# 5. Action Research in Croatia

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## 5.1. Research context

The Centre for Peace, Nonviolence and Human Rights, Osijek has been the partner organisation in Croatia in the implementation of this project and action research. The centre is a civil society association founded in 1992 as a non-violent response to the violence of war raging in Croatia. Since its nascent phase, it has been working, amongst other, with teachers and teaching professionals, and has participated in numerous national and international projects dealing with peace education. There are many books, manuals and teaching materials that testify to the centre's continuous contribution in this field. In short, the work of the centre, from the beginning, has been focused on:

> (...) human rights, equality, peace, pluralism and civil society. Two of its major projects are: The Promotion of Democracy and Civil Society, and Education for Peace Building and Psychosocial Development of Individuals and the Community in Eastern Slavonia and Danube Area – Creative Workshops. The former focuses on preparing citizens for monitoring elections and non-partisan campaigns and on assisting civil activists in the development of non-governmental sector and cross-border co-operation. The latter project was initiated in 1992 with the aim of assisting displaced teachers and children, including returnees, to overcome their traumatic experiences of war through workshops and seminars in which they learned the techniques of trauma management and self-empowerment. A long-term objective was to promote a culture of peace and non-violence as a prerequisite for a stable society. The programme is a combination of educational and interventionist approaches. The educational component is realised in terms of the acquisition of new values and skills in workshops.

The Centre for Peace joined this project because it agreed with its overall assumptions: each school, and its setting, is unique, and thus each school or each stakeholder has to develop its own strategies for addressing challenges to peace. The centre also supported the idea that the intervention should be done through action research: action research is action-oriented, but reflective as well; it is participatory and grassroots-based. It discloses power relations, gives power to the individual and fosters collaboration and joint actions.

Since this research addresses the realities of different learning communities, what follows is a brief review of the primary education system in Croatia.

### 5.1.1. Education in Croatia

Primary schools are mostly founded by the units of local self-government and the towns. In private primary schools, alternative primary education is available according to special pedagogical principles (Waldorf, Montessori). Eight-year primary education in the Republic of Croatia is compulsory and free for all children from the age of six to 15. Education of children with developmental difficulties is conducted in 21 special institutions. Education of the representatives of national minorities is car-

ried out in 24 primary schools, where the programme is conducted in the language and writing of the minority, while 61 primary schools have classes with a programme conducted in the language and writing of the national minority.

Primary schooling is divided into two levels: grade 1 to grade four, with one teacher per class focusing on all subjects, and from the fifth grade onwards with specialised teachers for each subject.

Public education in Croatia is subsidised by the Ministry of Science and Education, which also controls the operation of the school system and introduces regulations to implement legislative acts. The school is run by a school board, composed of representatives of school employees, parents and the superintendent (local/regional self-government unit). The board decides on and controls the implementation of annual curricula in each school. The head teacher's role is managerial and administrative. Schools also have parent and pupil councils with an advisory role.

Critiques point out that the Croatian government spends only 4.8% of its GDP on education (European average 4.7%). Thus, teachers are underpaid and schools lack money even for their most basic needs.

## 5.1.2. Socio-political context of the project implementation

In the public arena, the project implementation period was marked by harsh and to a large extent political (rather than expert) public debate about the long-awaited curricular reform, currently in its experimental phase. Both pupils and teachers are burdened with an outdated curriculum in which the focus is placed on rote-learning, i.e. reproduction of facts from textbooks rather than on acquiring key competences. As in many other European countries, the reported cases of peer violence are on the rise each year, as stated by the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Croatia in February 2018.

Other than being an important part of the migrant route to Schengen countries, Croatia, apart from its capital, Zagreb, does not face serious challenges with regard to successful societal and educational integration of refugees and migrants, but this is largely due to a low number of refugees and migrants wanting to stay in Croatia. However, Croatia has still a long way to go when it comes to resolving the legacy of the war, as the community still has not undergone a thorough social reconstruction, and, most of all, in building its civil society which was virtually non-existent just several decades ago.

After the war, huge amounts of international money were poured into most of the former Yugoslav states, under the label of 'democratization'. Part of that money went to civil society organisations to work, among others, with educators. And this is how peace education or education for nonviolence was introduced to Croatian schools. Unlike in some other post-socialist European countries that did not have armed conflict, there is virtually no teacher or educator in Croatia who has not been trained in nonviolence. Having said that, the civil society organisations in Croatia still face a huge level of distrust from both the population at large and from formal institutions, schools included. For a long time, they were being paid by foreign governments, which resulted in distrust. This makes it hard for a civil society organisation in Croatia to engage in serious and continuous work with schools. To attend a training, a seminar – that is fine, but to engage in an in-depth process of discussing relationships, school structure and power relations in a school and in a school community, that seemed virtually impossible.

## 5.1.3. How and why we decided to implement LCP in Ivan Goran Kovačić primary school in Vrbovsko

The Centre for Peace, Nonviolence and Human Rights – Osijek established in 2009 an award for the promotion of peace-making, nonviolence and human rights in honour of one of its founders, peace

activist and humanist Krunoslav Sukić. In 2015, the centre also introduced the *Certificate of Appreciation – Peacemaking School*, awarded to primary and secondary schools which promote education for nonviolent conflict management and active citizenship and solidary participation on the improvement of life of their school and local community. The laureate of this certificate in 2016 was the Ivan Goran Kovačić Primary School in Vrbovsko.

Given the short intervention time (only one school year) to implement such a structural process, we decided not to pilot the process in more challenging areas of Croatia, such as eastern Croatia, where the centre is also situated. We opted for a school that experiences interethnic challenges related to the recent war and, unlike eastern Croatia, has kept its minority population numbers almost at the same level as before the war, which is quite a rarity in Croatia. Also, Vrbovsko is one of the rare 'peace pockets' in Croatia: an area inhabited by both Serbs and Croats in which war didn't take place, because its population decided not to fight each other (although some of them participated in armed conflicts in other parts of Croatia).

## 5.1.4. Geographic and demographic data

Vrbovsko is situated in the far east of Gorski Kotar in Primorje-Gorski Kotar County. With its 280 square kilometres area, the Vrbovsko municipality covers 60 villages and has 5,076 inhabitants. In the north, it borders with Slovenia. The geographical position of Vrbovsko, halfway between Zagreb and Rijeka, is of extreme importance for the local economy.
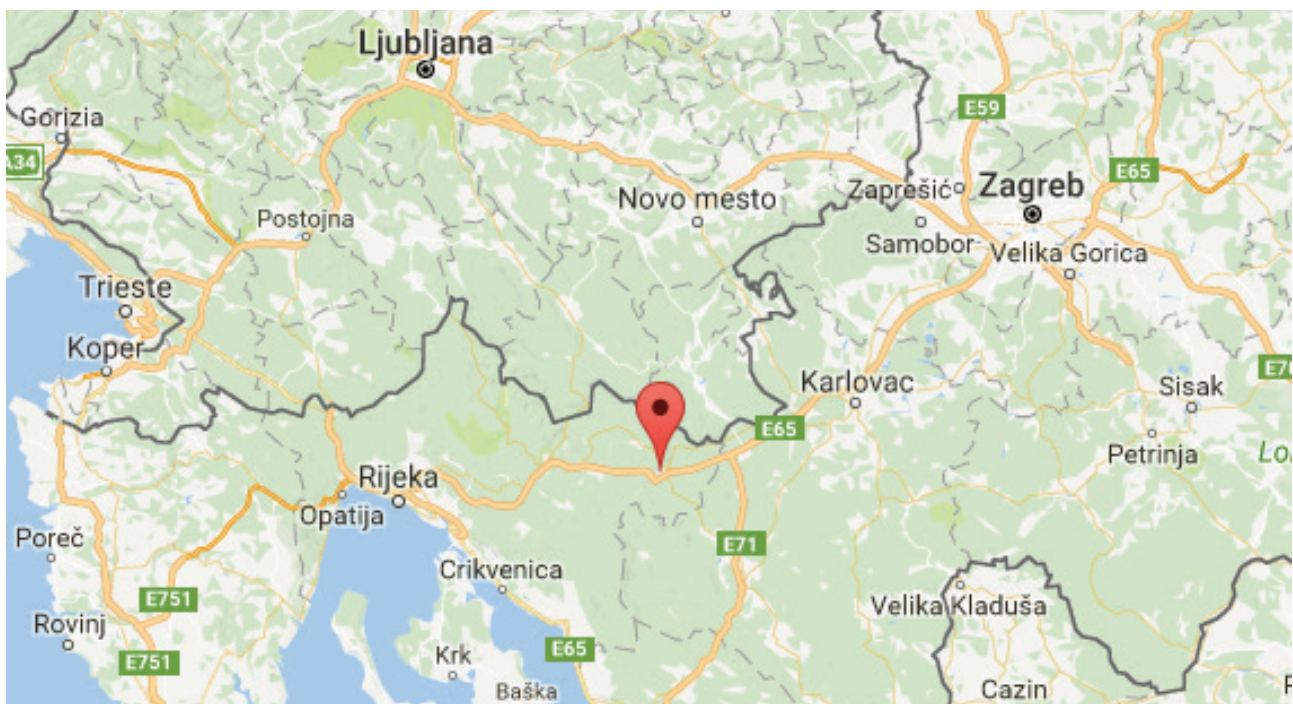


Location of Vrbovsko in Croatia

According to the last census (2011), there are 5,076 people living in Vrbovsko, of whom 60.15% are Croats, 35.22% Serbs and 4.63% 'other'; 57.01% of the population are Catholics, 35.34% Orthodox and 7.65% 'other'. The mother tongue of 95.49% of the population is Croatian.

The gender structure of the population of the town of Vrbovsko is the same as in other Croatian regions (prevailing female population). Demographic features include a low birth rate, high mortality, a natural decline in population and a negative migration balance.

The most important industry is the wood industry. Abundant forests have resulted in many sawmills. The economic crisis and the recession affecting Croatia particularly affected this area, especially small and medium-sized businesses. Negative economic factors have risen to the fore through a devastated economy. This has largely contributed to the depopulation of the area, especially by young people.

## 5.1.5. About the school

Ivan Goran Kovačić Primary School consists of one central primary school located in Vrbovsko and seven branch schools under its auspices – in Severin na Kupi, Moravice, Senjsko, Jablan, Gomirje, Lukovdol, Veliki Jadrč. The schools in Vrbovsko, Severin na Kupi, Moravice enrol pupils from first to eighth grade, while the other schools only have pupils from first to fourth grade. The central school in Vrbovsko and the branch schools have a total of 36 classrooms (1,871m2), two sports halls (1,417m2) and four sports courts (2,864m2).

The school starts at 07:30 or 8:00 and ends at 12:35. In two branch schools, after-school care is organised for pupils who travel by public transportation to school and back.

The school engages 65 employees. Apart from 43 teachers, it employs also a headmaster, a pedagogue, a SEN educationalist, two librarians, school secretary, accountant, cooks, janitors, and cleaning and maintenance personnel.

Teacher turnover rates are low. Teachers usually spend most of their work time in one school. Most have a fixed-term contract and are full-time employees. However, many work in 2-3 different schools (main and branch schools).

All classrooms are equipped with basic teaching materials and equipment, which are being acquired and renewed in accordance with financial circumstances. The school has outdated IT equipment, and is applying for donations through different projects. Currently, the school owns 43 computers.

The school has three libraries: one in the central school and two in two branch schools. In total, they have 7,611 books and other library material. School libraries organise and run various projects, such as 'We all read in our family' – developing reading skills and love of reading in a family circle, 'Gorani – with a book in their hand' – developing reading competences and development of social skills, Biblioclub, Treasure Bag, My First Book, Reading Knows No Frontiers, visiting book fairs, etc.

The school offers a wide array of before and after school activities aimed at fostering pupils' talents and interests in various areas. It has a drama group, theatre group, literary and journalism group, art group, photography group, creative group, ecology group, heritage group, school choir, brass band, firefighters, Red Cross group, etc. The school's sports club gathers children around different sports, such as football, handball, volleyball and chess.

A total of 45% of pupils and teachers are of Serbian nationality and 55% are Croats. Apart from providing education in the Serbian language and script, the school runs different interethnic and interreligious projects aimed at fostering tolerance in the learning community (such as the project 'Cyrillic and Latin Alphabet – Unity in Variety', in which pupils learn how to write in the Cyrillic alphabet, irrespective of their nationality; optional classes of three catechisms – Catholic, Orthodox and Baptist, which have resulted in visits to each other's place of worship, emphasizing the value and significance of a mutual sacred heritage).

The school mediation centre was founded nine years ago and all teachers, pupils and their parents, as well as mediator-trainers, have completed the specialist programme for practising mediation. The school also runs programmes for nonviolent conflict resolution as well as prevention of violence in youth relationships for 7th and 8th grade pupils.

### 5.1.6. People relevant to the research

The research was conducted in close planning and cooperation with project partners: University of Gothenburg (SE), Evens Foundation (BE), ARC (UK), Place Identity Gr (EL) and University of Barcelona (ES). The group met regularly both in person as well as online to design the research, set the principles and aims, and reflect and consult throughout the research implementation. It was a group of critical friends.

Teachers and other school staff, pupils, parents from the Ivan Goran Kovačić school in Vrbovsko and members of their learning community were at the heart of the research. They participated in training events, seminars and workshops, an action research planning session, a reflection session and two evaluation sessions. We exchanged numerous emails and had phone conversations and Skype talks. We learned from them tremendously.

Dr Klara Bilić Meštrić of the University of Zagreb trained trainers and project partners how to plan and deliver action research. She also conducted training and reflection sessions with the teachers from the school in Vrbovsko. She is our critical friend and also a critical friend of the teachers from Vrbovsko, who are writing their own action researches about the project.

Dr Sara Clarke-Habibi of the University of Cambridge conducted an external evaluation of the process and made two evaluation visits to Vrbovsko. Discussions with her and reflections on the project enriched our understanding.

Dr Valerija Barada of the University of Zadar provided valuable inputs about the literature in the field of sociology, relating to the culture of peace in multi-ethnic communities.

## 5.2. Action research process

In order to plan, act, monitor and reflect on the process, qualitative data were collected; namely, correspondence with critical friends, workshop/training materials and evaluations, images, notes from reflection sessions, audio recording from focus groups and reflection session, teachers' action research accounts, reports and the results of participatory observation.

The focus of this research was on establishing a process that would:

1. introduce the school to the concept of the Learning Communities for Peace and understanding of its main principles and values
2. introduce the school to action research as a method of reflective action and leading them through their own action research
3. test to what extent an outsider to a learning community for peace, in this case, a civil society organisation, can cooperate with a school to bring about this process

It is these three aims that we will describe and analyse in the rest of this report. The steps taken in the realisation of these goals were manifold and expanded over a period of two years.

Key steps taken to achieve goals

| First encounter with the school | Osijek, December 2016 |
|---|---|
| Joint staff training of project partners | Antwerp, February 2017 |
| Setting a framework of the school's LCP | Osijek, April 2017 |
| European learning communities for peace LAB – joint teacher training | Zadar, April 2017 |
| Conducting the whole-school analysis of needs and challenges | Vrbovsko, May/June 2017 |
| Workshop about action research, designing an action research plan | Vrbovsko, July 2017 |
| Implementation of the action research plan | Vrbovsko, September 2017-September 2018 |
| A 5-day initial impact evaluation visit of University of Cambridge researcher | Vrbovsko, November 2017 |
| Reflection and further planning by partners at the project partner meeting | Athens, March 2018 |
| Second impact evaluation visit of University of Cambridge researcher | Vrbovsko, October 2018 |
| Reflection on action research process; workshop on how to write an action research account | Vrbovsko, October 2018 |

In the report that follows, we will focus on the actions that are Vrbovsko-specific and not covered by other documents of the LCP project, i.e. first encounter with the school, setting a framework, analysis of needs and challenges, workshop on action research and the action research plan as well as its implementation (as related to our goals), and reflection on action research process.

## 5.2.1. Introducing the school to the LCP concept

The process extended over a two-year time span. It started in December 2016, when the school was first approached to participate in this experimental project. The first encounter took place at our annual ceremony of the Krunoslav Sukić Award for the Promotion of Peace-Making, Nonviolence and Human Rights, at which the school from Vrbovsko was awarded with a Peacemaking School Recognition. Head teacher Anton Burić and pedagogue Tanja Jakovac expressed an initial interest in participating in the project.

At our project's joint staff training (Antwerp, February 2017), the project partners discussed how to engage with schools and the main content and strategies of our action research. This training set milestones for our future work with the school in Croatia.

A great opportunity to present the project and its basic features was the school's five-day study visit to Osijek, in April 2017. The group of 25 people who attended a one-day introductory workshop to LCP was composed of both adults (teachers, parents, school administration) and pupils (11-14 year-olds) in equal numbers; this was already a big advantage that coincided with the main principles of LCP – a bottom-up approach and equal participation of all stakeholders of a learning community. The challenge for us as facilitators was to prepare process and materials that would be understandable and suitable for both adults and children.

Children from Ivan Goran Kovačić primary school at 7 March 2017 workshop

The facilitators did not start with presenting the project or with defining the key terms; they rather let the group, divided into smaller mixed groups, define what a 'learning community' and 'peace' meant for them, and then to come to a conclusion about what 'a learning community for peace' meant for this particular school. T*hey came to this definition: A school community consists of a number of people and to build peace in a learning community means to 'build more quality relationships among stakeholders of a learning community'* (group discussion, 7 March 2017).
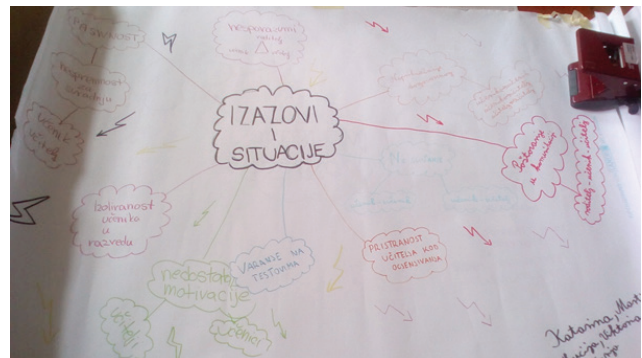


Presentation from workshop with mixed group from Vrbovsko, 7 April 2017

Afterwards, the group broke up into smaller groups to list the strengths and challenges of the school in their actions to build quality relationships in their learning community. After the presentations, the strengths and challenges were thoroughly discussed. The adults and children had different perspectives and opinions about these issues, and the discussion showed that there were many misunderstandings. For example, one teacher said: "*Parents rarely come to parent-teacher meetings or to individual consultations, and when they come, they are mostly passive. They lack interest in what is going on in the school and they show little interest in their child's progress.*" The reaction of pupils to these words was quite strong. They explained that their parents were very busy; sometimes they had two jobs in order to make ends meet; they had to take care of their younger children or work on the farm. In addition, the pupils said that, because of the scattered nature of the dwellings in the mountain area surrounding the school, parents found it hard to travel to school.

Furthermore, one teacher, also a parent, explained that parents still needed to learn how to engage with a school, because they (especially the older generation) tended to be respectful and quiet in communicating with the school staff. This conversation itself was a big learning point for all involved. It demonstrates how important it is to discuss challenges in mixed groups and from different perspectives. This part of the workshop ended with the conclusion about the main strengths and challenges.

The next task was to list all activities and cooperation projects that the school implements and are related to improving relationships in the community, whether in the school or in cooperation with other schools, local or regional government, civil society organizations, religious organisations, etc. Since the school has, apart from the school in Vrbovsko, seven branch schools, the group was now divided into smaller groups according to the location of their school. The lists that they developed were quite extensive, which indicated how proactive the school already was, and its great communication with community stakeholders.

Only after this exercise were participants introduced to the project itself, its European dimension and milestones. Facilitators explained that, based on the elicited definitions of their learning community for peace, defined challenges and strengths as well as key stakeholders in their community, they were going to define an action plan to be implemented in one school year in order to create better relations within their learning community. They were given guiding principles to lead and participate in the process: a whole-school and bottom-up approach, which should be participatory, inclusive, reflective and process-oriented.

The introduction to the process also included a European LCP LAB – joint teacher training, in April 2017 in Zadar. Four representatives from each European school participating in the project, this time only teachers and administrative staff, took part in a two-day training. Facilitators of the training were representatives of partner organisations. One of the greatest challenges we faced in preparing the workshop was in clarifying the role of two different research studies in the project: action research and impact evaluation. During the process in Zadar, the teachers from different European schools got to know each other and the range of different school realities, which was one of the most important benefits of this event, as well as gaining a European perspective on the idea and the process. This is also where teachers were introduced for the first time to Visual Voices, an evaluation tool used by the University of Cambridge to evaluate the impact of the conducted process.

Excerpt from participants' evaluation of the LCP LAB (prepared by Dave Warren)

*6. What did you like most about the training, what worked well?*

| Candidate Identifiers | Response |
|---|---|
| a. | To get to know new people. |
| b. | i) Meeting other schools and learning from each other, ii) the action research. |
| c. | Many teachers from other countries and establishing relationships across Europe. |
| d. | Collaborative and thoughtful training, polite and respectful atmosphere, more time needed to write our own ideas, 3 days with 'brain-breaks' would have been a more comfortable timeline. |
| e. | Meeting other teams and learning about our similarities and challenges. |

| f. | Amazing opportunity to meet teachers & experts from all over the world; great and clear info; really motivating; open to questioning and adapting. |
| --- | --- |
| g. | Information about the project; making contact with other schools; thinking about the project (challenges) in our school community. |
| h. | I learn more about school systems in other countries and issues and problems they have.  I heard some good ideas that I can use at my school.  Communication with others very well. |
| i. | Although at the beginning it was challenging, I found interacting with others interesting and helpful.  I kind of 'overcame myself'. |
| j. | I liked the strange and familiar exercise. Because of our diversities, we all look through different eyes on the world around us. I also liked the Visual Voices examples. I gathered very useful information from other schools and we worked well as teams regardless of the different countries that we came from. |
| k. | It was very well thought out and encouraging. We had real opportunities to work with others from different cultures. |
| l. | First I like getting to know each other.  The most about the training is learning community for peace. I also liked the example from Spain and I think everything worked well, especially exchange of knowledge. |
| m. | Collaborating with other groups. |
| n. | I like the differences, that you both listen, exercise, discuss and reflect. The hardest part is when someone speaks too fast  and it would be nice to have some slides on paper, so you can write some notes on them during listening. |
| o. | Good to work together and share. |

Although the school had already defined its key challenges and strengths in building an LCP at the workshop in Osijek in March 2017, it took 'the-whole-school-approach principle' seriously: it developed a questionnaire with questions about the school's challenges relating to building better relations and distributed it to all school staff, children and parents throughout May and June 2017. This process was not new to the school. In fact, similar surveys were conducted at the end of each school year in order to plan their next year's curriculum, teachers' professional development and school investments.

### 5.2.2. Introducing the school to action research and leading it through the research

Based on the collected data and key challenges from all examinees, a smaller group, composed of 10 teachers, including the head teacher and pedagogue, met in Vrbovsko on 5 and 6 July 2017 to develop an action research plan. The workshop was run by Dr Klara Bilić Meštrić of the University of Zagreb, who also conducted a preparation of trainers in the area of action research before the Zadar LCP LAB.

The process of preparing teachers for the action plan was partly organic, being based on their actual needs and some of the actions that had already been started in school. But it also involved an element of a top-down approach, as we came with our own values in this project and ideas on which direction it should go, particularly those concerning the project goals, bearing in mind the very context in which the school is placed (a mixed community and a nonviolent history in what was otherwise a war-torn country). After a five-hour session, the school staff came with a draft action plan, on which

we worked together in the weeks that followed in order to produce the final version. An abbreviated version of the final action plan is shown below.

Outline of final action plan

| 1. Challenges | *What are the challenges of building better relationships in and around school?* | 1ˢᵗ **challenge**: **Internal and external school space is not of satisfactory quality.** The outdoor space of the school is underused for the needs of the school and the community (outdoor classroom, lack of leisure facilities). Insufficient school equipment to achieve high-quality teaching. 2ⁿᵈ **challenge**: **Insufficient information flow between pupils, teachers and parents.** |
|---|---|---|
| 2. Starting values | *Why is building better relationships in and out of school important to us?* *What does it mean to my pupils? Parents? Colleagues?* *How can I improve our work through building better relationships?* | 1. **By jointly building and using the indoor and outdoor spaces of the school, we will create better interrelationships.** <br>• What matters to us is the school equipment – it leads to maximum use of our teaching potential. <br>• We need to be more motivated in order to motivate pupils better. <br>• Building trust between teachers, pupils and parents that contributes to better communication. <br>• Transparent communication of participants in the educational process. |
| 3. Research questions | *What can we do with the challenges we are facing? How can we contribute to address the challenge?* | 1. **How use the outdoor spaces of the school for teaching purposes?** <br>• How use outdoor space for the needs of children and citizens? <br>• How use outdoor space for cultural and public events? <br>• How improve the internal equipment of the school to improve the quality of teaching? <br>• How raise funds for landscaping? <br>• How better connect with branch schools and involve them in school activities? <br>• How balance interests? <br>• How motivate branch school teachers to become more involved in school projects? <br>• How can we build better mutual trust between pupils and teachers? <br>• How can we build better mutual trust between teachers and parents? <br>• How can we get parents to come to school parent-teacher meetings? <br>• How can we get parents involved in school projects? |

| 4. Aims of the research | *What do we want to achieve?* | **1st overall objective**: **Improve the material and spatial conditions of the school in collaboration with parents and the local community.**<br><br>Specific objectives:<br><br>● Equip IT offices and schools (Ministry of Education equipment of the school?)<br>● Use and tidy up the school's outdoor space and environment to enhance the quality of teaching and connect the school with its context (the local community).<br><br>**2nd overall objective**: **Enable better communication between pupils, teachers and parents.**<br><br>● Specific objectives:<br>● Introduce e-class registers to all schools<br>● Facilitate communication between stakeholders through social networks<br>● Conduct training in communication skills with teachers<br>Organise team meetings of teachers for the purposes of team-building |
|---|---|---|
| 5. Research criteria | *How do we know if we have achieved the goals? Which criteria needed to be met?* | ● Analysis of the quality and quantity of the joint activities<br>● Satisfaction levels of the branch-school pupils and teachers<br>● Frequency of activities in the school surroundings<br>● Number of activities, cooperation and number of participants<br>● More frequent cooperation with parents<br>● New learning and cooperation spaces<br>● Better flow of information<br>● Satisfaction with the relationships of all participants in the educational process<br>● Better cooperation with the local community |

| 6. Activities | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | 6.1. What activities are we going to implement in order to achieve our goals? | 1. Organising working groups<br>2. Acquiring the funds to conduct activities<br>3. Creating a plan to observe activities and reflection<br>4. Keeping a research journa | Ministry of Science and Education; LCP, The Park of Good Intentions; History Lane; Educational Path |
| | 6.2. What will we read? (topic-related professional and scientific literature) | | |
| | 6.2. What activities do we plan with colleagues, critical friends? Who are they? | | |
| | 6.3. What activities do we plan with our pupils? | 1st challenge – Activities:<br>• Acquisition of IT equipment | Barbara Turk Čop |
| | | • Cabinet refurbishing | Vesna Trope |
| | | • Construction and renovation of outdoor classroom in a school garden in Vrbovsko | Anton Burić |
| | | • Designing an educational trail at Severin a Kupi Primary School from the school to Frankopan Castle | Tihana Ljubojević – history teacher and Vojin Božović – Local council Severin na Kupi |
| | | • Designing an educational trail of medical plants in school garden | |
| | | • Labelling wild plants in school garden | |
| | 6.4 What activities do we plan with parents? | 2nd challenge – Activities | |
| | 6.5. What activities do we plan with the local community? | • Gain approval from Parents and Teachers Council and School Board to launch the school Facebook page | Nusreta Murtić |
| | | • Designing and administering school Facebook page | Alenka Javor |
| | | • Choosing and using social networks to establish better communication between parents | Jasmina Krakar |
| | | • Introduction of e-class registers to all schools | Viktorija Samsa |
| | | • Examining the need to conduct communication skills training | All teachers |
| | | • Conducting communication skills training | Tanja Jakovac |
| | | • Performing joint team-building activities | All teachers |

Additional activities:

- Involve branch schools in joint activities
- Increase the number of joint activities
- Transfer some activities to branch schools (school councils, celebrations)
- Literary meetings, celebrations, sport competition, joint research, A school bag full of culture project
- Ask parents for help with transfer when taking pupils to joint gatherings
- Involve parents, professionals in specific fields in educational programmes
- Continue with existing activities with Ministry of Interior, fire brigade, city library and religious associations, get involved in activities with Red Cross
- Contact local private entrepreneurs to donate materials for outdoor classrooms
- Contact parents to help with the construction of these classrooms, with pupils
- Create new workshops for the new school year
- Ask parents to participate in school celebrations and competitions
- Deliver a presentation for parents about what we do in school, at parents' meetings, school open doors
- Themes across curriculum
- Take part in cultural events in city as part of City Day, Pumpkin Festival, St Martin's Day ...
- Organise performances and concerts
- Find critical friends: mutual, defectologist, City Library, KUD Frankopan, TZ Vrbovsko
- Provide books in the gazebo
- Read relevant scientific and professional topic-related literature

| 7. Data | What are the data in our research? How will we collect them? | 1. Research journals, photographs, themes across the curriculum, critical friends' comments, study for the gazebo 2. Reflection on the satisfaction levels regarding inclusion 3. Surveys, journal articles, photographs, recordings 4. Collecting data following the timeline |
|---|---|---|
| 8. Ethical dimension | Does everyone want to participate? What if someone does not agree to participation? Do I have parents' consent? | ● Presentations of the action plan at the teacher council assembly, pupils council, parent-teacher meeting ● Collect parents' and pupils' consent |

The process of facilitating the implementation of the action research took place during the school year 2017/2018 (some actions did not stop with that school year). During this period we contacted the school regularly either face to face, through Skype meetings or in email correspondence.

During the workshop at which the school staff created the first version of the action research plan, some common challenges in conducting action research were highlighted. We did our best to prepare teachers for the uncertainties of action research. However, some were still puzzled over questions that regularly create problems in school action research; they were unsure if they were doing it well, if the research part went well, it they had collected data properly, etc (personal communication with teachers, mail correspondence, Skype meetings).

Despite the feelings of insecurity, given that this was the first time that school teachers, the pedagogue and the head teacher had conducted action research, their approach was truly participatory and bottom-up, and the work on the goals was done collaboratively, in constant dialogue with both the school community and the local community. They worked meticulously on achieving their goals. Below is a summary of some of the actions taken between 2017 and 2019 (some are still ongoing).

Actions taken, 2017-2019

| |
|---|
| The school has created a Facebook page in order to facilitate communication among schools and also with the local community. |
| Viber groups with parents were created that facilitated easier and more transparent communication between parents and home teachers. |
| An e- Class register was introduced in some of the schools in 2017/2018 and in almost all branch schools in 2018/2019 (except for branch school Moravice). |
| Teachers and pupils participated in several programmes aimed at developing communication skills. |
| Teachers participated in numerous events together, with the aim of team-building (going to theatre plays together, numerous festivities, etc). |
| Branch schools were actively involved in numerous cultural, educational and sport activities. |
| Several important events took place in branch schools and not only in the main school. |
| Local professionals delivered lectures to teachers and pupils on several subjects of importance for the  local area. |
| Parents and pupils participated in numerous activities aimed at improving conditions in and around schools (decoration, gardening, refurbishing, wall painting, etc). |
| A gazebo (outdoor classroom) was built. |
| The historical trail in Severin na Kupi was built. |
| The school was equipped with new computers, printers, etc. |
| ... |

The number of actions taken by the school was immense. This presented a challenge to us as to how to keep track of all the activities and (if needed critically) analyse the progress the research was making. Due to our positions (of a facilitator and someone used to conducting smaller-scale action research studies with individuals who work on their own professional challenges and resulting goals), the scope of work and the need to systematically follow all the steps taken seemed to be overwhelming. Despite having intense communication with the school and following their work on their Facebook pages, in their research diaries, etc, there was a feeling that it would be hard to systematically observe all the work that had been done and reflect on all the actions that had been taken - for both of us, the project partner and facilitator of the LCP process and the school itself. In short, due to the number of activities that the school envisioned for this period and the pace they took, it was hard, if not impossible to have enough time to reflect on all the actions that were planned and implemented. The school was obviously making progress, as the impact evaluation, Visual Voices and their own reports clearly show, but the time for a systematic reflection in such a short (project-framed) period was scarce.

It is for this reason that we decided to reflect on the whole process at a workshop on 27 October 2018 where the teachers were also taught how to write an action research report. Before the technical part of the workshop, dedicated to report writing, the group of around 20 teachers was divided into two smaller groups to reflect on the whole process and the actions taken in relation to the predefined goals – the overarching goal for the LCP action research project to promote "the process of building better relations among all participants in the educational process, and more and better connections with the local community", and then the two sub-goals (divided between the two groups): (1) to fa-

cilitate better communication between teachers and students, and (2) to improve the material and spatial conditions of the school in collaboration with parents and the local community.

In the reflection, the tone was generally positive as most of the goals had been achieved and the activities listed testified to the hard work that took place during the period in which the action research was conducted. Communication was facilitated through various communication channels; branch schools were involved in all the activities and in many cases they hosted various celebrations and other events; numerous events gathered parents and teachers and pupils, which led to better relationships. However, teachers did highlight challenges that remained and that went beyond the scope of the project. The whole area is particularly suffering from depopulation as many families are emigrating. Consequently, some of the branch schools will have to be closed down due to lack of pupils. The branch school Lukovdol has only one pupil, and the branch school Senjsko has already been closed down. Although much of the new IT equipment was provided through various projects and in collaboration with the local community (local entrepreneurs and politicians), the central school in Vrbovsko benefited from energy renovation during the same period, which then created an even bigger gap between the centre and periphery (central and branch schools) in infrastructural terms. Some of the parents from other areas drive their children to Vrbovsko for these reasons.

Finally, the reflection also looked at our role as facilitators in the whole process and the overall analysis on the action research process.

### 5.2.3. How far can an outsider to LCP cooperate with a school to build better relations?

The last reflective dimension was dedicated to the whole process of action research. In this part of our report, we will also reflect on our role as an outsider to an LCP and facilitator of an action research process.

When asked about the transformative dimension of the action research and to what extent it had taken place, the pedagogue, Tanja Jakovac, stated that the process of personal transformation had not been so extensive, as they had already been working on the goals that the LCP advocated. However, she did highlight that the systematic approach and constant observation and reflection that the research required was something new and had yielded positive results:

> *... it has inspired us for even more engagement because it was something systematic, organised, and we have had feedback – a kind of external evaluation, which I don't see in the teaching process ... We give ourselves credit as if we are working on ourselves. We normally do this because we see that our students are more successful, but it is only natural what we do and it was great that someone from the outside comes to say that what we do makes sense. This year, we all wanted something, and the other ones were involved, who did not take part until now, although a small number still remained aside, which doesn't mean they are bad teachers. It has connected us, so far each school has worked for itself (...), but now our attitudes and our thinking spread, now we see that everything that we do is a part of all of us – I see this as something valuable.* – School pedagogue, 27 October 2018, Vrbovsko

Her comments also marked the role of facilitators as external observers whose approval was welcomed and appreciated. She also makes the important point about the unity that persisted or came about as a result of this joint endeavour ("*now we see that everything that we do is a part of all of us*").

However, teachers mentioned the scope of work as something they had also found challenging. A statement saying that even "*just three actions, but on which we will work together, make sense*" and that they all needed a break now, confirmed our personal attitudes that the measures taken were to some extent burdening and hard to observe and reflect upon in a detailed and thorough way.

A couple of teachers highlighted the focus on challenges that the LCP approach advocated through action research. As one of the teachers observed:

> *I became aware of what the problems were. We are all doing great work and that's all been great for years, but to focus on challenges – this I found great!* (chemistry teacher, 27 October 2018, Vrbovsko)

A challenge to connect people and enable better communication and relationships was something that several teachers brought up:

> *It is useful because the implementation of a project alone is demanding in terms of interpersonal relationships, many different things and ideas that took place, and experiences, difficulties and obstacles, material and human, high expectations ... But this experience would be useful to everyone ... the challenge of connecting people... getting material equipment is less of a challenge than connecting people and having to work together* (religious classes teacher, 27 October 2018, Vrbovsko)

Though not explicitly mentioned, it was in these (and similar comments) that we felt that the role of NGO as an outsider in this community did make sense. With its clear and systematic approach, which required constant planning, action, observation and reflection and the focus on challenges that existed in society, our role did not seem redundant or unnecessary for the purposes of the LCP.

However, some challenges remained that we, as an outsider NGO organisation, felt had not been addressed in the research conducted. These challenges concerned inter-ethnic conflict which is rather palpable in other parts of Croatia with a higher mix of ethnic groups (Serbs and Croats), but did not seem to have an impact on the community and schools we worked with in LCP. On certain occasions, when we tried to ask questions about inter-ethnic relations, these questions were most frequently approached as something irrelevant and not pertinent to the local context. However, in other instances, some isolated voices indicated the opposite (e.g. a religion classes teacher during the reflective workshop, 27 October 2018).

It is in this context that we became aware that, in work with the LCP, we need to strike a balance between issues that matter to us – an NGO that has been actively involved in peacebuilding relations related to inter-ethnic conflict, especially bearing in mind that the Centre for Peace is situated in the war-torn zone where questions related to inter-ethnic conflict are of utmost importance – and the school and specificities of the local area, which managed to avoid the conflict and participate in an extremely co-creative and constructive environment.

Another, albeit related, issue that seemed relevant and worth addressing in future projects and research, concerned a more general question of the role of an NGO that is not from the same area as the community itself. Despite our intensive involvement and constant dialogue with school teachers, pedagogues and headmaster, we felt that we missed the fine nuances of the everyday reality in which relationship-building took place. Furthermore, our own preoccupations (mentioned above) were also something that were hard to observe from the position of an outsider. It is for this same reason (of us not being a local organization) that the observation part and reflection could not be as systematic and as extensive as we would have liked. Although the position of the Centre for Peace, Nonviolence and Human Rights – Osijek is legitimized for a number of reasons (coming from a war-torn area, working on peacebuilding for decades, recognising the school's work and intensive dialogue with the school community), its external position may entail various challenges. Other NGOs that will work in this (or a similar) context might be dealing with issues related to projectisation of peace-building and 'armchair peacebuilding'. We therefore recommend that constant dialogue and direct involvement in community activities be integrated in such (research) projects.

## 5.3. Planning a new cycle of research

After the final reflective workshop,  a general conclusion was that the action research yielded extremely positive results. All the envisioned activities were successfully completed or, if still in progress, were proceeding as planned. In the final reflection, teachers expressed their satisfaction with the way branch schools had been involved and with the parents' participation in school activities. Both internal and external school spaces had been much improved and this has led to more creative classes and networking on the whole. The general feeling was that the local community took part to an unprecedented extent. For the new cycle of research, as the teachers themselves concluded, the challenge of how to connect the school with the local community remained. But this cycle was a great beginning and set a new direction for the school.

As most of the action research participants stated, this was indeed just the beginning. In spite of the scope of the activities and the work that had been done, teachers felt that it had taken time to become acquainted with the action research methodology and that the whole idea of reflective practice is something that needs to be learned and developed. This school is used to working on projects and similar activities, but the basic idea of action research – that the initiative comes from bottom-up, involving all participants (teachers, school admin staff, pupils, parents) in active engagement in the whole process, that the plan can and should be readjusted after careful observation and reflection – was something new, and is something that the school plans to maintain, particularly concerning the challenge of building relationships in school. The following excerpt is from their action research report:

*Recommendations for further research will be related to working on the challenge to bring together participants in the education process.*

1. We will investigate how and to what extent teachers are satisfied with the cooperation of support and technical and administrative staff and vice versa. If we start from the fact that the social system of the school is made up of students, teachers and supportive technical and administrative staff, then the school culture  depends on their mutual relations and cooperation. Research will also be based on their characteristics such as the role that they play in the educational process, the position, and the relationships among them.

2. We will investigate how satisfied students are with the communication between themselves and the teachers and other staff in school.

3. We will also explore the educational status of our students with the aim of improving the quality of teaching.

4. We will complete the Frankopan Teaching Trail in collaboration with the local community.

*Finally, we can conclude that this kind of research is improving the quality of each school. The school should not be a place of bureaucratic pursuits in which we constantly refer to rules, laws, averages, arithmetic means, etc. The school should be a community of all participants in the educational process, a learning community.*

*The local community and school should be collaborative, stimulating and creative to teach young people that it is important to be together and that the community needs them. A local community like a school should be a learning community.* (excerpt from school action research report, April 2019)

Finally, despite the stress and time constraints for the reflection part, it is important to highlight that the Vrbovsko school has successfully achieved the goals from the action research. It identified and recognized all the members of its learning community for peace; it engaged the schoolchildren, their parents and the local community, including politicians and entrepreneurs. As shown in this report,

they put enormous effort into the various activities, which resulted in the creation of community. The gazebo they built together clearly demonstrates 'togetherness' and testifies to the success in building the community.

The activities have enabled a flow of information between teachers to an extent unprecedented in previous projects. Some teachers from branch schools voiced a sense of being cut off from school activities. However, during the LCP project, the community implemented concrete measures to address this challenge and this led to fruitful cooperation with the branch schools during all project stages.

Finally, the project managed to engage all members of the community. School staff, students, parents, local community all contributed to the quality of the activities and the school curriculum. In this sense, the action research proved to be truly participatory. The initiative came from the grassroots level, and all members of the community took an active part in the research. The role of students, parents and local entrepreneurs was transformed; they were no longer mere passive 'consumers' of the school curriculum, or outside observers. During the LCP project, through constant and active dialogue, they profoundly shaped the intellectual and physical space of Ivan Goran Kovačić School, its branch schools and the surrounding area.

As for our role, the Centre for Peace, Nonviolence and Human Rights – Osijek will continue its cooperation with the school. Some events have already taken place, following the process of action research. The LCP project and the action research were presented at the Peacebuilding School Forum event in August 2019 in Moravice, where Dr Sara Clarke-Habibi presented the whole concept and the relevant findings.

In order to finish the whole action research cycle, teachers, pedagogue, headteacher and other participants of the school action research have written their action research report. The Osijek Centre is now helping with the editing and revision of this document.