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Promoting Democratic and Intercultural Competences in the Primary School Context: The experience of “Children’s Voices for a new Human Space”¹

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ABSTRACT

The promotion of citizen’s democratic and intercultural competence is one of the main actions that European societies may take against some of the most significant challenges they are facing nowadays. The paper is aimed at briefly describing the Council of Europe’s Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture, some actions that can be taken to promote democratic and intercultural competences and a case of implementation of this framework in the context of primary school, that is the Erasmus+ Project “Children’s Voices for a new Human Space” (CVS). The paper also aims at illustrating the intellectual outputs produced by CVS project consisting in a training course for teachers, a curriculum for children, an app assisting trainers and teachers during the implementation of the training and the curriculum, and a scientific study aimed at investigating the efficacy of the educational processes in which teachers and children have been involved.

Keywords: *Democratic Competence; Intercultural Competence; Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture; Teacher Training; Curriculum*

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The Background

The promotion of citizen's democratic and intercultural competence is one of the key components of the action European societies need to take against some of the most significant challenges they are facing nowadays. These phenomena include: (a) high levels of prejudice, intolerance, discrimination and hate crimes against minority ethnic and religious groups living in Europe; (b) the dangers posed by radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorism; (c) the gains made in recent elections – in both national and European parliaments – by far-right political parties that advocate Islamophobic, anti-Semitic, xenophobic and racist ideologies; (d) the expansion of international flows of immigrants and refugees; (e) the decline in citizen engagement with formal democratic processes and institutions (Barrett, 2018; Council of Europe, 2016; European Commission, 2014; FRA, 2015; Human Rights First, 2015; Pew Research Centre, 2014)

As outlined by Barrett (2018), these challenges “are deeply disturbing for anyone who cares about the peaceful coexistence of cultural groups and about respect for the dignity and rights of all human beings” (p. 93). They pull against the development and the maintenance of fundamental European values such as democracy, equality and human rights, against the vision of a European society characterized by pluralism, non-discrimination, solidarity and justice, and they negatively affect the opportunity to view cultural diversity – in its several facets – as a resource.

In order to set against this situation, there is a need for European societies to work actively together to build more cohesive and democratic societies where people and especially youth – irrespective of their socio-economic, religious or ethnic background – are given the chance to be heard and to succeed. In this regard, one of the most powerful vehicles we have to promote social integration while improving common democratic values is intercultural education (Council of Europe, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2013, 2016).

There is empirical evidence supporting the hypothesis that appropriate educational practices can boost children and adolescents' (from 5 to 18 years) democratic engagement, counter their prejudice and intolerance towards other groups and reduce their support for violent extremism (Aboud & Levy, 2000; Paluck & Green, 2009; Pfeifer, Spears Brown, & Juvonen, 2007).

In this context, the informal meeting of the European Union (EU) Education Ministers with Commissioner Navracsics adopted the “Declaration on promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education” (Paris, 17 March 2015, hereafter Paris Declaration), defining common EU aims such as (a) “ensuring that children and young people acquire social, civic and intercultural competences, by promoting democratic values and fundamental rights, social inclusion and non-discrimination, as well as active citizenship”, (b)

“fostering the education of disadvantaged children and young people, by ensuring that our education and training systems address their needs”, and (c) “promoting intercultural dialogue through all forms of learning in cooperation with other relevant policies and stakeholders”. The Paris Declaration calls for renewed efforts to reinforce teaching that promotes inclusive societies through education. There is a need to build on the positive contribution that can be made by children through participation, while at the same time endorsing and supporting the fundamental values on which European democracies depend. The Paris Declaration defines common aims for the Member States, and argues that the EU should help the Member States to share good practices that will enable children to acquire social, civic and intercultural competences, will foster the education of disadvantaged children, and will promote intercultural dialogue. Therefore, one action which may be taken is to use European school systems to develop young people democratic and intercultural competences.

In 2018, the CoE has proposed the so-called *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture*² (RFCDC; Barrett et al., 2018a, 2018b, 2018c), that is a single comprehensive framework which covers Education for Democratic Citizenship (EDC), Human Rights Education (HRE) and Intercultural Education (IE) in the full range of formal educational system, from preschool to university. It contains several proposals on how formal education can be used to foster young people democratic and intercultural competences, that are the competences needed to actively participate in democratic culture.

The present paper is aimed at briefly describing the CoE’s RFCDC, some actions that can be taken to promote democratic and intercultural competences and a case of implementation of this framework in the context of primary school, that is the Erasmus+ Project “Children’s Voices for a new Human Space”³ (CVS). The paper also aims at illustrating the intellectual outputs produced by CVS project consisting in a training course for teachers, a curriculum for children, an app assisting trainers and teachers during the implementation of the training and the curriculum, and a scientific study aimed at investigating the efficacy of the educational processes in which teachers and children have been involved.

The Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture

The RFCDC is based on two key assumptions, the democratic culture and the intercultural dialogue. With regard to the first assumption, the term "democratic culture" – used to define the Framework –

²<https://www.coe.int/en/web/campaign-free-to-speak-safe-to-learn/reference-framework-of-competences-for-democratic-culture>.

³ <https://www.cvs-project.eu/>

make reference to the idea that, while democracy obviously cannot exist without democratic institutions, these institutions will not be able to function in practice unless citizens themselves hold democratic attitudes and values and are willing to participate in democratic processes. Therefore, for a democracy to function properly it is necessary that citizens are committed to democratic action, are willing to support decisions that are made by the majority, are willing and able to express their own views, are willing to listen respectfully to the views of others, are committed to protect the rights of minority groups, and are committed to the peaceful resolution of conflicts..

The second assumption of the RFCDC concerns the importance of “intercultural dialogue” in culturally diverse democratic societies. In a democracy, citizens who are affected by the outcomes of political decisions have the right to express their views to the decision-makers before the decisions are made, and the decision-makers themselves should listen to those views and factor them into their decision-making process. In the case of culturally diverse societies, citizens and decision-makers may well have different cultural affiliations from each other, and therefore communications between citizens and decision-makers will require intercultural dialogue. For this reason, intercultural dialogue is vital for democratic exchange, discussion and debate in culturally diverse societies, and for enabling everyone to feed their views into political decision-making on an equal footing regardless of their cultural backgrounds. Intercultural dialogue is therefore regarded by the RFCDC as being crucial for democratic decision-making to function properly in the case of culturally diverse societies.

The Framework comprises three components: (a) *a conceptual model* of the competences required for participating appropriately and effectively in democratic culture and intercultural dialogue; (b) *scaled descriptors* for all of these competences; and (c) *guidance* for teachers and school principals and for ministries of education on how both the model and the descriptors may be used in citizenship education within schools.

With regard to the conceptual model, the RFCDC defines democratic competence as “the ability to mobilise and deploy relevant psychological resources (namely values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and/or understanding) in order to respond appropriately and effectively to the demands, challenges and opportunities presented by democratic situations” (Barrett et al., 2018a, p. 32). Likewise, intercultural competence is defined as “the ability to mobilise and deploy relevant psychological resources in order to respond appropriately and effectively to the demands, challenges and opportunities presented by intercultural situations” (ibid.). The so-called ‘butterfly’ model lists all of the values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and understanding that together are required for both *democratic and intercultural competence* (see Figure 1).

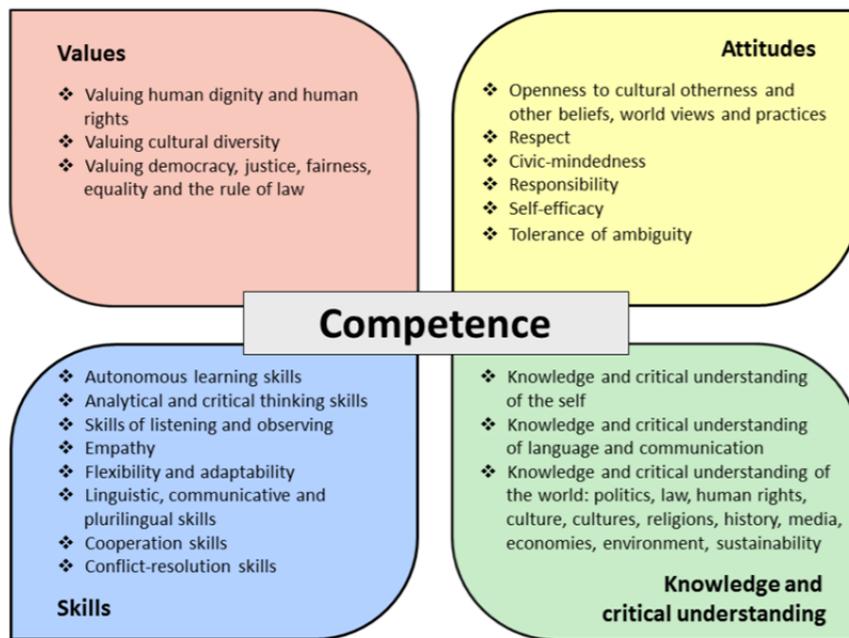


Figure 1. The butterfly model of the RFCDC (Barrett et al., 2018a)

Values are defined by the RFCDC as “general beliefs that individuals hold about the desirable goals that should be striven for in life” (Barrett et al., 2018a, p. 38). They have applicability across a broad range of situations: for example, they can be used to motivate actions, guide decisions, offer criteria for evaluating, justifying and planning behaviours and opinions. They also have a normative quality which specifies what *ought* to be done or thought across all of these situations. There are three sets of values in the RFCDC: (a) valuing human dignity and human rights, (b) valuing cultural diversity, and (c) valuing democracy, justice, fairness, equality and the rule of law.

An *attitude* is defined as “the overall mental orientation which an individual adopts towards someone or something” (Barrett et al., 2018a, p. 41), which includes beliefs about the attitude object, feelings towards the object, the evaluation of the object, and the tendency to behave in a particular way towards the object. There are six attitudes in the RFCDC: (a) openness to cultural otherness and to other beliefs, world views and practices, (b) respect, (c) civic-mindedness, (d) responsibility, (e) self-efficacy, and (f) tolerance of ambiguity.

The RFCDC defines a *skill* as “the capacity for carrying out complex, well-organised patterns of either thinking or behaviour in an adaptive manner in order to achieve a particular goal” (Barrett et al., 2018a, p. 46). There are 8 sets of skills in the RFCDC: (a) autonomous learning skills, (b) analytical and critical thinking skills, (c) skills of listening and observing, (d) empathy, (e) flexibility and adaptability, (g) linguistic, communicative and plurilingual skills, (h) co-operation skills, and (i) conflict-resolution skills.

Finally, *knowledge* is defined as “the body of information that is possessed by a person, while understanding is the comprehension and appreciation of meanings” (Barrett et al., 2018a, p. 52). The term “critical” is used to emphasise the need for active reflection on and attentive evaluation of intercultural and democratic issues. There are three main sets of knowledge and critical understanding in the RFCDC: (a) knowledge and critical understanding of the self, (b) knowledge and critical understanding of language and communication, and (c) knowledge and critical understanding of the world (including politics, law, human rights, culture, cultures, religions, history, media, economies, the environment and sustainability).

As outlined by Barrett et al. (2018a, p. 32), “a competent individual mobilises and deploys subsets of competences in a fluid, dynamic and adaptive manner in order to meet the constantly shifting demands, challenges and opportunities that arise in democratic and intercultural situations”. Indeed, depending on the particular real-life situation in which the individual is involved (and the specific demands, challenges and opportunities characterizing this situation), different subsets of competences will be mobilized and deployed. Moreover, each particular situation changes over time so that a continuous monitor and constant adjustment of the competences to be deployed are necessary to make it possible for the individual to implement an effective and adaptive response.

As previously said, the RFCDC also provides scaled descriptors for each competence in the butterfly model (Barrett et al., 2018b). They are formulated and worded as learning outcomes, so that each one is the description of a behaviour that could be observed if a person has attained a certain level of development in a given competence. Because they are expressed as learning outcomes, the descriptors can be used to develop a curriculum, for designing pedagogical activities and for assessing learners. The RFCDC descriptors are empirically validated, and they have been scaled to three levels of proficiency (basic, intermediate and advanced) using data collected from 3,094 European teachers.

Finally, the RFCDC contains guidance about how the conceptual model and the descriptors can be used by schools (Barrett et al., 2018c). Information is provided about the various ways in which the RFCDC may be applied in practice, discussing the pros and cons of the different options. For example, the guidance explains how the Framework can be used to:

- review and develop the curriculum; to guide the selection of suitable pedagogical methods that can be used in the teaching and learning of the competences;
- guide the selection of suitable assessment methods;
- implement a whole school approach for promoting the development of the competences; to train teachers during both pre-service and in-service teacher training;
- tackle radicalisation that might lead to violent extremism and terrorism.

Actions to promote democratic and intercultural competences

As previously said, education is crucial for preparing students to take on the role of active democratic citizens, and for equipping them with the ability to function as independent and self-determining agents who are able to select and pursue their own goals in life. In the attempt to identify some of the main actions that can be taken by schools to promote students' democratic and intercultural competence, Barrett (2018) has made some suggestions:

- *Using specific pedagogical approaches*: methods such as project-based learning and cooperative learning, and activities emphasizing multiple perspectives, role plays and simulations are able to stimulate and scaffold students' critical thinking about their own democratic and intercultural experiences, and about their own cultural affiliations;
- *Organizing periods of study abroad*: students are able to encounter people from other cultural groups when they spend a period studying in another country. It is well established that students' intercultural competence can be significantly enhanced by spending time studying abroad (e.g., Anquetil, 2006; Vande Berg, 2009).
- *Setting up school-community links and partnerships and implementing service-learning projects*: students can experience contact with members of other cultural groups when their school sets up partnerships with organizations and with minority individuals in the local community. Indeed, there is evidence that involving people who have different cultural backgrounds in the activities of schools can help to reduce stereotypes and cultural prejudices of children and improve their cultural knowledge (e.g. Christou & Puigvert, 2011). Moreover, service-learning projects that are conducted in the local community can be very effective in promoting democratic and intercultural competences. Studies show that this type of activity is particularly effective with adolescents and young adults, and helps to boost their empathy, self-efficacy, knowledge of cultural otherness, and self-understanding (Bringle, 2017; Morgan & Streb, 2001).
- *Organizing events of teachers' training*: in order for all the actions described above to be used successfully, however, teachers need to be suitably trained so that they can act as transformative agents in their students' lives. The training should be available as part of both in-service and pre-service teacher training, to ensure not only that their democratic and intercultural competences are sufficiently developed, but also that they know how to use the various methods that are available for promoting their students' democratic and intercultural competence.

Barrett has also outlined the need for studies that employ methodologically rigorous research methods to evaluate the general effectiveness of these actions and their effectiveness in different

cultural contexts. A specific action might be useful to promote the development of students' democratic and intercultural competences in one particular cultural or educational context but not in another. For this reason, further research is required to ascertain the specific circumstances and conditions under which each type of action is most effective, and the specific subgroups of children and adolescents who might be able to benefit most from each action.

The CVS Project

The Erasmus+ Project "Children's Voices for a new Human Space" (CVS; lasting from September 1 2018 to December 31 2021) is based on the idea that participation in democratic societies is essential to reduce the negative impact of these trends, and that young people have to be encouraged to think about the environmental, social and economic problems affecting their lives. Its general aim is to foster the democratic and intercultural competences of both teachers and students in the primary school context, by drawing on the CoE's RFCDC. Its objectives are:

- to enhance teachers' access to democratic and intercultural education practices;
- to increase teachers' knowledge about democratic and intercultural education;
- to equip teachers with tools, techniques and methods to promote and assess pupils' democratic and intercultural competences;
- to foster the development of pupils' democratic and intercultural competences;
- to empower pupils by offering them the opportunity to participate effectively in public life and in decision-making processes in order to make their voices heard;
- to promote the involvement of pupils with a migrant or minority background, by improving their access and participation in their living school contexts.

The target groups of the project are teachers and pupils of five European primary schools located in Bulgaria, Italy, Norway, Spain, and Romania. Direct beneficiaries are about thirty-five teachers and two-hundreds pupils of the partner schools. In particular, the CVS Project activities involve: ten Key Classes (two classes in each partner school) that in the first year of the project were in the third grade; about three teachers for each school, one of whom acts as the Core Teacher; about twenty-five pupils in each Key Class. Indirect beneficiaries are other teachers, students and staff members of the partner schools, pupils' families and local communities of the towns where the schools are located, and the CoE. Additional indirect beneficiaries are the teachers and pupils of other schools in Europe that choose to implement the CVS Training Course for teachers and the CVS Curriculum for children.

In order to achieve its objectives, a variety of activities have been foreseen:

- the development, implementation and testing of the CVS Training Course for teachers;
- the development, implementation and testing of the CVS Curriculum for children;
- the development, implementation and testing of the CVS App;
- the planning and implementation of the CVS Study;
- two short-term joint staff training events aimed at teachers: the first training event was aimed at implementing the CVS Training Course; this took place in Mezdra (Bulgaria), in March 2019, and involved ten Core Teachers; the second training event was aimed at implementing a training programme focused on the CVS Curriculum for children and the use of the CVS App; this took place in Bagheria (Italy), in September 2019, and involved ten Core Teachers;
- a short-term exchange of groups of pupils, aimed at increasing pupils' collaboration with peers of partner schools and allowing them to share their experiences; this should take place in Bergen (Norway), in May 2021⁴;
- a series of multiplier events at local and transnational level, aimed at disseminating the intellectual outputs foreseen by the project; the local events will take place in partner schools, in Spring 2021, while the international conference will take place in Bergen, on June 3-4 2021.

The CVS Project combines education, research, and innovation activities, using ICT as a driver, to improve systemic learning and increase the quality of educational actions at primary school level. The partner organisations are three public universities, including University of Palermo (Italy; lead organisation), University of Bergen (Norway) and University of Surrey (United Kingdom), five public primary schools, including school Ivan Vazov of Mezdra (Bulgaria), school Giuseppe Cirincione of Bagheria (Italy), school Slettebakken of Bergen (Norway), school Nicolai Orghidan of Brasov (Romania), and school Manuel Foguet of Vinaros (Spain), the non-governmental organisation Identità Sviluppo Integrazione (ISI) Onlus (Italy), and the software house Rodax Management (Romania). Moreover, the lead author of the RFCDC, Martyn Barrett, actively participated to CVS project and the development of its intellectual outputs.

The CVS Outputs

As previously outlined, to achieve the overall aim of fostering the democratic and intercultural competences of children and teachers in the primary school context, four related intellectual outputs⁵ inspired to the RFCDC were developed and utilized in the CVS project: (a) a training

⁴ As we write this article, the world is facing the COVID-19 pandemic. Depending on the progress of the health emergency, this event could take place in remote or blended mode.

⁵ The CVS Outputs can be downloaded at the following link: <https://www.cvs-project.eu/intellectual-output/>

course for teachers, (b) a curriculum for children, (c) an app for trainers and teachers, and (d) a scientific study. The strengths on which the CVS Outputs are based comprise a solid theoretical framework, the international and multidisciplinary nature of the development team, teachers' and children's involvement in the CVS Outputs revision, a powerful system of teaching and learning evaluation and of pupils' assessment based on the RCFDC, and the integration of IT in the training, the curriculum and their evaluation and assessment system.

The CVS Training Course for Teachers. This course comprises a series of activities (containing standardized and customizable learning materials) brought together to enhance teachers' knowledge about the theoretical and practical features underlying EDC, HRE and IE, as well as their democratic and intercultural competences. Even though it has been designed as a program aimed primarily at teachers interested in implementing the CVS Curriculum in their classes, which can be used as a training tool for its own sake. The CVS Training Course was developed through a four-steps process. First, we chose some of the best training resources and materials in the field of EDC, HRE and IE. Second, we organized learning resources and materials (adding some developed by our own work-team) to develop a training curriculum divided into five modules. Third, we field-tested the CVS Training Course in all the countries of the partnership, whilst involving the primary school teachers. Finally, we modified some of the activities based on feedback from the field testing and published them on the CVS Training Course handbook⁶.

The CVS Curriculum for Children. The curriculum comprises a series of activities that encourage 9- to 10-year-old pupils to actively exercise their democratic and intercultural competences at school and in their local communities through urban regeneration activities, making their voices heard about their needs, views and dreams regarding their closest "urban" spaces. The experiences that pupils accumulate through the activities are designed to promote and strengthen their democratic and intercultural competences.

The curriculum is a biennial course⁷ that is taught in two modules: (a) Module 1 "Our voices for our schools", (b) Module 2 "Our voices for our towns". Module 1 has been developed using a project-based learning approach and Module 2 using a service-based learning approach. Both modules are

⁶ It is freely downloadable at the following link <https://www.cvs-project.eu/intellectual-output/>

⁷ The CVS Curriculum was initially developed in Summer 2019, and its first implementation was supposed to take place from October 2019 to May 2020. Unfortunately, the health emergency caused by the COVID-19 pandemic forced an abrupt interruption to schools that had to focus their attention on the online remodeling of their educational activities, to the detriment of the activities envisaged by the CVS project. Therefore, the implementation of the CVS Curriculum had to stop. During the first virtual meeting of the CVS partnership, held at the end of April 2020, in the face of the crisis that prevented the completion of Module 1 with the children – the real beneficiaries of the intervention – the partnership decided to develop a new online formulation of the Curriculum for the following school year. In this way, we developed the so-called Module 0 ("Our voices for our class") for the CVS Curriculum, whose goal is to offer children the opportunity to express their experiences related to COVID-19 and communicate it to others. Module 0 was based on the same theoretical-methodological approach already envisaged by the CVS Curriculum. Module 0 is downloadable from the CVS website, <https://www.cvs-project.eu/intellectual-output/>.

expressed in the five steps of Experience, Comparison, Analysis, Reflection and Action and are taught over an entire school year. The CVS Curriculum also uses a system of (a) evaluating the teaching and learning activities and the whole programme through the observation and measurement of their effectiveness, and (b) assessing the children's degree of proficiency in DI competences.

The CVS Curriculum was developed through a five-step process. Firstly, we conducted an auditing process involving all partner schools, which is a systematic examination aimed at analysing to what extent, when and how learners acquire DI in the course of their schooling as a whole. Secondly, we selected some of the best training resources and materials that already exist in the field of EDC, HRE and IE. Thirdly, we organized the learning resources and materials (adding some further materials that were developed by our own work team) to create the curriculum. Fourthly, we field-tested the CVS Curriculum in all the countries of the partnership, involving both teachers and pupils. Finally, we changed some activities on the basis of feedback received from field testing, and published them in the CVS Curriculum handbook⁸.

Two considerations should be noted about the implementation of the curriculum. Firstly, during its development, we considered it essential to provide a training course for teachers on the RFCDC and the curriculum. Therefore, we suggest that before the implementation of the curriculum takes place, teachers should participate in the CVS Training Course. Secondly, although the curriculum was designed for primary school children, its characteristics make it suitable for middle school children as well.

The CVS App. It is an IT tool put together for allowing the online methodological supervision of trainers and teachers during the implementation of the CVS Training and the CVS Curriculum, respectively. Its two main functions are to provide: an electronic "how-to manual" for the use of the CVS Training Course and the CVS Curriculum, an evaluation and assessment tool for trainers and teachers as well as an evaluation of the results for CVS researchers. The CVS App works on desktop, laptop, tablet and mobile⁹.

The CVS Study. It embraces all research activities of the CVS project and has the general goal of testing the efficacy of the CVS Training Course, the CVS Curriculum, and the CVS App. Specifically, the study aims to investigate: teachers' DI competences before and after the Training Course, children's DI competences before and after being taught the CVS Curriculum, teachers' satisfaction with the CVS App, parents' knowledge, skills and attitudes toward DI education as well as scholastic communities' views about DI education. The University of Surrey is the coordinator for the CVS research activities.

⁸ It is freely downloadable at the following link <https://www.cvs-project.eu/intellectual-output/>

⁹ It is freely consultable at the following link <https://www.cvs-project.eu/cvs-app/cvs-app-home/>

Conclusions

As we write this article, the world is facing the COVID-19 pandemic and its tremendous consequences on our societies not only on the health and economic level, but also at that of human relations. Recently Ingoglia et al. (under revision) have studied the relations between democratic competence (defined in accordance with RFCDC), interdependent self-construal, sense of community, and civic engagement with the appraisal of COVID-19 Public Health Emergency Management and attitudes toward behaviours to prevent infection among Italian emerging adults during the lockdown phase, from March to May 2020. The main idea inspiring this study is that «overcoming the challenge represented by the outbreak entails a new perspective on human relationships focused on a strong sense of “us” instead of “me”. In other words, the efforts of all should be addressed to abandon a philosophy of “everyone for themselves” and to enact shared actions for the common well-being» (Ingoglia et al., p. 3). Overall, Ingoglia et al.’s findings highlights the importance of promoting democratic citizenship education at all ages and in all contexts of society, both formal and informal, because fostering democratic values and sense of belonging to a community may have a general protective role for people’s well-being and for their compliance to prevention programs and health recommendations developed by governmental institutions regardless their subject (i.e., COVID-19, other infections, cancer, cardiovascular diseases, etc.).

We need to live COVID-19 emergency and, above all, prepare ourselves for the challenges that the future holds by investing in the promotion of democratic and intercultural competences; opening up to the world and actively living democracy is essential to act in a real community of people careful to each other.

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