young people begins with initial meetings in which they just get to know each other and in which the facilitator consciously works on building a sense of security and trust within the group (they are encouraged to express their opinions and ideas, test their ideas, ask and listen to opinions of others in the group).

When you start working with a group, be directive, ask a lot of questions, provide feedback and recognition for

every positive progress those young people make (e.g. when they present ideas, support each other, etc.). It is desirable to start the meetings with games ("icebreakers") in order to get to know each other in a fun way, and discover mutual similarities and differences. At the end of each meeting, check for any questions that remained unanswered and ask them for a brief evaluation of the meeting.

BE OPEN TO THEIR IDEAS

Encourage young people to offer as many ideas as possible and make a list of ideas. During the brainstorming phase, don't evaluate or discard ideas, as even the unrealistic ones can later gain value. You can combine similar or upgrade existing ideas, thus building a sense in young people that the project belongs to them.

In the initial stages of working on a project, the idea usually just emerges, together with the objectives and the activities through which these objectives will be achieved. In addition, the roles of individual group members, as well as their skills, needs, and desires, become clearer. Greater involvement of children and young people in the implementation of activities, as well as increased assuming of responsibility, begin only after the sense of safety is built within the group, relationships between group members are developed and their potential for greater independence is felt. Whilst at the beginning the group leader shares the tasks with young people, at this stage, the he or she leaves more and more work to young people, so that over time young people take full responsibility for the project.

USE THE CIRCLE METHOD

Do you use the "circle" method with your students? It is a seemingly very simple method of listening to students which consists of asking everyone to say something. The questions may be different, from the "ordinary" ones such as *How are you today?*, all the way to the more complex ones such as *What do you think about this? What did you learn?, What else do you want to learn?, Tell us...*

Using the skills of moderation and facilitation, the leader of the Circle ensures that everyone is heard, acknowledged, that everyone's opinion is allowed and respected. Time can be a possible limitation of this method, but with some skill and experience (or by dividing into smaller groups and reporting in a large group), it is possible to gain a lot with this method, in terms of group collectivity, getting to know each other, connecting and critical thinking.

USE THE FOCUS GROUPS METHOD

You can also use focus groups to involve young people in project planning from the very beginning. In small groups, through a structured discussion conducted by a trained facilitator, you can get their opinion and a large amount of information in a relatively short time, and this information can guide you in further planning of activities.

Possible questions for the focus group for students when planning a project:

1. How satisfied are you with your school at the moment? What would you point out as good?

2. What are the weaknesses of our school? What should we all work on together?

3. What problem do you notice in your school, in your environment?

4. Who would you like to help and why?

5. Do you have a proposal for an initiative or an idea of what you would like to start? Whose help do you need?

Possible questions for the focus group for students after the implementation of the action:

1. How actively were you involved? What were you involved in the most?

2. Did you learn anything new? How does this project, in your opinion, impact you and your peers? What skills, attitudes and knowledge have you developed?

3. In your opinion, what is the impact of this project on the school?

4. Do you think the project activities were useful to the beneficiaries? If so, in what ways?

5. All in all, share your impressions and thoughts on the development of this and similar activities.

FROM A CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE: School of the future

(COMPETITION I DREAM OF A SCHOOL, 2020) STUDENT, 2ND GRADE OF VOCATIONAL SCHOOL

Could there be a school in the future that is different from the present one? A school where students arrive happy. A school where we actually learn new things, form new friendships and acquire new skills. I would like to believe that such a school can really exist, but seeing how the educational system has not changed for decades, that hope is slowly fading. Students spend a large amount of time on school, learning and homework, which leaves them no free time for the things they love. Although everyone is different, there is no place for special treatments in our educational system. The system is based on memorizing, so children who remember quickly and easily are considered excellent and smart students, while children who need a little bit more time are considered lazy. Children's creativity

and talents are neglected and their personal opinions are repressed. Listen, shut up, sit down, complete this task. However, criticism will not help us, we need change.

For starters, I think oral exams should be abolished or at least announced to the student taking it. The only reason why exams are acceptable in the first place is to encourage children to learn continuously rather than occasionally. In a perfect world, that would be a good idea, but in reality, students have too many obligations to be able to learn each subject sequentially, so we have to choose our priorities. There are also people suffering from anxiety who simply cannot stand up and take an exam in front of others, but we are all already familiar with the fact that school rarely takes care of the mental health of students. If students complain about a professor, most often no one does anything about it and students are characterized as lazy, causing them to lose confidence in authority.

I think that the lunch break should be longer and the selection of food wider, as the general health of the students is yet another neglected area. We should have a greater choice of extracurricular activities, more sports, music, creativity. A compulsory subject through which children would learn to live independently, that is, to cook, clean, pay bills, as well as learn politics and other important things, should be introduced. The school hall should always be open to students, not just during physical education. We would get a chance to meet more students from our school and be more active.

Finally, I think schools should celebrate more holidays, decorate hallways and organize events (which would be headed by students). Schools would be much nicer places with a better atmosphere, and students would be able to get rid of stress, have fun, socialize, and show off their talents to other students. Schools underestimate the power of small things that can make a student's day better. I hope that the school of the future exists and that it is not in the distant, but in the near future. A school where students are happy and acquire new knowledge.

SET UP A STUDENT ACTION TEAM
WHAT IS A STUDENT ACTION TEAM?

Student Action Team (Australian Youth Research Centre, 2003) is a concept developed in Australia in 1998, originally with the idea of preventing violence and delinquency among young people, which later came to life as a practice in many schools, more specifically, in upper grades of primary and lower grades of high schools.

It includes a group of students working together on a real problem recognized in the local community. The group first investigates the problem and then develops solutions: recommendations or actions they take themselves.

The basic principles are:

- Active role of young people in their community, as an integral part of the community;
- Young people as researchers in the community

- Young people doing something that is important and brings change

- It is related to learning and the program within which they achieve academic goals.

Young people perceive their role in the team as: meaningful (what they do is important to them), creative (they create real change in the environment) and collaborative (working together with their peers, teachers and others).

WORK PROCESS

The teamwork approach is not a pre-defined program; it is more of an approach to learning and teaching, adapted to the circumstances in individual schools and communities. However, it usually consists of these 5 stages: 5 stages naglasiti fontom ili rasporedom, krugovima, itd.

1. Initial meeting and involvement (Forum 1),

2. Research (what is it about, what do we already know?);

3. Meeting for sharing research knowledge (Forum 2);

4. Action phase (what are we going to change? What are we going to do?) and

5. Meeting to present the report on what has been done (Forum 3).

ADDITIONAL ADVICE:

- Kids love to learn from their peers! Allow children to be mentored by peers experienced in active participation. Peer experiences can motivate and encourage other children, as well as give them concrete examples of how they can do the same.

- Provide an opportunity for children to talk and meet with decision makers (principals, municipal heads, mayors, prefects). Prepare both children and adults for these meetings - it is important that everyone knows what to expect.

- Be prepared to debate ideas and suggestions with children who come up with them. Children are aware that not all of their suggestions and wishes are necessarily feasible, but it is important that you discuss it with them and act accordingly.

- CRUCIAL! Make sure you always give children feedback on their participation: inform them honestly about what happened, what decision was reached, and so on.

- Allow children to quit activities, projects and participation. Respect the decision of every child; participation is a right, not an obligation.

- Evaluate the process, the form and the outcome of children's participation: identify the conditions that facilitate it, as well as those that hold it back.

FROM A CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE: Focus groups with children, research within the "Start the change" project (Kovačić, Baketa, 2020):

ADVICE AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM STUDENTS

Students believe that the teacher-student relationship would be better if teachers were more informal. They suggest organising student-teacher gatherings during the school year in order to get to know each other, thus improving their mutual communication.

In addition, students suggest changing the teaching methods by making them more interactive, the atmosphere more participatory, and the subject matter presented as vividly as possible.

They would like to work more with the technology they will use in their future careers.

They suggest classes from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. because they find it easier to get up a bit later.

They want to arrange an outdoor classroom in the schoolyard in order to intensify the implementation of teaching outside the classroom.
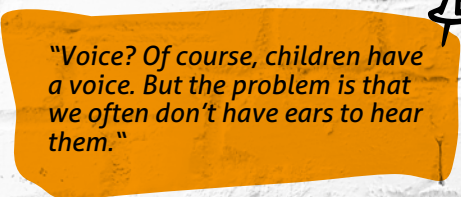
They suggest introducing some sort of a public transport from the train station to the school.

During the summer months, they are very hot and would like air-conditioned classrooms.

Students would like to talk to teachers more, regardless of the subject matter they have to cover, so they suggest organizing classes in which they would be able to realize that idea.

They would like nutrition of higher quality so they ask to be provided with a cafeteria or the opportunity to go to the store during the break etc.

*Students recommend that teachers get to know them better. They suggest devoting a class or two in each subject to simply **talk to students**.*

"Voice? Of course, children have a voice. But the problem is that we often don't have ears to hear them."

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ABOUT THE MANUAL

This Manual was developed within the three-year international project titled "Start the Change!", implemented in a partnership with the organizations from Croatia, Portugal, North Macedonia and Belgium. The purpose of the project is empowering 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. The project emphasizes, in particular, that active participation of children transforms the balance of power between children and adults: instead of a hierarchical power structure in which adults hold all the power, participation advocates cooperative power relationships based on dialogue, negotiation and cooperation between children and adults thus ensuring the inclusion and acceptance of diversity in schools.

We see a particular significance of this publication in the fact that firstly the students were interviewed in 2020, when all three countries experienced sudden changes in education due to the COVID-19 crisis and as the key findings show the voice of young people in these times was even less asked, consulted and respected. We consider student voice, i.e. the students' perspective on those changes, to be extremely important because they enable consideration to take place about what changes can be implemented in order to achieve a higher quality of the teaching process and student wellbeing in the challenges of the pandemic situation. Thus, the authors decided to approach the topic of student voice from different perspectives: children's, teachers', and experts' and in this way provide theoretical background and models, good practice examples, different tools and inspirational self-reflection exercises.

PARTNERS ON THE "START THE CHANGE!" PROJECT:

Forum for Freedom in Education, Croatia

Ivan Meštrović Primary School in Zagreb, Croatia

INOVA+ INNOVATION SERVICES, Portugal

José Estêvão Cluster School, Portugal

Macedonian Civic Education Center, North Macedonia

Secondary Municipal School „Nikola Karev" – Strumica, North Macedonia

Network of Education Policy Centres (NEPC), Croatia
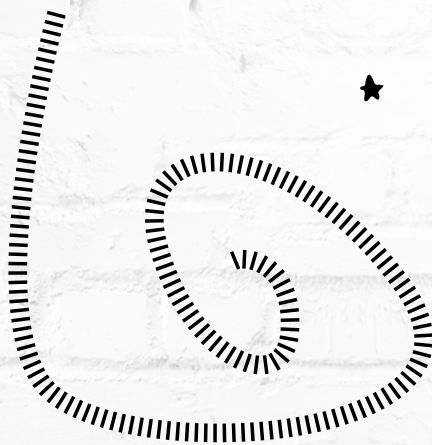
SIRIUS Policy Network on Migrant Education, Belgium

You can find more about the project and project activities on www.startthechange.net

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ana Munivrana has a degree in psychology, she is the head of the Program for the development of personal and social competences and a trainer at the Forum for Freedom in Education. Since 2001 she has worked as a psychologist, lecturer and project manager in the fields of education, health and youth policies. She is a co-author and editor of the Forum's manuals "From Heart to Heart - Communication Models as a Tool for Mediation" and "We can solve it! Understanding and managing conflicts". Within Forum's different programs, she supports schools in developing school mediation and mental health projects and has implemented many trainings and projects in the field of communication, youth work and conflict management. She is the leading expert on the 'Start the Change!' Project.

Jelena Perak is a coordinator of school prevention programmes at the Forum for Freedom in Education. She has a degree in Sociology and Croatian language and literature at the University Centre for Croatian Studies. During her work at the Forum for Freedom in Education, she has managed a series of projects as well as several workshops for children and young people in the areas of tolerance, equality and nonviolent conflict resolution. She holds a certificate in the reality therapy and choice theory by William Glasser, organised by the European Association for Reality Therapy.

Višnja Pavlović is the head of the Volunteering and Active Citizenship in Education Programme and a mediation and development of school volunteering trainer at the Forum for Freedom in Education. She has more than ten years of experience in creating and implementing educational projects, youth programmes and training for professionals working with youth. She has a degree in Community Youth Work from the Jönköping University in Sweden and a Master's degree in Child Studies at the University of Linköping in Sweden. She is finalising her psychotherapy training in Gestalt therapy.

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