

Changing Education by Participation

The Project Transform4School of the UNESCO Chair in Klagenfurt (Austria)

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“An intensive project—working together with pupils, students, teachers, and school directors for changing the paradigm of school was very exciting! It was rewarding to discuss the project in the wonderful GloCo Community.”

Abstract: *The Transform4School project, carried out by the University of Klagenfurt in cooperation with the University College of Teacher Education Carinthia, aims to foster democratic understanding and peace education in partner schools through participatory approaches, such as class councils and student parliaments. By involving students in school decision-making processes, they gain hands-on experience in democratic participation and become familiar with the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The project is anchored in UNESCO Global Citizenship Education (GCED) and promotes experiential learning, enabling students to challenge themselves, take on responsibility, implement their own project ideas, and reflect on their role within a global society. Experiences from the last two years indicate both the potential to stimulate school development processes through students' participatory involvement in collaboration with teachers and school administrators, and the challenges involved,*

especially in overcoming resistance and adapting to existing school structures (Sparkling Science, n.d.-a).

Keywords: *Participation; Democracy; Peace Education; SDGs; Education*

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Motivation for the Project

The Transform4School project was initiated in response to the growing gap between the goals of a sustainable, peaceful global society and current educational practice. The central concern of the project is to promote democratic learning and peace education through participatory methods in partner schools. This initiative addresses the “[...] dilemma that educational goals cannot be achieved through mere transmission; they also require the self-initiative of learners and are thus inherently open-ended. Transform4School therefore builds on an understanding of learning as experience.” (Universität Klagenfurt, n.d.-a)

One of the main reasons for the need for “Transformation through Participation: Model Schools for Democratic Learning and Peace Education” (Transform4School, n.d.-a)—in short, Transform4School—is the realization that traditional educational approaches often fail to

meet the high demands of democracy promotion and peace education. Educational systems worldwide have long sought to impart values such as democracy, environmental awareness, and peacefulness. Nevertheless, the actual implementation of these values in many students' everyday school lives often falls far short of expectations. A key criticism is that education is frequently viewed as a one-sided process in which knowledge is merely conveyed rather than actively acquired through participation and personal experience (Zentrum für Citizen Science, 2023).

Which Challenges Does the Project Address?

Key challenges that have become visible through the project include:

Passivity and Lack of Participation Opportunities in Everyday School Life

Traditionally, there is little room for participation and individual initiative. Students learn about class councils and student parliaments and how they are implemented. Mutual appreciation is fostered. Together, participants create a “place of well-being.”

Different Understandings of Democracy

Various forms of democratic understanding exist. The project addresses these differences (for example, by engaging in conversations, making compromises, recognizing and nurturing potential). Democracy must be learned: “The path from a subjectively shaped ‘I’ to a socially empathetic and democratically shaped ‘self’ does not develop on its own.” (Himmelfmann 2016: 61). Convey, model, and maintain fundamental democratic values. Practical testing within the school (e.g., class council, student parliament, projects).

Overcoming Structural Barriers

Structures: school regulations and legal requirements. These are difficult to change. Positive learning experiences still occur. There are limits, which is why compromises are important. The goal is to jointly find a path toward greater student participation and involvement, make it sustainable, and continue developing it in collaboration with all stakeholders.

Project Description

The Transform4School project is an educational initiative carried out by the University of Klagenfurt in cooperation with the University College of Teacher Education Carinthia, working with three partner schools in Carinthia and one partner school in Tulln (Lower Austria). It aims to promote the principles of democracy and peace education through participatory approaches in schools. The project is embedded in UNESCO's Global Citizenship Education (GCED) strategy and contributes to the implementation of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations, particularly Goals 4 (Quality Education) and 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions).

The resulting “[...] learning processes, resistances, moments of failure and success [are] documented, reflected on, and evaluated by the participants themselves as co-researchers—so-called citizen scientists—together with the research team. The insights gained from the experiences in the project, understood as experiential learning, are made public and are particularly made available for school development and teacher education.” (Universität Klagenfurt, n.d.-a; Str. und Einf. E.P.)

Transform4School seeks to enable students, through participatory educational approaches, to experience and actively shape democratic processes. Central to this are the establishment of class councils and student parliaments, which allow students to voice their opinions on school matters and help shape their school environment. These bodies

are organized on a grassroots-democratic basis and offer students a platform to represent their interests.

The project team and dedicated teachers support this process. The core idea is to stimulate learning about global contexts within one's own school through engagement with the SDGs. Close collaboration among students, the project team, and teaching staff allows for deepening existing projects at the schools or developing entirely new ones.

Fig. 39: Participation for togetherness



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Project Workflow at the Schools

Fig. 40: Participation needs spaces for exchange and encounter.



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Opinion-forming process workshop: This workshop introduces students to the concept of democracy and creates an open space for them to share their personal experiences. Within this context, the roles of class representatives and the student parliament are explained and discussed.

Class Representatives Workshop: Students engage more deeply with the responsibilities of this role. They collect ideas and wishes from their class, design creative posters, and prepare and practice their election speeches.

Election Commission Workshop: The election commission workshop focuses on preparing for election day. One or two students per class take on the responsibility as members of the election commission and organize themselves into different teams. While one group prepares materials such as voter registries and ballots, another designs creative elements, such as the ballot box and signage, and a third ensures overall coordination and communication with the school administration.

Election Day: Each class elects a class representative and a deputy. The process is largely organized by students, with support from teachers and the project team. Voter registries are checked, ballots are distributed and cast in voting booths, and the votes are counted. If necessary, runoff elections are held, and the final results are announced.

School representative election: Following this, the school representative election takes place. Class representatives and their deputies can stand as candidates for student body president, present short speeches, and are elected together with two deputies. The results are then formally communicated to the school administration.

Fig. 41: School ballot box



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Student Parliament: The student parliament meets once a month and serves as a platform where class representatives bring forward the concerns and ideas of their peers. Discussions are held, decisions are made through voting, and implementation processes are carried out in cooperation with teachers, school leadership, and the project team. Not all ideas are realized, which is also part of the learning process.

Class Council: In parallel, the class council takes place within individual classes during designated periods. These sessions are led by students, with teacher support, allowing class-specific issues to be discussed and decisions to be made democratically, taking into account both majority and minority perspectives.

Projects: Various projects emerge from these processes, ranging from a yearbook and SDG-related activities to initiatives that improve everyday school life, such as break organization and school events. Students develop and implement these ideas in coordination with teachers, the project team, and the school administration.

Events: In addition, different events complement the project, including visits to institutions, networking meetings, or participatory formats such as forum theatre. These are organized collaboratively and supported by teachers, school leadership, and parents or guardians.

SDG-Workshop: The SDG workshop introduces students to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals and encourages them to identify their relevance within the school context. Students reflect on existing practices, develop new project ideas, implement selected initiatives, and present and evaluate their outcomes.

Citizen Scientists: As citizen scientists, students, teachers, and directors actively engage in research processes using methods such as research diaries, photovoice, forum theatre, and creative formats like memes. The project team guides these activities and include joint reflection as well as the presentation of results in diverse formats.

In-School Professional Development: Finally, in-school professional development is offered for teachers and school administrators. It focuses on topics such as class councils, student participation structures, the SDGs, and research methods, to ensure the long-term, sustainable integration of these practices into school life.

Challenges and Adaptations

Below is a brief excerpt of experiences collected by the project staff throughout the project.

Time

- Workshop phases are time-consuming.
- Teachers and school administrators called for shorter sessions.
- Elementary school (grades 1–4) and lower secondary school (grades 5–6) require more time.
- Age and comprehension play a significant role.

One key observation was that students involved in decision-making processes not only developed a deeper understanding of democratic principles but also showed increased motivation to become more involved in their school community. Student parliaments provide a platform for students to express their opinions and ideas, leading to greater identification with the school and an improved school climate.

It also became apparent that involving students in democratic processes leads to heightened awareness of global issues and the SDGs. The students develop an understanding of how their actions affect global challenges such as environmental protection, nutrition, and poverty, and they are motivated to contribute ideas for related projects.

Additional Burden on Teachers

- Due to new projects and responsibilities.

- Teachers are supported throughout the process.
- The project primarily provides this support.
- It requires dedicated teachers and school social workers.

This raises the question of how schools can continue participatory processes independently after the project concludes. At one school, a social worker tried to oversee the student parliament, which worked very well initially. However, the social worker's hours have since been reduced, so supervision of the student parliament is no longer guaranteed. Teachers themselves would need more flexibility to guide participatory projects, which is possible only with strong support from school leadership.

Drawing on these experiences, a follow-up project to Transform4School, called transform2gether, was developed. The follow-up project aims to empower school administrators, teachers, and social workers to become active participants in fostering participation. To achieve this, new training modules will be developed to expand their skills so they can independently establish student parliaments and class councils. The project team will continue to provide support during practical phases. However, the main idea is that democratizing the school will become embedded in the school's culture and become an accepted norm. Additionally, transform2gether involves geographical expansion, as the collaboration with the University College of Teacher Education Carinthia has been extended to the provinces of Vienna and Tyrol.

Connection to the GCED Framework and the SDGs

The Transform4School project is closely linked to the vision of Global Citizenship Education (GCED) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). GCED aims to raise awareness of the planetary dimension within educational processes, thereby contributing to a global sense of responsibility among citizens. People who recognize the link between local actions and global consequences are more motivated and capable of actively and responsibly participating in shaping a sustainable and peaceful world. For UNESCO, Global Citizenship Education is thus

the key pathway toward a more just and peaceful world community. The SDGs, especially Goal 4 (Quality Education, with the integration of GCED in 4.7) and Goal 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), provide valuable reference points for this educational endeavor.

As an educational approach designed to equip learners with the skills, values, and knowledge necessary to address these challenges, GCED is particularly relevant to the transformative vision underlying the concept described here. GCED can raise awareness of global challenges such as climate change, inequality, and conflict. It emphasizes the importance of human rights, social justice, and sustainable development. GCED's goal is to empower learners to think critically, develop intercultural competencies, and contribute ideas for solutions to global problems (UNESCO, 2024).

Transform4School draws on these principles by allowing students to experience and shape democratic processes as elected class representatives and student delegates. Through student parliaments, students are given a space to assume responsibility and make decisions that directly affect their school community. These experiences not only foster a deeper understanding of democratic principles but also raise awareness of their own role as citizens who can contribute to improving their community and global society.

Transform4School has the potential to have an impact beyond the participating schools, as evidenced by other schools' growing interest in it. The methods and approaches developed and tested in the project can serve as a model for other schools and educational institutions pursuing similar goals. By integrating GCED principles and the SDGs into everyday school life, the project lays a sustainable foundation for a more open school culture. In addition, the follow-up project aims to create a competence network and a digital expertise platform for school-based democracy and participation.

Lessons learned, experiences, and Insights.

The experiences gained during the various phases of Transform4School have prompted the project team to continuously refine methods and structures. The challenges that arose during implementation were treated as learning opportunities, allowing the approaches to be further developed and better adapted to the needs of schools and students. These experiences have also yielded valuable insights that could be relevant for future educational initiatives.

In the future, the findings from Transform4School will be compiled into a handbook offering guidance on conducting workshops on democracy, class representatives, and election commissions, as well as on organizing class councils and student parliaments. This handbook aims to contribute to a more open and democratic school culture. In addition, an online platform is under development to provide information about the Transform4School and transform2gether projects and invite people to engage in exchange. In this way, the project makes a lasting contribution to democracy and peace education. Through the follow-up project transform2gether, there is an effort to evolve from a “university project for schools” to a “school project with the university.”

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