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Institute for Human Rights

Findings and Recommendations from High School Student Discussions on Inclusive Education

1. BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

Within the framework of the project "Youth Activism for an Inclusive Society", implemented as part of "EU Support for Confidence Building in the Western Balkans" (funded by the European Union and implemented by UNDP), the Institute for Human Rights (IHR) organized a series of student discussion forums on the topic "Inclusive Education."

The discussions were held with high school students from the following schools:

- SUGS "Dimitar Vlahov", Skopje (16 April 2024)
- SMUGS "Dr. Panče Karagjozov", Skopje (25 April 2024)
- OSMU "Nikola Štejn", Tetovo (26 April 2024)
- SOU "Pero Nakov", Kumanovo (10 May 2024)

Instruction in these schools is conducted in Macedonian, Albanian, and, in some cases, Turkish. The overall objective of the discussions was to encourage students to critically reflect on the benefits and challenges of education in a multiethnic environment, and to share ideas for initiatives that promote diversity, inclusion, and interethnic dialogue.

Across all discussions, a total of over 100 students participated, representing Macedonian, Albanian, Turkish, Roma, Bosniak, and other ethnic communities. All sessions were facilitated by trained moderators of different ethnic backgrounds, with consecutive interpretation provided where needed.

2. METHODOLOGY

The discussions were conducted in an interactive format, combining group exercises, guided dialogue, and open discussion. Students were encouraged to:

- Define key concepts such as diversity and inclusion
- Share personal experiences related to interethnic interaction
- Identify barriers to inclusion in their schools
- Propose practical solutions and recommendations

3. KEY FINDINGS

3.1. Interethnic Interaction and Communication

Across all schools, students emphasized that direct interaction significantly reduces stereotypes. Even when students did not previously know one another or did not speak the same language, facilitated activities created a positive atmosphere and revealed shared interests and common experiences.

However, interaction remains limited and inconsistent. In some schools, students are physically separated into different floors or buildings, sometimes up to 30 minutes apart on foot. In others, separation occurs through different shifts or language-based class divisions. Joint activities are rare, with some students reporting only two or three shared activities over their entire secondary education.

Students noted that segregation (whether physical, organizational, or linguistic) reinforces feelings of distance and "otherness."

3.2. Language as Both Identity and Barrier

Language was consistently identified as the most significant barrier to communication. Albanian, Macedonian, and Turkish-speaking students often have limited opportunities to learn each other's languages. Many students expressed a strong willingness to learn the language of another ethnic group if such courses were offered as electives. At the same time, stereotypes persist, including beliefs that learning another language is unnecessary or undesirable.

Students widely agreed that language learning could play a key role in reducing prejudice and improving everyday communication, similar to how foreign languages like English are learned.

3.3. Quality and Effectiveness of Joint Activities

While joint activities do exist in some schools, students frequently described them as ineffective or symbolic. For example, debates conducted in multiple languages lose momentum due to translation delays. Moreover, events such as fashion shows or celebrations often involve joint participation only on the final day, while preparation remains segregated. Sports activities were repeatedly highlighted as the most successful form of inclusion, as teamwork naturally overrides ethnic divisions.

Students expressed a desire for more frequent, well-designed activities that require real cooperation rather than parallel participation.

3.4. School Organization and Institutional Role

Students identified school administration, teachers, and principals as key actors in either enabling or hindering inclusion. Common concerns centered on the limited availability of communication channels beyond individual classes, which often resulted in information being shared informally, inconsistently, or unevenly among students. Many participants expressed the perception that

students' ideas, suggestions, and voices are not sufficiently valued within the school system, leading to feelings of exclusion and disengagement from decision-making processes. Additionally, there was a prevailing concern that some school staff members avoid organizing joint activities due to fear that interethnic interaction could lead to misunderstandings or conflict, a stance that ultimately discourages engagement and reinforces separation rather than fostering dialogue and cooperation.

At the same time, students acknowledged their own responsibility to be more proactive and open to cooperation.

3.5. School Climate, Safety, and Discrimination

Most students reported that discrimination and bullying are not widespread, particularly compared to primary school experiences. However, isolated cases of ethnic- or religion-based discrimination were reported. Some students felt that teachers and school staff lack effective mechanisms to respond, while existing reporting and support systems were perceived as weak or unclear.

When asked to rate inclusion in their schools on a scale of 1 to 10, students' responses ranged from 4 to 7, indicating moderate progress but substantial room for improvement.

4. STUDENTS' RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the discussions across all four schools, several consolidated recommendations emerged.

- Increase Extracurricular Integration

There is a strong need to increase extracurricular integration by organizing more frequent joint activities such as sports, arts, cultural workshops, and science projects. Particular emphasis should be placed on activities in which language does not represent a primary barrier, including creative and team-based initiatives that naturally encourage interaction and cooperation among students from different ethnic backgrounds.

- Improve the Quality of Existing Joint Activities

The quality of existing joint activities should be improved by ensuring that both the preparation and implementation phases are carried out collectively rather than separately. Activities should be intentionally designed to require cooperation and sustained interaction, as this approach fosters a deeper sense of connection and shared responsibility among participants.

❖ Address Physical and Organizational Separation

Students should be encouraged to regularly visit and use all school facilities in order to strengthen the perception of belonging to a single school community. Where possible, schools should reconsider shift schedules and class organization to allow for increased contact and interaction among students who study in different languages.

❖ Introduce Language Learning Opportunities

Offering elective courses in the languages spoken by students, including Albanian, Macedonian, Turkish, and Romani, would help reduce communication barriers and promote mutual understanding. Multilingualism should be actively promoted as a practical skill and a shared value rather than being perceived as a threat to individual or collective identity.

❖ Strengthen Communication and Student Participation

Schools should establish inclusive, school-wide communication platforms that ensure equal access to information. Creating safe spaces where students can openly express concerns and propose initiatives would further enhance engagement, while strengthening student representation and ensuring follow-up on student proposals would help build trust and accountability.

❖ Build Institutional Capacity for Inclusion

Building institutional capacity for inclusion is crucial. This includes providing training for teachers and school staff on diversity management, conflict prevention, and effective responses to discrimination. Schools should encourage open discussions on stereotypes, identity, and coexistence, and promote a shared sense of responsibility for inclusion among students, teachers, and school leadership alike.

5. CONCLUSION

The discussions revealed that young people are far more open to inclusion and cooperation than commonly assumed. While structural, linguistic, and institutional barriers persist, students clearly recognize shared interests, express readiness for change, and propose concrete, achievable solutions.

Inclusive education, as voiced by students themselves, is not merely about studying in the same building, it is about learning together, interacting meaningfully, and being equally valued. With stronger institutional support and genuine student participation, schools can become powerful spaces for building trust and an inclusive society.

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