

UNESCO – COUNCIL OF EUROPE ONLINE CONFERENCE

From making student voice heard to active civic participation in the digital age:

The role of schools during and after the pandemic

23-25 November 2020 (1:30 -3:00 pm CET)

Background

WHAT IS STUDENT¹ VOICE?

Student voice is the right of students to have a say in matters that affect them in their schools and to have their opinions taken into consideration. It encompasses all aspects of school life and decision-making where young learners are able to make a meaningful contribution, adapted to their age and stage of development. It stretches from informal situations in which students express an opinion to their peers or staff members to participation in democratic structures or mechanisms, such as student parliaments and consultations.

Student voice can vary from voicing an opinion, to taking on a leadership role in an aspect of school life. It can be characterised according to a six-fold typology of increasing complexity and responsibility:

Expression	– voice an opinion
Consultation	– be asked for an opinion
Participation	– attend and preferably play an active role in a meeting
Partnership	– have a formal role in decision-making
Activism	– identify a problem, propose a solution, and advocate its adoption
Leadership	– plan and make decisions.

Student voice can be expressed anywhere in the school community, in and out of formal lessons. These activities include, for example, inviting students to comment on teaching approaches and techniques, suggest topics for class discussion, participate in school policy committees and/or consultations, or just join in a casual conversation on school matters with a teacher or other staff member in their free time².

WHY IS STUDENT VOICE IMPORTANT AT SCHOOL?

Student voice is rooted in the concept of children's rights and human rights. In particular, Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child³ (UNCRC) establishes the right of every child to have a say in matters which affect them, whether in or out of school, as well as to be involved in

¹ For the purposes of this conference, "student" is understood as designating any person enrolled in a formal education programme, regardless of his or her age, the strand or level of the education programme in which he or she is enrolled. Some varieties of English make a distinction between "student" and "pupil"; for the purposes of this conference, the term "student" covers both.

² See Council of Europe Thematic Paper on *Making children's and students' voices heard* (to be published soon on the '[Free to Speak, Safe to Learn-Democratic Schools for All](#)' project).

³ [UN General Assembly, Convention on the Rights of the Child, 20 November 1989, United Nations](#)

decisions that affect them. More generally, the UNCRC includes other articles that seek to increase student voice, including the right to seek and receive information, to express their own views and to associate with others.

This right has been conceptualised as ‘participation’, which is an ongoing process of expression and active involvement of young people in decision-making in matters that concern them - at the local, national, and international levels⁴. Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)2⁵ urges its member States to ensure that all children and young people can exercise their right to be heard, to be taken seriously and to participate in decision making in all matters affecting them with their views given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.

Student voice can have many benefits both for schools and the wider society – for example:

- Participating in school decision-making fosters a sense of citizenship in young learners, helping them to develop important competences, e.g. cooperation and communication skills, self-efficacy, responsibility, civic-mindedness and respect for the value of democracy – all of which lie at the heart of the Council of Europe Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFDC).⁶
- Contributing to their school community gives young learners a sense of belonging, develops self-esteem and can lead to relationships that are more respectful. This has a positive influence on school discipline and helps to reduce the incidence of problems, such as drop-out, bullying, substance abuse and radicalisation (UNESCO, 2019)⁷.
- Engaging students in active learning activities in class has a positive effect not only on the classroom atmosphere, but also on the educational achievements of students and their peers⁸.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?

As countries, local communities and schools are faced with growing intolerance of diversity, lack of respect for human rights, violent conflict, and societal and environmental degradation, as well as more recently the global COVID-19 pandemic, many young people feel that their generation has a responsibility to improve the world. However, there is a perception among young people that they are not well equipped to deal with these global challenges, and that decision-makers are not actually hearing their voices (WISE survey, 2020)⁹.

WHAT CAN BE THE RESPONSE OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM?

Education can play an important role in gradually improving this state of affairs. Both UNESCO and the Council of Europe promote a vision of education in which school leaders and teachers contribute significantly to preparing students to build sustainable, peaceful societies by developing adherence to and taking action to defend and promote human rights, democracy and the rule of law, and to participate effectively in culturally diverse societies.

⁴ This is based on the General Comment no 12 (2009) from the Committee on the Rights of the Child <https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/AdvanceVersions/CRC-C-GC-12.pdf>

⁵ [Council of Europe: Committee of Ministers, Recommendation CM/Rec\(2012\)2 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the participation of children and young people under the age of 18](#)

⁶ [Council of Europe Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture \(RFDC\)](#)

⁷ UNESCO and UNODC, [Strengthening the rule of law through education](#): A guide for policymakers, 2019.

⁸ See Council of Europe Thematic Paper on Making children’s and students’ voices heard (to be published soon on the [‘Free to Speak, Safe to Learn-Democratic Schools for All’](#) project).

⁹ [WISE Global Education Barometer, 2020](#)

The right to participation is at the heart of [UNESCO Global Citizenship Education](#), which aims to be transformative and empower learners to become champions for peaceful societies. In a similar vein, the [Council of Europe Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture](#) aims to equip young people with the knowledge and critical understanding, skills, values and attitudes that they need to be able to contribute to a more democratic, inclusive and fair world.

In practice, schools can make a difference by promoting students' voices, involving them in decision making and promoting their civic engagement, in both the physical and digital environment. The first step is for schools to ensure that students are fully aware of their right to participation and that they develop the competences needed to engage in school and in broader society, *inter alia*, by means of education for democratic citizenship, human rights and the rule of law. Schools should also equip students with a sense of agency, which empowers them and makes them capable of improving themselves and influencing their communities. School leaders and teachers can demonstrate attitudes and behaviours they wish to develop in students, such as being respectful of diversity and inclusive, resolving conflicts peacefully, being responsible as well as mindful of the natural environment.

Learning about and practicing participation and civic engagement is clearly not only about theoretical knowledge of democratic citizenship but also - and mainly - about developing competences for democratic culture; this includes the [values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge and critical understanding that prepare young people for life as active citizens](#). Both formal and informal activities in school play a role in this regard. For example, a longitudinal study found that school councils, debate teams, school elections, and/or mock elections in schools, have both short- and medium-term impact on young people's political engagement¹⁰.

YOUTH PARTICIPATION

Increasingly, young people are engaged with alternative modes of civil, social and political activism. Studies suggest that youth tend to mistrust conventional forms of political engagement, while they are more likely to engage in ways that are 'disruptive' to the *status quo*, such as through sit-ins, walkouts, boycotts, or protests¹¹.

The Internet, social media and technologies in general, are providing them with new means of participation, mobilisation, cooperation and innovation. The prevalence of youth using digital tools to engage in participatory politics, contrasts with declining trust and interest in institutional politics. Youth are at the forefront of participatory politics defined as 'interactive, peer-based acts through which individuals and groups seek to exert both voice and influence on issues of public concern'¹². Examples of participatory political acts range from blogging and circulating political news, to starting a new political group, to creating petitions, to mobilising one's social network on behalf of a cause'.

It is essential that strategies for formal education in the twenty-first century take into account the new opportunities made possible by the widespread use of digital technologies and also the risks that come with them.

¹⁰ Avril Keating and Jan Germen Janmaat, Education Through Citizenship at School: Do School Activities Have a Lasting Impact on Youth Political Engagement?, 2015

¹¹ Henn, M., Oldfield, B. & Hart, J., Postmaterialism and young people's political participation in a time of austerity, 2017

¹² Kahne J., Hodgins, E. & Eidman-Aadahl, E., Redesigning Civic Education for the Digital Age: Participatory Politics and the Pursuit of Democratic Engagement, 2016

HOW HAS THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AFFECTED STUDENT VOICE

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a uniquely challenging time. Schools and teachers have had to find innovative solutions to provide some form of learning whilst prioritising the welfare of their students. Specifically, many schools were faced with obstacles in protecting and promoting student voice during the worst of the pandemic. Concerns have been raised about how emergency measures to prevent its spread can impact fundamental freedoms and rights, such as peaceful assembly, privacy and self-expression¹³. Therefore, there is a risk that the pandemic further exacerbates the feeling of young people that was existing pre-COVID, that their voices were not being heard. At the same time, the current crisis can provide an opportunity to reshape the next normal with the full participation of young people, starting from the education system, as highlighted by a recent report of the International Commission on Futures of Education¹⁴.

Conference Objectives

With this in mind, UNESCO and the Council of Europe are organising, in partnership, a conference on this topical issue. The two Organisations will bring together teachers, school leaders, policy-makers and students to discuss the role, responsibility and opportunities of schools in increasing young people's voice, and in promoting their participation and civic engagement in the digital age.

The specific objectives of the conference will be to:

- Facilitate dialogue between students, school practitioners and policy-makers in order to map out challenges and practices for raising student voice and, in effect, empowering their participation and civic engagement in and outside of schools;
- Review the impact of COVID-19 on student voice and participation in secondary schools, building on the findings from a recent research study (see below);
- Discuss effective education strategies to equip students with the relevant values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and critical understanding in both physical and digital environments;
- Showcase evidence of the benefits of education strategies that promote students' participation and civic engagement.

The expected results from the meeting are to: i) map out challenges and practices in different learning and teaching contexts in several countries, as well as ii) provide suggestions, with a view to understanding:

- What are the educational strategies used by policy-makers, school leaders and teachers to give young people voice and empower participation in and outside of school?
- How can schools adapt to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic to enable student voice and participation?
- How should these educational strategies make effective use of the digital environment and, in particular, of social media?
- What mechanisms are effective in ensuring that student voice feed into decision-making processes, not only within the school life, but also in their communities and more broadly in society?

13 UN policy brief, COVID-19 and human rights: we are all in this together, 2020

14 The International Commission on Futures of Education, convened by UNESCO in June 2020, produced the report "Education in a post-COVID world: Nine ideas for public action" which recommends to 'Promote student, youth and children's participation and rights (...), and prioritise the participation of students and young people broadly in the co-construction of desirable change.'

Expected outcomes and follow-up

- Mapping relevant practices on student voice and participation in schools
- A report for policy-makers with recommendations based on evidence from research
- Synergy between the UNESCO Associated Schools Network (ASPnet) and the Council of Europe Democratic Schools Network

Relevance for the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4)

Through their partnership, UNESCO and the Council of Europe will contribute to advancing the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which aims to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.”

SDG Target 4.7 aims to *ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development.*

In particular, the conference will build on:

UNESCO’s work on Global Citizenship Education with a focus on the relevant educational resources developed in the context of the programme on Global Citizenship Education for the Rule of Law. It will also consider the existing multi-sectoral expertise of UNESCO in the area of youth, notably in the context of UNESCO’s Operational Strategy on Youth (2014-2021), which includes the promotion of civic engagement, democratic participation and social innovation through education as a key priority.

The Council of Europe Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture which, while grounded in European experiences and standards, echoes global commitments to promoting Global Citizenship¹⁵ and Human Rights Education. The Conference will also build on the Council of Europe Democratic Schools Network and themes of the Free to Speak, Safe to Learn project; the Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec (2019)10¹⁶ on developing and promoting digital citizenship education and related work, such as the Council of Europe [Digital Citizenship Education Handbook](#).

Background documentation

The conference will build on the preliminary findings from a joint UNESCO/Council of Europe research study on the impact of COVID-19 on student voice and participation in Europe and Middle East and North Africa conducted in cooperation with the University of Roehampton (UK) during the summer of 2020. The research study aimed to:

1. Understand whether and how there has been a shift in student voice and participation in secondary schools since the beginning of the pandemic;

¹⁵See also UNESCO, Global Education Meeting 2018, Brussels Declaration, 5 December 2018, available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000366394?posInSet=1&queryId=f00bbeb5-caf0-495d-9782-4caad1e9e0f>

¹⁶ https://library.parenthelp.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/CoE-digital-citizenship-education-recommendations-CM_Rec201910E.pdf

2. Identify practices within secondary schools in selected countries, as well as related barriers to participation in different contexts;

The mixed-methods research draws on the responses provided by teachers in secondary schools in Europe and in the Middle East and North Africa that are part of the UNESCO ASPnet and the Council of Europe Democratic Schools Network and builds on case studies that were developed by local researchers in schools in nine countries – namely France, Greece, Jordan, Lebanon, Portugal, Romania, Tunisia and the United Kingdom – to gather the perspective of both students and teachers.

Furthermore, the conference will build on the following key materials developed by UNESCO and Council of Europe, in particular:

- [Global citizenship education: topics and learning objectives, UNESCO](#)
- [Educational content up close: examining the learning dimensions of Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship Education, UNESCO](#)
- [Empowering students for just societies: A handbook for secondary school teachers, UNESCO and UNODC](#)
- [Strengthening the rule of law through education: A guide for policymakers, UNESCO and UNODC](#)
- [Global citizenship education: Taking it local, UNESCO](#)
- [UNESCO ASPnet](#)
- [Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture, Council of Europe](#)
- [Project 'Free to Speak, Safe to Learn-Democratic Schools for All', Council of Europe](#)
- [Democratic Schools Network, Council of Europe](#)
- [Recommendation CM/Rec\(2019\)10 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on developing and promoting digital citizenship education](#)
- [Digital Citizenship Education Handbook, Council of Europe](#)
- [Digital citizenship education - Trainers' Pack](#)

Participants

UNESCO and the Council of Europe are expected to bring together up to 500 participants from around 60 countries in Europe, as well as the Middle East and North Africa, among which:

- Policy-makers, including from Ministries of Education;
- School leaders and teachers from UNESCO's ASPnet of Schools and the Democratic Schools Network of the Council of Europe;
- Youth Parliaments;
- Secondary school students from UNESCO's ASPnet and the Democratic Schools Network of the Council of Europe, and OBESSU as the representative organisation of secondary school students in Europe.

Format

The conference will be held online during afternoon sessions over the course of the three days. While the majority of the discussions will take place in plenary sessions, the second day will include breakout sessions, to provide more in-depth discussions of the school case studies.

Languages

The language of the conference will be English, with interpretation into Arabic and French.