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Enhancing quality assurance of EDC in schools with focus on Roma issues

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This paper presents a series of practical activities implemented in Romania based on Council of Europe work on EDC as well as on local activities on Roma issues, school development and civic education implemented by the Intercultural Institute of Timisoara.

The Council of Europe has developed over the past decade a coherent approach and a collection of practical resources on improving the quality of education for democratic citizenship (EDC). Key elements of this approach are summarized in the Tool for quality assurance of EDC in schools, document available in various languages at www.coe.int/edc. Among the most significant elements of this approach we mention here:
- the distinction between quality assurance and quality control, the former being associated with the empowerment of the team of teachers in a school and the promotion of team self-evaluation;
- the definition of a set of quality indicators, covering five areas: school policy and curriculum, learning outcomes, assessment, school ethos and leadership;
- the promotion of a democratic and participatory school development planning process.

The Intercultural Institute of Timisoara (IIT) has been in close cooperation with the Council of Europe since its creation in 1992 by a group of Romanian teachers interested in promoting intercultural education, particularly in connection with civic education. Since 2000, IIT has developed and piloted an approach for developing citizenship and intercultural education based on a whole-school approach. This approach resulted perfectly compatible with the Tool published by the Council of Europe. However, it included, besides the elements strictly related to democratic citizenship, elements concerning the intercultural dimension in all areas of school life. Based on a series of local pilot experiences, elements of this approach were integrated with the support of the Romanian Ministry of Education in a national training programme for members of school boards, with special attention to measures for preventing and combating school violence.

Without doubt, the issues concerning the Roma and the relations between Roma and non-Roma are among the most challenging ones confronting the Romanian society and this is clearly reflected also in education. The Intercultural Institute of Timisoara has been among the pioneers who addressed topics like the training of teachers working with Roma children and training of Roma school mediators, combating prejudice and discrimination against Roma, the empowerment of the civil society inside Roma communities and particularly the

support for young Roma to become involved in civil society organizations, the improvement of the relations of Roma with public authorities or the image of Roma in the media.

The evaluation of the work in schools applying the principles promoted in the Tool for QA of EDC revealed a limited medium-term impact and a superficial approach, often characterised by avoiding sensitive and difficult issues, including the avoidance of issues related to Roma. In the same time, strong anti-Roma attitudes remain present in the schools, among students, parents and teachers, reflecting a widespread anti-gypsyism proven by various studies for the whole Romanian society. We therefore concluded that in order to overcome these challenges, besides the use of a participatory planning for integrating the principles of democratic citizenship and the intercultural approach in school life, it is necessary to offer a practical tool to stimulate constructive debates on the most sensitive topics, those related to Roma.

For this purpose, the Intercultural Institute proposed to adapt a method of civic education developed by the Center for Civic Education (USA) and promoted in Romania in the framework of the CIVITAS network. The method involves activities over a period of around three months with a class of students who selects a community issue and propose a public policy to address it. This adaptation resulted in a structured process named: "Students propose solutions to the problems of the Roma communities", with groups of students focusing on proposing a public policy to address a specific problem of the local Roma community, based on a process of research and debate involving interactions with members of the Roma community, with staff of local public institutions and with other local stakeholders. The involvement of heads of schools and of a team of teachers from each school assures effective connection with a broader QA-based school development process. More precisely, the students go together through the following steps:

- Mapping of the problems faced by Roma people in their local community
- Identifying a problem that requires a public policy solution
- Examining and evaluating alternative solutions
- Developing a proposed public policy solution
- Developing an action plan to get the public policy adopted by the authorities
- Organising a public event to present their proposal

Teams from all participating schools participate to a joint public event where they present their projects and learn about the projects developed by the others. In the pilot phase, in 2011, this public event took place at the Romanian Parliament.

The implementation of the project required the training of a team of teachers from each school on the methodology, including EDC, intercultural education and quality assurance topics. The activities implemented at local level were monitored through an online platform where teachers were asked to post information about their progress. In most cases they were done as extracurricular activities but also connected with elements in the curriculum, mainly from the curricular area man and society.

The involvement of the head teachers in the public events was meant to stimulate a reflection in each school on how the results obtained can be integrated in a larger school policy.

The use of this approach was appreciated by teachers for several reasons:
- It provides a concrete complex activity to focus on, thus facilitating planning
- It is a method both structured and open in terms of content
- It has a wide visibility at school level and beyond
- It brings local community closer to school
- It attracts interest and generates constructive debate

Overall, the method offers rich opportunities for reflection and stimulates further participatory planning and action for improving the quality of EDC and intercultural education. Most of the classes involved in the pilot phase were mixed classes and the activities allowed Roma students to cooperate with non-Roma colleagues in understanding the problems that Roma communities are facing, as well as in raising the awareness of rights.