



National Summary of STAIRS Study Visits

CROATIA

The aim of this summary is to synthesise the information collected in the study visits and focus on what is relevant for the respective country and to create a reflective report on the findings that have emerged from group discussion or the Learning Diaries. The report will be an input for the National Adaptation Plans and the European Adaptation Guidelines. Please, reflect on both study visits.

Deadline for delivering the national summary: 31st January 2021

Recommended resources for the Summary

- Learning Diaries of the participants (Request from participants by e-mail or find it in Canvas in the Modules “Learning Diaries Limerick, Ireland” and “Learning Diaries Lisbon, Portugal”)
- Padlet board of Study Visit Ireland
https://padlet.com/tka_tudaskozpont/wcn7tetulvpwejc0
- Padlet board of Study Visit Portugal
https://padlet.com/tka_tudaskozpont/oanj72ye161c5cue
- Country consultation in national teams (Study visit to Portugal):
https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/16_kh4Sai8_B3UJK7wc66GIEFyEke4vzE3_TyA0bUEmU/edit?usp=sharing
- Link to the Irish Study Visit videos here:
<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/i5eti8le1ys13nn/AAAiRVBOVuK2L4y04juVzAXfa?dl=0>
- Link to the Portuguese Study Visit videos here:
https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1ynNmTuFMWk036jiYhK5gMDVRjwa_jkV1?usp=sharing

Guiding questions and aspects to prepare the summary

The questions below can serve as a starting point to prepare your summary and they represent the minimum requirement to reflect on.

- What are the **lessons learnt by each individual participant** based on the national/individual focus during the study visits?
Members of our study visit team were representatives of various educational institutions: the Tomislav Špoljar Center for the education of students with severe difficulties (special facility), the Mechanics and Transport School (vocational school), the Faculty of Organization and Informatics and the Varaždin County (founder of educational institutions in the Region).
That's why their interests were very different, but with a common goal: how to readjust the local educational system and improve the inclusion of all groups of children into the educational system. For the representative of Tomislav Špoljar Center the main topic was the transformation of special schools into the support centres specialized for providing support to the regular educational system. Croatia has some mismatching between the needs and programs of schools for the education of teachers (especially in general and vocational education / subjects).



The most of support, the children get is in groups of students with special educational needs (gifted, talented, minorities). The main obstacle for the better situation is the unfavourable attitude linked to negative experiences and lack of necessary competent support to students and teachers. The students with mental difficulties may not be forgotten, because they have severe limits in adopting educational contents. There is a lack of flexible curricula and possibilities for additional teaching during which the students would learn what they enjoy and are capable to learn, and not torture them with the things for which they have no capability.

All students (in Portugal and Ireland) have been included into the regular educational system and huge importance has been given to the cooperation with parents, after-school activities and projects. That was explained by the education of teachers and their preparing for such kind of work, inclusive culture of the state and practice arise from these things.

In Croatia, students with disabilities after completing the educational process in primary (compulsory schools up to 15 years of age) and secondary (non-compulsory schools up to 18 years of age) often do not have the opportunity for an adequate job and involvement in community activities. Mostly the existing activities in the community are organized through specialized NGO-s, parents and teachers in the schools they attended. During the study visits, we noticed that Ireland and Portugal have recognized this problem and, through various educational initiatives, the education system creates more favourable conditions for the inclusion of students with disabilities in society and the community after graduation.

For the representatives of VET school, the most important was the fact that teachers, SEN assistants, psychologists and parents can work together, and the involvement of the whole community into the educational system is possible. Teachers can and should work together, so they have a more personalized approach and create activities tailored to the students' needs. Teachers from special schools can use their education and experiences to support colleagues in regular schools. Even, a home school teacher for the Roma population, but also for the other children with special education needs, can be engaged.

We all have to learn to listen and accept others and differences – respect diversity.

It was very useful to observe the engagement of principals, which has to be an example for inclusion at school and talk with parents in every occasion, even about some everyday things, in order to show the parents that we are partners with the same goal - to be successful for our children. Initiatives like "open days" or other programs that include parents can improve collaboration and be a good start to include them more in secondary education. One of the possibilities for improvement of educational results could be to organise learning support centres in Croatian VET schools.

Follow up and preparing children should start from kindergarten, and the teachers have to familiarise themselves with their needs, in order to prepare them for a good school start. In order to achieve the above mentioned, the emphasis should be put on individual treatment of children with difficulties and individual education plans for each such child separately. All steps and procedures needed to resolve individual cases quickly and efficiently, have to be clearly identified. Also, forming a school



integration committee (teachers, parents, principal, students) can help to put the integration on the list of priority for school goals.

Experts for career pathway planning and guidance should be included in work with children in primary schools, as well as founder (in Croatian case it is county).

Mediator (for Roma people, for solving conflicts between students and teachers, parents and students etc.) is something that we need in Croatia.

We cannot „force” the children and their parents to make them finish school if they do not want. It would be better if we concentrate on the children who want to learn and raise the level of knowledge and skills they get at school. It will be a good example for other students and provide a strong motivation to finish the school process and get occupations. We should organise support for early school leavers for when they may later decide to go back to school when they realise the importance of education.

This support includes the organization of the various channels for providing information and financial support, which must be held by the state and local / regional authorities. In addition to financial support, it is necessary to provide real jobs and cooperation with companies and entrepreneurs who will provide internships and later employment opportunities. In this way, students who have dropped out of school will have the support and vision of their future which is the motive for education.

But, for every child with special needs or who is at risk of being able to drop out of school early, an effective communication system should be established. This communication system should be established between the school, parents and other stakeholders.

For the representatives of higher education institutions, the most interesting was also the topic development of trust between schools and their principals, teachers, parents and students. The availability of teachers and school staff for parents may be the key to success. Greatest success can be achieved by encouraging collaboration rather than promoting competitiveness and a competitive atmosphere, at least in lower classes. The transfer of knowledge and skills by listening to each other and respecting other people's views and opinions can achieve a positive dialogue and thus take a step towards the desired transformation of the education system. Only creative ideas that follow the needs of stakeholders can achieve a successful transformation of the education system.

Strengthen the cooperation of higher education pedagogical institutions and harmonize them according to the needs of teachers and professionals in primary and secondary schools. It is also necessary to monitor and develop new curricula and propose changes to pedagogical standards when and if necessary. To this end, faculties must be in constant cooperation with schools and, based on analysis, adjust and improve student-teacher-parent relations.

How to develop a partnership with all relevant stakeholders in the community regarding educational system and inclusion of whole groups under threat of exclusion, was also the most important lesson for the representative of the local authority and funder of educational institutions in the region (County). The importance of constantly working on developing a partnership with all relevant stakeholders in the community was stressed during both study visits. Principals’



networking for support in solving problems of children with difficulties and other vulnerable groups could be initiated in Croatia.

- What are the **lessons learnt** that you can synthesise **at the national level**? Which of these lessons can be adapted to your specific national context? Which of these lessons cannot be adapted and why?

Activities, very similar to those we saw during the study visits, are implemented also in Croatian special schools and centres for children with severe difficulties, but also in other educational institutions, at least during the different EU funded projects. But, there are flexible enough curricula only in special schools and centres for children with severe difficulties, although primary and secondary schools (among them also VET schools) have the obligation to develop individualized programmes and educational plans for each student with any kind of difficulties. These individualized programmes and educational plans are based exclusively on the valuation of capability and determination of student's needs. Because of misunderstandings and fear of parents, students and teachers, these individualized programmes and educational plans are not used as much as they should be. Students and parents don't want to be stigmatized because of the use of this opportunity in education.

Learning support centres; psychological help for students, parents and teachers; a partnership with all relevant stakeholders in the community; education of all relevant stakeholders in inclusive education; cooperation with teachers from special schools and exchange of knowledge and experiences; mediators; common school activities with parents and the whole community, and all other good practice cases we saw during the study visits, could be implemented in Croatia too.

These activities could be implemented without much means and finance, with just a little goodwill and effort of all participants and in better coordination and planning (local/regional governmental bodies should be the main leaders).

All other cases where the state (through the responsible ministry) have to finance some activities are impossible to implement, at the moment.

Also, some of these things that we saw in Portugal cannot be implemented in our schools without the approval of the state and the Ministry of Education and Sport. For example, our teachers have very strictly defined working hours and tasks, and they cannot go to other schools and work with other teachers during their working hours.

They can do it just as a part of a private initiative, without payment.

But, our educational system needs continuous evaluation. The whole school approach encompasses multi-disciplinary team work to provide inclusion and personalized approach to a particular student. It is important that the function of a national centralized education system has to be improved in relation to the support of children, delivering equality of opportunity in Croatian schools, which is not possible without Ministry of Education and Sport, who set the standards.

As our schools educate a significant number of Roma pupils, who need to be included in our society, we have to offer them educational resources that respect their differences. One of the solution in Croatia can be to allow teachers to go to the



students' homes for consultation with parents and help students with school adaptation. It could be also for all children with difficulties.

In Croatia, there is a problem of insufficient financial support for families at risk of poverty, especially those families that have unsettled family relationships and have children with special needs and other vulnerable groups.

It is necessary to strengthen the cooperation between schools and parents in Croatia, as we have seen a good example of the Irish program that allows teachers to visit students' homes in certain situations. This certainly contributes to a better relationship of understanding between teachers and parents while benefiting the students themselves.

The cooperation of local communities and the University in order to better training of teachers, expansion of educational inclusive programs and the introduction of substitute teachers for those who are at a certain extra education, is the goal to which the Croatian education system must strive towards the model presented from Ireland and Portugal.

All this is not possible without commitment and plan at the national level.

- Please **compare your newly acquired knowledge with your practice identifying similarities and differences.**

In Croatia, we have many projects which support similar goals and try to achieve similar results as we saw in Portugal and Ireland, as for example Support for Roma students (through scholarships); Assistants and support for children with disabilities etc.

But, most of the projects are financed through EU funds, and when the financing stops, there is no sustainability (mostly) for the project results and extension of activities.

Secondary education in Croatia is not obligatory, so all activities in school depend on motivation and enthusiasm of teachers. If the teachers are good in motivating parents to be more involved in childrens education, parents will participate.

Also, the problem is that almost all solutions are most often declarative and sporadic, without systematic and permanent solutions, and that's why it is necessary to strengthen the cooperation of social welfare institutions with the education and financial system in order to provide lasting and uniform assistance to beneficiaries (children, parents, schools and professional associates).

Many things we saw during the study visits in Portugal and Ireland, we already know and have, but we don't use them as effectively as we saw Portugal and Ireland do.

- Please formulate your **preliminary plans for adaptation.**

We will conduct a survey to evaluate the knowledge, attitudes, motivation, practices and competencies of teachers to the inclusion of students with difficulties.

Based on survey results, we could suggest changed or/and new subject of learning at the Faculty for teacher education, as well as develop new possibilities for the professional development of teachers through the life long learning centres and internet platforms accessible for students, parents, teachers, principals etc. An



integrated database of available services (for example network of principals we saw during the study visit) and resources, which could be given on request in a short period of time, would also be very useful.

In Varaždin County, for example, Tomislav Špoljar - Center for the education of students with severe difficulties, could incorporate all these, and could organise the exchange of services of existing professional associates, as it does at the moment, but only based on the individual request of a school if the evaluation and opinion for a particular student are needed.

This centre can become a Center of Excellence for Inclusion Issues and be a central point of assistance to all schools in the region (Varaždin County). It would provide counselling, supervision, planning additional teacher education, collaborating with Colleges and participating in research to improve the inclusion system in schools.

Varaždin County (as funder and local authority) could suggest the implementation of pilot programme of mobile teams (like in Slovenia), and different experts for the work with children with any kind of difficulties, could come to the school and help and educate the school staff. The assumption is that all students with difficulties are included into regular schools.

Implementing good practice in Varaždin County (Croatia) would be a regional skills platform / forum for tracing early leavers, curriculum flexibility, greater promotion of the importance of the culture of education, evaluation, self-evaluation and self-responsibility for education. It is of great importance to focus on attitudes and values and promotion of an holistic approach and culture of high expectations.

Development of personal, social and emotional skills programs could be also be suggested from Varaždin County.

Initiatives as "school open to the community" and "school as a part of the community" could be initiated by each school.

The County could also develop special funds for schools for additional and special projects. A strong family support component could be developed in every school, as well as student monitoring during periods of academic interruption (holidays).

"Listening to students" and „student-centred learning approach“ should be promoted, accepted and implemented.

Develop IVET features: take care of STEM/science knowledge too, assures (different) pathway to high education (entering high education).

Preliminary plans for adaptation could also include following:

- consultation, creating a management model
- creating an intervention model, conducting research, and find sources of funding for the implementation and realization of key activities and initiatives
- build and maintain partnerships with all relevant stakeholders
- set up strong rules and also provide adequately and effectively leadership
- stronger and broader engagement and support of higher education institutions in/to primary and secondary education at the local level and beyond, as a part of their social responsibility



- education of teachers to make them ready and aware that they should compete for each student and to assure that each student attends school with joy, want to stay at schools to do homework etc. (teachers as „agents of change“).

The County could encourage secondary schools to provide more activities that include parents.

Secondary schools could provide more activities for students beside regular teaching. Those activities would be an opportunity for teachers to get closer to students and for schools to involve parents in education. The County as a founder could encourage schools to provide those kinds of activities, as well as the organisation of learning support centres at VET schools.

The County can encourage inclusion of experts for career pathway planning and guidance in primary schools and improve cooperation between primary and secondary schools. That can help students to make a better and easier decision about which secondary school they choose. The existing campaign "Choose your school" conducted by the county every year for students in the final grades of primary schools (students aged 14 to 15), can be appropriately extended to other grades.

Also, secondary schools would be better informed about students from the beginning and that is especially important for students with special needs.

Everything that includes long term funding is questionable because of political and changes in the political structure every few years in Croatia, but creating long-term stable plans will allow for their better financial sustainability.

Education of all relevant stakeholders in inclusive education has to be planned.

National summary of Varaždin County - Croatia

Considering the education system so far, the following problems, among others, have been identified in Croatia (Country report made in the beginning of the project):

1. The national centralized education system is not flexible and effective enough.
2. Lack of a quality organizational process which would clearly identify all the steps and procedures needed to resolve individual cases quickly and efficiently (improvement of IT systems, simpler and more accessible databases, improved results tracking system, etc.) and avoid conflicts or duplications of responsibilities.
3. Lack of quality, available, systematic and free of charge courses for additional education primarily for parents / guardians.
4. Insufficient financial support for families at risk of poverty (especially families with unsettled family relationships and with children with special needs, divorced parents).

All of these issues have been detected and stressed also from the Croatian participants during the study visits in Portugal and Ireland.

There are solutions to these problems that are often declarative and sporadic, not systematic and permanent.

The Croatian team agreed that the actions which could be undertaken, without much resources are as follows:



- conduct a survey and valuation of knowledge, attitudes, motivation, practices and competencies of teachers to the inclusion of students with difficulties (prepared by Tomislav Špoljar Center, conducted by Varaždin County; deadline: 6 months after the project's end)
- based on survey's results, suggest changed or/and new subject of learning at the Faculty for teacher education (Varaždin County in cooperation with Tomislav Špoljar Center, VET School and Faculty of Organization and Informatics; deadline: 6 months after the project's end)
- suggest and implement topics for the education of all relevant stakeholders in inclusive education and professional development of teachers through the LLL centres (prepared by Tomislav Špoljar Center and schools, conducted by Varaždin County; deadline: 8 months after the project's end)
- organise the exchange of services between professional associates in Tomislav Špoljar Center and schools in Varaždin County (assure the financial means, promote, inform, implement / Varaždin County in cooperation with Tomislav Špoljar Center and all schools; deadline: 18 months after the project's end)
- to initiate the creation of the Center of Excellence for inclusion in the educational system in the context of one of the schools in the county jurisdiction (deadline 12 months from the completion of the project)
- develop and implement a regional skills forum for tracing early leavers, curriculum flexibility, promotion of the culture of education, evaluation, self-evaluation and self-responsibility for education etc. (Faculty of Organization and Informatics, Varaždin County in cooperation with all schools; deadline: 18 months after the project's end)
- develop special funds for schools for additional and special projects related to inclusion (Varaždin County; deadline: 24 months after the project's end)
- prepare the project proposal and find the funding for the implementation for mobile teams consisting of different experts which will work with children with any kind of difficulties, come to the school and help and educate the school staff (Varaždin County in cooperation with Tomislav Špoljar Center, VET school and FOI; deadline: 24 months after the project's end)
- encourage secondary schools to provide more activities that include parents (VET school in cooperation with the County, deadline: 8 months after the project's end)
- encourage secondary schools to organise a learning support centre (VET school in cooperation with the Count; deadline: 18 months after the project's end)
- encourage more intensive work of experts for career pathway planning and guidance in primary schools and improve cooperation between primary and secondary schools (Varaždin County as a lead partner in cooperation with schools; deadline: 24 months after the project's end).