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European Needs Analysis WP2 Report

The PLACES Project

Playful LeArning and storytelling that Create Engagement for the SDG's among
children and young people.





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INTRODUCTION

The European Needs Analysis is the core output of PLACES Project's Work Package 2. It ensures that the partners have all the necessary background knowledge and insights in order to create the best foundation for the development, testing, sustainability and upscaling activities which will be carried through in the other Work Packages.

Therefore, the specific objectives of this baseline report are:

- 1) to ensure that the project does not invent the wheel, includes existing knowledge, and moves the innovation forward from there;
- 2) to ensure the involvement and engagement of the main target group, which is teachers (and pupils);
- 3) to ensure best possible political positioning of the project on local and European level;
- 4) to ensure best possible opportunities for the dissemination activities during and beyond the project period.

The European Needs Analysis report is made up of 3 main parts. Each part responds to specific research questions and thanks to this structure, context information and points of view from all the main actors are assembled in a single comprehensive document:

- 1. Context analysis:** It includes a more detailed analysis of how the participating countries and the European Union introduce the SDGs in their societal development strategies, which will assist the project to better position itself in dissemination activities. It also includes an analysis of existing projects within the 4 participating countries and at a European level that have already worked with SDG, ensuring that PLACES includes any kind of good practice or material from other projects.
- 2. Teachers' needs analysis:** to assess their opinions, experience and knowledge about SDGs, playful learning and storytelling.
- 3. Students' needs analysis:** to assess their school experience, their needs and their experience with storytelling.



1. CONTEXT ANALYSIS

The context analysis is an essential step of PLACES Project, as it lays the foundations for the European Needs Analysis foreseen in Work Package 2. This baseline report is based on knowledge gathered from all four participating countries. Information has been collected using common templates.

First, a more detailed analysis of how the participating countries and the European Union introduce the SDGs in their societal development strategies, will assist the project to better position itself in dissemination activities. Second, the analysis of projects that have already worked with SDGs within the 4 participating countries and at a European level, ensures that PLACES does not invent the wheel, but includes any kind of good practice or material from other projects.

1.1 Policy framework

Inclusion of the SDGs in school teaching

We analysed the policy frameworks that guide the school systems in the European countries included in PLACES Project, which are Belgium (French-speaking community), Denmark, Greece and Italy.

Based on this research, it can be noted that the SDGs are included to some extent in schools' teaching of all the countries involved, even if significant differences between the national policy frameworks can be identified.

The first distinction to be highlighted refers to whether the SDGs are part of the schools' curricula on mandatory bases or rather if they are seen as something optional. In Greece and Denmark, the SDGs topic can be embedded but the choice is discretionary, even if highly recommended. This is due to how the policy framework is structured: in Denmark, for example, the SDGs are not to be found in the national education policy, however, the reference is the national action plan and the Ministry of Education that provides an online platform where teachers can find materials and cases regarding teaching the SDGs. In Italy their introduction appears to be compulsory, and this can be inferred by the national law on Civic education issued in 2019. Even if the law does not state that the SDGs are to be compulsorily taught per se, through this law, civic education became mandatory in all schools, and it explicitly mentions the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda when clarifying that one of the topics to be covered by civic education activities is sustainable development. In addition to that, a number of other national documents provide recommendations, plans and guidelines on how to introduce the SDGs in school education.

It must be noted that the boundary is often not clearly set in terms of specific requirements. This is the case for Belgium, where the SDGs are not mentioned as such in the policy



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documents, but are implicitly part of the different curricula because similar objectives are mandatory at all levels.

Overall, it seems that at the European level, educational policy decisions are progressively going in the direction of integrating the 2030 Agenda at every level of the school system, even if this process is developing in each country with its own methods and procedures.

Policies content

Official education national or regional policies introducing the SDGs in schools are usually not extremely prescriptive in terms of contents. Even when they explicitly mention the need to integrate SDGs topics in school teaching, choices on how to do so are mainly left to the schools' autonomous decisions. Content wise, policies provide recommendations in terms of general aims, and additional supporting documents or platforms go more in-depth providing materials and suggestions. In Italy, guidelines explore lessons contents and methods, and underline the great importance of awareness raising initiatives. Moreover, Italian regulations require teachers to attend specific training courses in order to be updated and have the necessary teaching tools and competencies; a recent note from the Ministry of Education included sustainability among the priority topics to be addressed by those training courses. In the case of Greece, policy documents, such as the programme of studies for sustainability from the Department of Education for the Environment and Sustainability in the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, also focus on the specific objectives to be reached: being part of the primary school curriculum, the SDG themes are included in texts and stories in Greek language school books, and are included as optional programmes in the context of environmental education, sustainability, health education and active citizenship themes in the weekly skills workshops for primary and secondary schools. No additional deduction on policy contents can be made for Belgium and Denmark because, as explained in the previous paragraph, the SDGs are not mentioned in national education policies from their countries.

This very open and broad approach that leaves room for adaptation to the different contexts, providing a strategic vision without going into specific implementation details, is consistent with the fact that policy documents usually refer to the SDGs as a whole, with no specific focus on a single goal or activity. This does not mean that the single goals are overlooked, but rather that they are all extremely interconnected and should be tackled jointly, addressing topics in school in a way that aims to create active and responsible citizens broadly speaking in the long term.

Focus on SDGs 3-4-10

Besides this generally true consideration, since the PLACES Project focuses on SDG 3, 4 and 10 with a specific interest, we tried to understand if school policies devote attention to these three goals through dedicated recommendations.

In Italy, documents do not foresee provisions specifically addressed to SDG 3, 4 and 10. However, there's a focus on education and great attention is given to the issue of inclusion (inequalities, gender, special needs). The plan "Rigenerazione scuola" also mentions health



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promotion among its pillars, and the law that regulates civic education specifies that sustainable development and environmental education do not imply only the environment, but rather a wider concept that includes the right to health, psychosocial wellbeing, equity and quality education.

In the case of Denmark, the national action plan for the SDGs incorporates the three SDGs of interest for our project in its priority n. 2, "Humans". It also defines some relevant aims linked to priority 2 "Humans":

- Strengthening gender equality in education between girls and boys, including reducing gender differences in well-being and grades (SDG 4).
- Strengthened professionalism, quality and relevant content in study programmes to improve the development of all children and young people (SDG 4).
- Strengthened efforts for academically weak students (SDG 4).
- Continued development of a good healthcare system and a dignified elderly care, among other things through a focus on coherent patient pathways and patient involvement (SDG 3).
- Strengthened response to chronic and life-threatening diseases, including cancer, COPD, diabetes type 2, dementia, and the elderly medical patient (SDG 3).
- More people must be part of the working community, including persons with disabilities (SDG 4).
- Increased well-being for children and young people as well as development and learning for all children in day care (SDG 4).
- Maintaining Denmark's role as an active international advocate for equality and sexual and reproductive health, and rights (SDG 3,4,10).

No information on a potential focus on SDG 3, 4 and 10 is available for Belgium.

School levels and time to be dedicated

A very positive aspect that seems to be recurrent in all 4 countries involved in the project is that, regardless of how the SDGs are integrated into school teaching, this happens for every school cycle, from primary schools to high-school upper grades. In Greece, the SDGs have been introduced also in kindergartens for children aged from 5 to 6 years old.

Even if it's clear that the SDGs or related topics should be addressed at all grades and levels, the time to be dedicated is not explicitly defined by policy documents. The choice depends on the teachers, consistently with the autonomy that is granted to schools regarding the topic. Even when specific laws or regulations exist, such as in Italy, how much time should be allocated to teaching the SDGs is not specified. It's only established that at least 33 hours per year should be devoted to civic education more in general.

Implementation: subjects and teachers involved

In all countries involved, a recurring element of teaching the SDGs is its multidisciplinary and cross-cutting nature. Policy documents recognize and underline how sustainability should be encompassed and developed across all disciplines, promoting its complete integration into the school curriculum. Since it is something that impacts every aspect of life, it cannot be seen



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as a separate subject. This is the case for Greek schools, where SDGs topics can be delivered through different subjects or activities, such as language studies, environmental studies or skills workshops.

Something similar can be found in the Danish context, where activities about the SDGs are delivered through two main platforms where teachers can find cases and teaching material. One of the platforms links the SDGs to all mandatory school subjects plus other subjects, e.g., Design. Likewise, in Italy, policies specify that civic education and sustainability education should have 3 characteristics: being cross-sectional, being integrated into the school curriculum and included in all subjects.

This comprehensive approach that touches upon several fields and competencies is also reflected in who is supposed to deliver the activities in schools. It can be noted that, in all European countries involved in PLACES, no specific teachers are in charge of teaching the SDGs, because they should all be involved and responsible for promoting sustainability. Since it's not a separated subject but a cross-cutting approach, it can be seen as an overarching strategy that should be adopted by any interested teacher. For organizational reasons, schools might be required to appoint one or a group of teachers to coordinate the activities, but all teachers should be involved. Of course, the actual engagement of each teacher can vary and also depends on personal motivation: the SDGs should be in every school subject, but practice shows that sometimes it is still a prerogative of certain domains, such as language courses, civics, ethics or religion lessons.

Other actors involved

Given the multifaceted and broad nature of teaching the SDGs, involving the community in delivering knowledge and awareness on sustainability could be key for a successful implementation. However, with the information collected through the search carried out it is not possible to fully understand to which extent such involvement is taking place in the partners' countries. The Danish partners explain that it is not possible to determine if and how external actors or students' families are involved in teaching the SDGs. In Belgium, nothing is prescribed by policy documents and families are seldom involved.

In Italy, most plans, strategies and guidelines on the SDGs in the school context underline the importance of a network of actors to collaborate with a transdisciplinary approach. Co-designing the activities is also considered relevant but it's not specified how this collaboration and engagement should be achieved or implemented. Similarly, Italian policy documents stress the relevance of families' involvement in SDGs-related activities. Thanks to the law on civic education, through a "Patto di corresponsabilità (Joint responsibility pact)", schools are requested to enhance the collaboration with the families in order to promote conscious and active citizenship among students. Still, each school is autonomous and can decide how to engage students' families. Lastly, in Greece, Environmental Education Centers and Officials are actively involved in the delivery of SDGs related activities in schools. The involvement of different actors in activities delivery will be further explored in the section dedicated to the analysis of existing projects.



Methodologies

The theme of autonomy and freedom in terms of schools' decisions is also true in relation to methods: the choice of a given method is not mandatory, and each school is free to decide how to implement the activities, but again, most documents suggest the use of active methodologies. Overall, it seems that recommended methodologies to deliver the activities in schools in the different countries represent a good combination of traditional teaching, engaging initiatives, group discussions, playful learning and active and cooperative learning. This common trait is extremely encouraging, showing that the importance of activating, involving and empowering students is acknowledged by national and regional policies. However, no explicit reference to the storytelling method can be identified in the available guidelines.

For example, several Italian plans and strategies propose innovative initiatives aimed at making activities more engaging and interesting for students: interactive methodologies, peer education, self-reflection, narrative thinking, transformative learning, games and scenarios simulations, hackathon events, prizes to recognize good projects carried out by schools.

Materials

A lot of materials are available for teachers to choose from in order to have ideas and tools for activities to implement in the classrooms. Besides structured programmes or projects, that are analysed in the dedicated sections, free materials to be used can be found online. In Denmark, two main platforms are used to find teaching materials; the national teaching platform and a platform specifically designed for working with the SDGs. Especially the SDGs platform is structured in an easy and accessible way and provides not only teaching material ready to be used but also links to other websites as well as films, VR's and podcasts. Likewise, in Italy, even if this material is not included in policy documents, there are open platforms and databases where materials can be retrieved. Likewise, In Greece, we are not aware of the existence of specific databases, but a Greek translation of UN material is available.

Summary

The following table summarizes the main characteristics of the policy documents on the SDGs in schools. It provides a brief overview of the results from the analysis carried out by PLACES partners.



| | Belgium | Denmark | Greece | Italy |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------|---|---|---|
| Inclusion of SDGs teaching | No – only implicit | optional | optional | mandatory |
| School levels | - | Primary, lower secondary and high schools | Kindergarten, primary, lower secondary and high schools | Primary, lower secondary and high schools |
| Policy contents | - | No policy available, but online platforms with materials | General aims, specific objectives | General aims, lesson contents, methods, training |
| Time allocated | - | No time allocated | Depends on the teacher | Not specified, but 33 hours for civic education in general |
| Subjects | - | Linked to all subjects | Language, environmental studies, skills workshops | Cross-sectional and integrated into all subjects |
| Teachers | - | No specific teacher in charge | Any interested teacher | All teachers should be involved. |
| External actors | | | Environmental Education Centers and Officials | Community stakeholders and students' families involvement desirable |
| Methods | - | Combination of active methodologies and traditional lessons | Combination of active methodologies and traditional lessons | Combination of active methodologies and traditional lessons |
| Materials availability | - | Yes, through platforms | UN materials translations | Yes, through databases |

1.2 Existing projects

Rationale

The policies analysis is extremely useful to get an overview of how the SDGs are included in educational systems and to understand the framework that guides schools' approach to sustainability topics in European countries.

To further explore the concrete development of activities related to the SDGs in schools, PLACES project partners carried out a research on existing school projects and programmes already implemented in their countries. As the aim of PLACES is to promote engagement and active participation among pupils towards the SDGs through a didactic learning design, learning materials and teachers' guidelines, being aware of what is already in place is of utmost importance. To ensure that PLACES does not re-invent the wheel, but builds on existing



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knowledge moving the innovation forward from there, the analysis of existing projects represents a necessary starting point. It is especially relevant in order to:

- learn about existing good practices that can be taken into consideration and valued;
- gain awareness about gaps to be filled and additional needs.

Following is a list of criteria used to select relevant projects for our analysis:

- promoted by an Institution – not a single school initiative
- promoted at a national or regional level (depending on the country of reference)
- interventions aimed to promote knowledge, awareness, engagement and active participation among children and young people towards SDGs 3, 4 and 10 or towards the SDGs in general
- different project typology: interventions in schools, training, lessons plans, activities, etc
- targeted to 6-14 years old / primary and middle school students

Projects overview

Through their research, PLACES partners were able to identify several projects that can be implemented by schools in order to promote SDGs teaching and learning. Some of these projects were purposely developed to promote knowledge on the SDGs in general, while a few were born even before the 2030 Agenda was created but were already meant to raise awareness on sustainability and to enable young people to become responsible and respectful adults. We also included international projects that are currently being implemented in the participating countries.

The following table is the synthesis of the projects included in our analysis. It's important to note that this is not a complete and exhaustive list of all the school projects on the SDGs that exist in the countries involved. We decided to focus on large scale initiatives at the regional, national or international levels. Other smaller actions carried out locally or by single schools getting more and more active on the topic exist.

| PROJECT NAME | LOCATION | MAIN WEBSITE |
|---|----------|---|
| CAP2030 – « Les ODD, de l'ONU à ma rue » | Belgium | https://cap2030.be/ |
| Éducation et formation au développement durable | Belgium | www.efdd-asbl.org |
| Label Ecole durable | Belgium | www.ecoledurable.be |
| Label Eco-School | Belgium | http://www.ecoschools.be/wallonie |
| UN Young | Denmark | https://un.dk/visit/schools/ |
| Verdensmål i undervisningen | Denmark | https://emu.dk/verdensmaal |
| Schools for climate, places of resilience and change | Greece | https://schools4climate.weebly.com/ |
| 17 SDGs of the UN: the case of gender equality through folk tales | Greece | https://kpe-drapets-new.att.sch.gr/ |
| La corsa contro la fame | Italy | https://azionecontrolafame.it/scuole/ |



| | | |
|--|---------------|---|
| sCOOLFOOD | Italy | https://scoolfood.fondazionemps.it/#dipi_popup-3935#popup_on_load |
| Get up and goals! | Italy | https://www.getupandgoals.it/ |
| GenerAzione 2030 – Alleanze Regionali per l’Educazione alla Cittadinanza Globale ECG | Italy | https://www.regione.toscana.it/-/generazione-2030-alleanze-regionali-per-l-educazione-alla-cittadinanza-globale-ecg- |
| Il racconto per un futuro sostenibile. Lo storytelling per avvicinare gli studenti agli obiettivi dell’Agenda 2030 per lo sviluppo sostenibile | Italy | https://www.eurosafia.it/images/schede_tecniche/SCHEDA%20TECNICA STORYTELLING.pdf |
| Agenda 2030: scuole in azione nel Parco Valle Lambro | Italy | https://www.parcovallelambro.it/progetto-21-agenda-2030-scuole-azione-nel-parco-valle-lambro |
| Agente 0011 | Italy | https://agente0011.it/ |
| Youth 4 impact | International | https://aiesec.org/project/1280515 |
| The Goals Project | International | https://www.goalsproject.org/ |
| SDGs Action! | International | https://sites.google.com/view/sustainabledevelopmentgoalsact/the-project?authuser=0 |
| Human Differences: What Keeps Us Apart? | International | www.humandifferences.com |
| Innovation project | International | https://www.innovation-project.info/ |
| The World’s largest lesson | International | https://worldslargestlesson.globalgoals.org/ |

The boxes included in the following paragraphs contain more detailed descriptions of some of the projects that can be taken as examples.

Existing projects analysis: strengths and weaknesses, good practices and gaps

- *General structure and integration in the school curriculum*

We compared the identified projects with the recommendations provided by some of the guidelines on sustainability, prevention and health promotion programs in schools (Catalano et al., 2004; European Commission, 2022; Nation et al., 2003; Simovska & McNamara, 2016; Young, St Leger & Buijs, 2012): one of the main positive aspects that can be noted, is that most projects are very well structured. Many have also been going on for years now, making improvements and adjustments over time possible, also thanks to increased experience.

In general, the identified projects seem to have clear goal descriptions and methodology. Spot initiatives, such as single intervention by an external expert in the classroom, are less common than what could be expected. However, having selected regional or national level projects, our analysis might have missed smaller scale initiatives that are more subject to the risk of using designs that are less sound or not well-planned.

Several projects identified are well designed also in terms of integration with the school curriculums. This is a key factor for success and for the sustainability of the project itself: when



integrated into the school curriculum, a project is no longer perceived as an optional “extra”, but as part of the teaching and learning process (Darlington et al., 2021; Simovska & McNamara, 2016; WHO & UNESCO, 2021; Young, St Leger & Buijs, 2012). This happens, for example, in Greece, where children in primary schools read texts and discuss about inequalities, climate change and similar topics in the classroom as part of the daily lessons.

“sCOOLFOOD+” - Italy

sCOOLFOOD+ has been going on since 2016 and is currently in its eighth edition. It involves 3 operating partners, 10 project partners and 18 scientific partners. Its main objective is generating change within the educational community through the inclusion in the school curriculum of relevant topics and competence for sustainable development. One of its strengths is being well structured and integrated into the school curriculum: it lasts for the whole school cycle, with 30 hours per school year divided into 3 strands every year on different topics. Each strand includes 10 units: 1 basic unit and 5 booster sessions.

Of course, some exceptions still exist, such as Greek secondary schools, where these projects are often implemented as an extra-curriculum activity in the afternoon for a few pupils. Likewise, when describing the project UN Young, the Danish partners also warn and draw attention to the fact that, if teachers do not follow up on the project’s activities themselves, the risk is that the project becomes just an isolated visit outside school. If so, it cannot make a difference and it’s not linked to any of the school’s subjects, becoming an add on rather than an add in. In such cases, the integration in the curriculum becomes a teachers’ active effort.

- ***Targets***

Another asset of the projects identified is that options are available for all ages. Many projects can be implemented in both primary and secondary schools and more in general, the variety of existing options targets different school levels and activities are thought to address different age groups. This is extremely relevant because students can be exposed to the SDGs topics since they are very young and grow up accompanied by these topics that are resumed more than once. On the other hand, having this many options, the risk is that what selected might not be well-targeted and specifically tailored for a given group.

The total number of schools or students reached by the identified projects also represents a strength. As mentioned above, some projects are lasting over time and have now been going on for around 10 years, which means the target reached has grown bigger and bigger, counting thousands of schools and pupils involved.

“The World’s largest lesson” - international

The best example in terms of the size of the target reached is “The World’s largest lesson”, an international project mentioned by the Danish partners but currently widespread all around the world. It was developed in 2015 in partnership with UNICEF and with the support of UNESCO. Its main goal is to advocate for education for sustainable development and



encourage the use of the SDGs through formal education systems. This is done through a database of resources and creative tools for educators and action focused learning experiences for children and young people that build skills and motivation to take action for the SDGs. It is a bank of materials combined with annual campaigns. By 2019, it had reached 17.9 million children located in over 160 countries around the world.

There are also examples of initiatives originally born on a smaller scale and later adapted in order to be extended to larger target groups. It is the case of sCOOLFOOD+, described in the previous paragraph. Initially developed in its classical version on a provincial/regional scale, it was later enriched with a new version named “sCOOLFOOD Smart”. The new version of the programme can be adopted by all the Italian primary schools that want to join, as it mainly consists of online tools that can be easily exported to reach more schools.

- *Whole-school approach*

The whole-school approach, normally used with reference to health promotion, claims that, in order to be effective, interventions should involve all parts of the school, which should be working together and be engaged. This approach has been taken into consideration also with reference to environmental sustainability (European Commission, 2022; Simovska & McNamara, 2016). A whole school approach to sustainability seeks to embed learning for environmental sustainability across the institution. It adopts a systemic view of education creating opportunities for living and learning sustainability across the education environment.

Projects on the SDGs identified by our research are heterogeneous, and the extent to which they involve the whole school community varies. In Belgium, some projects involve the whole school community and give a lot of attention to the school physical environment. The consciousness related to the physical spaces of the school is generally present at the European level in such projects that focus on SDGs that are more closely connected to environmental sustainability topics, such as school projects aiming at recycling or waste reduction. Projects identified by the Danish partners often share the good practice of including the SDGs simultaneously in teaching, management, organization and operation. The content is aimed at both the teaching staff and the school management, and there are even pilot initiatives for schools to be certified as “SDGs schools”. In Italy, projects tend to involve students and teachers, while the management is less taken into consideration and should be further engaged.

- *Materials*

The availability of a great number of materials to support teachers in carrying out SDG’s related activities is definitely a positive element that emerged from our projects’ analysis. Plenty of modules, lessons, activity suggestions, multimedia tools etc., can be easily found online. Even outside formal projects or programmes proposed to schools, free access resources can be accessed to dedicated databases, libraries and collections. The international project “The world’s largest lesson” mentioned in the previous paragraph is a great example of this abundance of resources, since it encompasses a real bank of materials with a lot of materials that can be retrieved through an easy-to-use search function.



Verdensmål i undervisningen – Denmark

A national example of resources availability is the Danish project “Verdensmål i undervisningen”.

Developed by the Danish Ministry of education, it supports the development of sustainable education and pedagogy. It is a site that brings together teaching activities, examples of good practices and articles on global goal didactics. It is not a proper project but a well-known database with a variety of types of materials, including subject-specific resources. It is useful to inspire individual teachers in the planning of their own teaching, and to inspire leading staff to collaborate across educational institutions.

With reference to materials, however, some gaps still need to be filled. In Greece, materials availability is still somewhat critical: there is a need to make relevant educational material in the Greek language more visible and easily accessible for more teachers. This is not because resources do not exist, but rather because the projects are not easily visible and it's not easy for a teacher to get access to the educational materials if he/she is not part of the region where a given project is currently implemented. Therefore, it's not possible to find the resources in Greek unless someone is told where to look for them, since the schools actually invited to participate in projects are not many.

Moreover, a weak point that needs to be highlighted for all the countries involved, is that even if materials are available, their adoption is very fragmented and depends on each school/teacher good will. Coordination at the national level seems to be absent, and no official or mandatory proposal for everybody can be identified.

- *Coordination, management and access to projects*

The issue of top-down coordination from a national or regional level should be further taken into consideration and enhanced by governments and institutions. It's something that does not only impact the availability and uniformity of materials that are to be found in different platforms, but is also important in terms of equity and access to the same projects' offers and opportunities.

There's an increasing need to standardize and make projects more homogeneous at the regional or national level instead of having a number of projects leaving to the single school initiative. This would allow for a stronger methodological accuracy, and would provide more opportunities to enhance the initiative's rigorous implementation, as observed for larger-scale projects.

Efforts in this direction have already been undertaken. Some projects offer inspiration to enlarge schools' networks and collaborate across institution, and some initiatives are very widespread and allow for a homogenization of the activities at least locally. Moreover,



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projects are explicitly supported by the public authorities (e.g., Label Ecole Durable in Belgium), which promotes their even implementation in the area.

- *Methodologies*

A surprisingly positive element of the identified projects is related to the methodologies used. Interactive, alternative and innovative techniques are offered more than would be expected, even if some exceptions in which more traditional activities and classroom-taught lessons can still be found.

Overall, the majority of the initiatives described by all the European partners involved, are projects or programmes that give students the chance to experience and work with the SDGs in alternative ways. They usually bring together teaching activities, examples of practices and suggestions for active and innovative didactics. Co-construction, co-design, experience sharing and practical exchanges are often part of the picture, together with group work and participatory and phased actions. Active and cooperative learning and playful techniques are also quite common and used to work on the engagement and motivation of both teachers and students. For example, we can find training seminars, educational material with board games and quizzes, events, competitions and other practical activities on the field.

SDGs Action! - international

It's an international Erasmus+ project that aimed to prepare the next generations of students to function sustainably in our interconnected world and integrating the education of the UN global goals into the schools' curriculum. Even if it is a small-scale project, it is a good example of innovative and interactive methodologies used to promote collaboration between kids. Involved schools were requested to create presentations on a given SDG, use the presentation to prepare scratch games and then create board games. It stimulated creativity and actively involved kids through active learning and gamification.

- *Storytelling method*

Even if innovative and interactive methods to teach about the SDGs are very common, the use of the storytelling method is not frequent yet. This definitely represents a gap that PLACES should keep into consideration and help solving, since the power of narrative approaches could promote engagement towards the SDGs.

Among the projects identified by our analysis, only 2 are specifically based on storytelling.

"Il racconto per un future sostenibile. Lo storytelling per avvicinare gli studenti agli obiettivi dell'Agenda 2030 per lo sviluppo sostenibile" - Italy

This professional course consists of a training for teachers precisely developed to use the storytelling method in order to interest students in the SDGs. Through this project, teachers should become more familiar with the method and be able to use storytelling as a potentially effective tool for self-representation, personal expression and social action, to promote creativity, multi-modal narrative and citizenship competences.



Even if the project is definitely in line with PLACES objectives, it must be noted that it is an isolated private initiative with a subscription fee. It's a short-duration intervention that only lasts 10 hours and focuses on teachers' training but does not include any other aspect of the school community.

"17 SDGs of the UN: the case of gender equality through folk tales" - Greece

It is a Greek project developed and implemented by the trainers of the Environmental Center of Drapetsona. The Center regularly implements projects related to the SDGs and uses folk tales. Schools visit the Environmental Center and implement a 3-4 hours experiential workshop with activities and storytelling for the teachers and students (from all educational levels).

The methodology is based on experiential education through stories, in the seminars they use "word clouds", digital storytelling, and folk tales for the educators.

- *SDGs explicit knowledge and focus on SDG 3-4-10*

An element to be improved that has been highlighted by our analysis is connected to how SDGs topics are addressed in practical terms. As mentioned before, sometimes SDGs topics are only touched upon implicitly; this is frequent in Belgium and can also be experienced in Greece, where those topics can be well-integrated into the curriculum but might not be referred to as SDGs as such.

Moreover, it happens in all European countries that not all the SDGs are covered by existing projects and activities, and no clear indication of how to work with a specific Goal at a certain students' age or level is provided.

Italian and Danish partners also pointed out a tendency to focus more and put more emphasis on nature science and on goals that are more strictly linked to the environment intended as the physical and natural ecosystem. When projects focus on all the SDGs more in general, it's possible to address sustainability in a broader sense, using a wide perspective.

In light of this, the specific focus and attention to SDGs 3, 4 and 10 and on inequalities and inclusion will be a distinctive characteristic of the PLACES project.

The focus on health promotion is also lacking in existing projects on the SDGs that we could identify at national and international levels. Sometimes, activities also aim at well-being at schools in general terms, but a proper focus on health promotion is absent.

- *Evaluation and effectiveness*

A critical aspect that is apparent in all the countries involved is the lack of evaluation of existing projects. We could not identify any project that has been properly assessed in order to measure its impacts. Even when seemingly sound methodologies are used, project developers do not usually clarify if a given programme is based on scientific evidence.



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Some attempts are ongoing: for instance, for the Greek project "17 SDGs of the UN: the case of gender equality through folk tales" mentioned above, developers are currently researching and planning a qualitative evaluation through interviews and questionnaires.

To sum up, there's a noticeable need to plan sound evaluation protocols in order to understand which activities are truly effective in promoting SDGs knowledge and young people engagement towards them.

- *Stakeholders and families' involvement*

The extent to which external stakeholders and students' families are involved in school projects on the SDGs varies a lot from country to country and from project to project. Generally speaking, in the Italian context parents and community engagement are emphasized frequently, by both policy documents and projects themselves. Families should be involved in school events and various stakeholders should be part of projects planning and development. Differently, the Greek partner underlines the need to further involve community members and families in the activities. For Denmark and Belgium, the level of stakeholders' involvement is not easy to assess. However, when external stakeholders are involved, it is mostly during the project design phases, rather than during activities implementation.

1.3 Conclusions

To sum up, the analysis carried out among PLACES European partners showed that the SDGs are to some extent part of school teaching in all the countries involved. In some cases, policy documents explicitly require schools to work on the SDGs, while in others they are implicitly included through similar educational objectives to be reached. Overall, the importance of sustainability topics and Agenda 2030 is increasing at all school levels. A recurring element is that policy frameworks do not go into the details of how SDGs activities should be implemented in schools: they provide recommendations and suggestions, but schools are autonomously in charge of defining the activities to be realized. Many materials are available for teachers but it is unclear if the platforms are really used. Policy documents recognize and underline how sustainability should be encompassed and developed across all disciplines, promoting its complete integration into the school curriculum. Moreover, involving the community in delivering knowledge and awareness on sustainability is promoted but it is difficult to understand to which extent such involvement is taking place.

The existing projects analysis showed that several projects are available for schools to be implemented, at local, regional, national and international levels. Databases with resources and materials on SDGs didactics are also common.

Existing projects and programmes are very different from one another and aim to introduce the SDGs in schools through a variety of strategies, but some prevailing underlying characteristics can be identified.



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Positive elements and good practices of the projects identified are:

- The use of interactive, innovative and playful techniques and methods;
- The target reached, that is getting bigger and bigger and involves all school levels, from kindergarten to high-schools;
- The availability of a wide range of materials;
- The increasing integration of the SDGs in the school curriculum and attention to the whole school community.

On the other hand, critical points and elements that still need to be filled are:

- The target of many projects is not well defined
- The scarcity of evaluation activities, to assess the effectiveness of the projects;
- The absence of coordination and management at the regional/national level, in order to make implementation consistent and homogeneous among schools in a given area;
- The storytelling method is not used extensively yet, and this could be a strength and an innovating characteristic of the PLACES project;
- Also playful learning and design thinking are less exploited methods in relation to the SDGs.
- There's the need to focus more on health and inequalities topics and on specific SDGs. Currently, most projects address the SDGs in general or give more attention to environmental issues. PLACES could help fill in this gap, thanks to its focus on SDGs 3,4 and 10 combined with its attention to health promotion and inclusion.
- The extent to which the projects involve the whole school community varies between countries

According to these results, the PLACES project is strongly linked to the last developments of school policies and curriculum. The importance of SDGS, their integration in the school curriculum and the whole school community is increasing at all school levels in all countries. Moreover, PLACES can contribute to filling the lack of specific didactic tools and support effective methods, such as storytelling, playful learning and design thinking.

The PLACES project has also a very good opportunity to connect with all the other international projects. At the same time, the national and international programmes, which already exist, very easily can benefit from PLACES.

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2. TEACHERS NEEDS ANALYSIS

2.1 Introduction

In the framework of the European Needs Analysis foreseen by Work Package 2 of PLACES project, we developed a questionnaire in order to gather data from the teacher’s perspective. Since teachers are the ultimate persons in charge of dealing with pupils in schools, delivering specific activities and addressing SDGs topics, the teachers’ needs analysis is clearly a crucial element.

The needs analysis among teachers aims to assess their knowledge and opinions about the SDGs, playful learning and storytelling. Moreover, the questionnaire is useful to understand which practices are already in place, how and when teachers implement dedicated activities and which barriers they face. Through such a questionnaire, it is possible to clarify not only if teachers are already familiar with the SDGs and with storytelling but also how learning about SDGs can become a more qualified and integrated part of teaching in schools.

The questionnaire was developed by the working group from Bicocca University with the contribution of all the project partners, who agreed on the final version that was later translated into the 4 partners’ languages. Qualtrics software was used to distribute the questionnaire to a specific link and to collect the replies.

2.2 Sample

All PLACES partners were in charge of disseminating the questionnaire in their country, among teachers from primary and lower secondary schools (students aged approx. 6 to 14).

We collected a total of 198 questionnaires. However, the number of questionnaires collected in the different countries varies significantly. To have a more balanced sample, we randomly selected 40 questionnaires from the Italian sample and included all the questionnaires from the other countries. This sample is more useful to reflect the global situation instead of focusing too much on the Italian context.

Therefore, this report is based on the analysis of 118 questionnaires, as shown in the following table:

| | PARTIALLY FILLED IN QUESTIONNAIRES | INCLUDED QUESTIONNAIRES |
|--------------|---|--------------------------------|
| Belgium | 30 | 30 |
| Denmark | 11 | 11 |
| Greece | 37 | 37 |
| Italy | 120 | 40 |
| TOTAL | 198 | 118 |

Table 1. N° of questionnaires per country



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In line with international trends of teachers' populations, the vast majority of the included respondents is female (more than 75%, as shown in Chart 1).

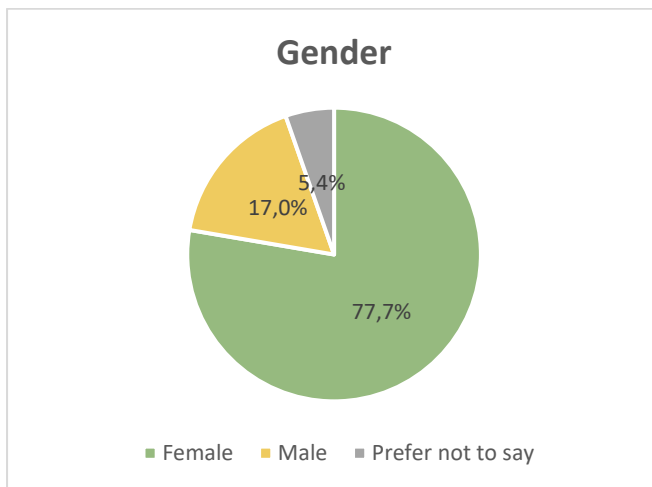


Chart 1. Gender composition of the sample

More than 90% of the respondents work in public schools.

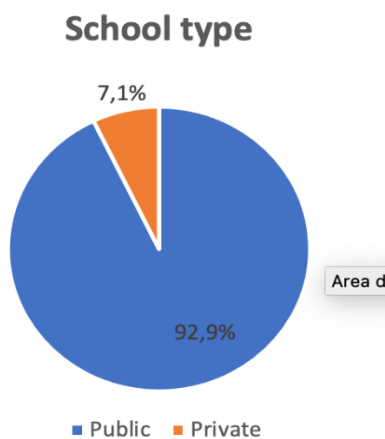


Chart 2. Composition of the sample according to the school type

The sample is more balanced in terms of teachers working in primary schools and lower high schools. Of a total of 118 questionnaires analyzed, 59 were by teachers working in primary schools, and 51 by teachers working in middle schools. Two teachers stated that they work at both levels and 6 did not reply to the question. It must be noted that, given the international nature of the project, school levels may vary in the different countries involved. We asked to select the option that better applied to the national context of reference choosing primary schools if working with students aged approximately 6-10, or middle/lower high school if working with students aged approximately 11-14.



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The teachers included in the sample tend to have quite a long professional experience, as 43,4% (n= 49) have been doing this job for more than 20 years.



Chart 3. Years of professional experience

Of course, teachers can teach a variety of different subjects. In the following chart, data on the subjects taught by the teachers included in the sample are shown. It's important to highlight that, while some teachers are specialized in a specific subject, many affirm they teach all the subjects, or a significant number of different subjects among the ones in the list. This is particularly true for teachers who work with very young children in primary schools, where the distinction between different disciplines is not neat yet, and the educational role of teachers is broader and less focused on specific content. This role can be shaped in different ways based on the country, but to give an example, it corresponds to what in Belgium is referred to as "instituteur/rice primaire".

Something similar happens with teachers who support children with special needs in the classroom. Their role is cross-cutting and does not focus on a single subject.

| Subject | respondents teaching it | Subject | respondents teaching it |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| National culture and language | 21% | Social science and civics | 10,2% |
| Math | 14,4% | Technology or IT | 2,5% |
| Foreign language | 14,4% | Music | 2,5% |
| Sciences | 12,7% | Religion | 4,2% |
| Physical Education | 5,9% | All subjects or more than 5 subjects | 22,9% |
| Arts | 6,8% | Special needs teachers | 8,5% |
| History | 13,6% | Workshops or practical courses | 8,5% |
| Geography | 8,5% | | |

Table 2. Subjects taught by the teachers included in the sample

2.3 Results

Knowledge about the SDGs

- *Self-reported knowledge*

Teachers seem to be very cautious when assessing their levels of knowledge in relation to the SDGs. The 38,5% state they know what the SDGs are, but only “to some extent”. Apparently, there’s room for improvement, as 10% of the sample is totally unaware of the SDGs and their meaning.

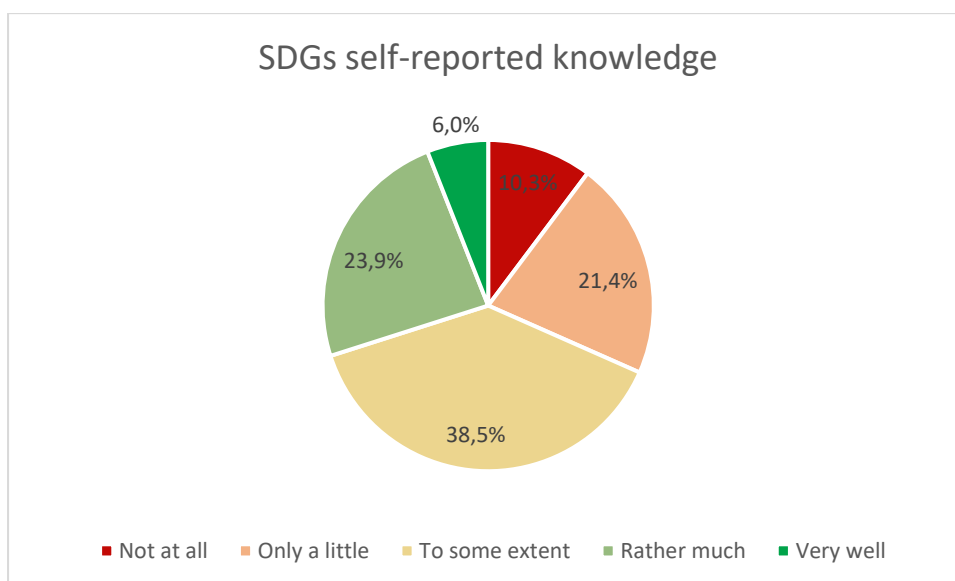


Chart 4. SDGs self-reported knowledge. Responses rate to “How well do you think you know the SDGs?”

- *Representations of SDGs topics*

In order to investigate teachers’ representations of the SDGs, they were asked their opinion on which topics are addressed by the SDG. The list of topics included the environment, health, education, inequalities and economy and production. As shown in the chart below, teachers mostly recognize that all those topics are related to the SDGs. However, environmental topics are still perceived as more closely connected to the SDGs than the rest. Some respondents also reported other topics that were not included among the ones listed in the question. The additional themes mentioned by teachers refer to more general aspects (such as “overcoming barriers” or “citizenship”) or to other SDGs (“peace” or “gender equality”). Some respondents also mentioned themes that are interesting because they can be interpreted as a representation of the SDGs as something that has a direct impact on people’s lives: this is the case for answers as “professional orientation” or “free time”.

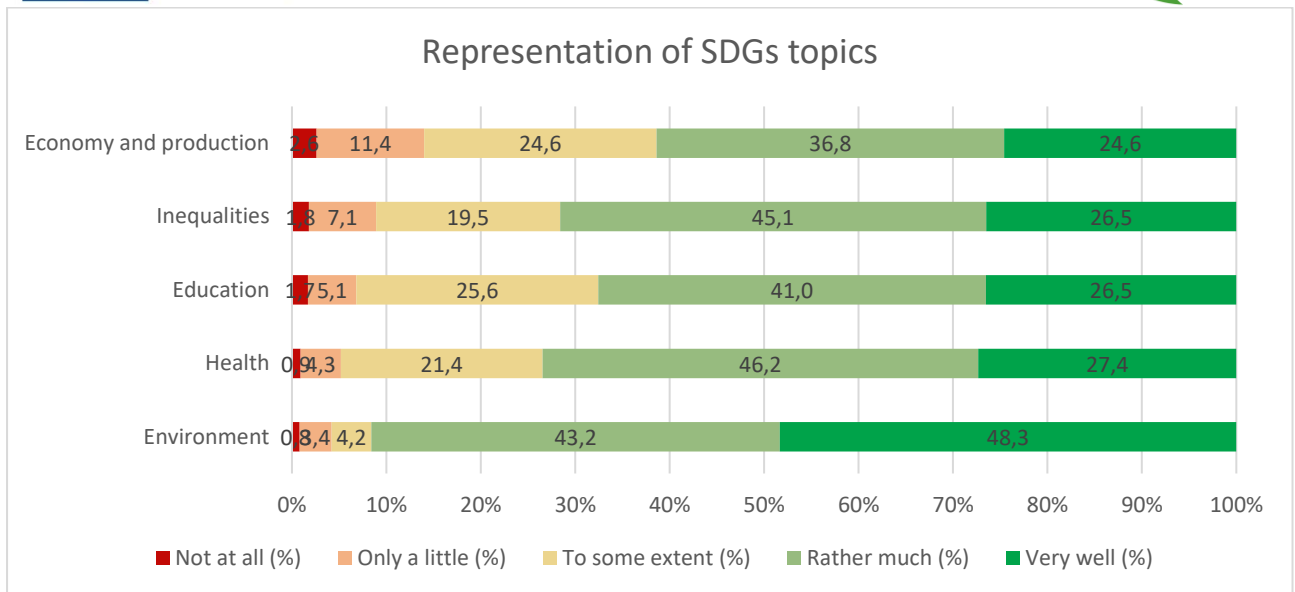


Chart 5. Representations of SDGS topics. Response rates to “In your opinion, which of the following topic(s) is/are addressed by the SDGs?”

- *Sources of information and training needs*

Knowledge of SDGs related matters can spring from a number of different sources, and people can learn about the existence of Agenda 2030 and its objectives in different ways. Personal non-work-related interest seems to be the main driver that makes teachers look for information on these themes. This is consistent with the fact that, when knowledge comes from formal training, this is less frequently provided by the school system than by external providers. This might be an indication of trainings received due to personal initiative. The personal network of family and friends is the least relevant source, while among the media traditional ones are slightly more central than new media.

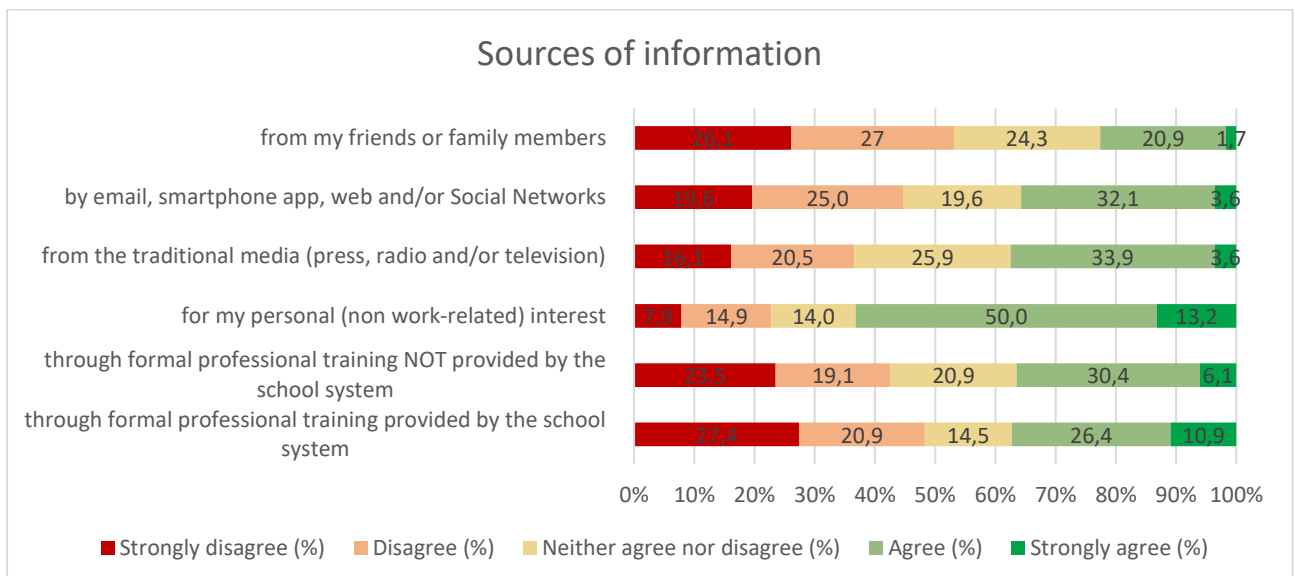


Chart 6. Sources of information. Response rates to “I have received information about the SDGs...”



With reference to training needs, the vast majority of the teachers involved claims they would need additional training on the SDGs, both to be able to teach about the SDGs to their students and to improve their own knowledge about the topic. A very limited and residual percentage of respondents (3,4%) say they don't need additional training. This shows that teachers recognize the importance of increasing their literacy on the topic and can be interpreted as a signal of an existing gap in terms of training. PLACES project needs to value this information and build on the awareness that structured and effective training materials can be extremely relevant.

Opinion about the SDGs and about teaching the SDGs

- *Impact of SDGs and personal role in the SDGs*

In order to explore teachers' opinions on the importance of the SDGs, they were asked to express their thoughts with respect to the impact of the SDGs on people's lives. Alongside this, the role they believe they can play in relation to the SDGs was also investigated.

It's important to highlight that teachers were requested to express their opinions even if they don't use the SDGs in their professional activity.

On both dimensions, answers were extremely positive: on one side, teachers recognize that the impact of the SDGs is significant, and on the other side they also believe they can play an important role in doing something in relation to sustainable development (Chart 7).

A noteworthy element is that teachers' replies become even more positive when they are asked about their students instead of themselves. In terms of impacts, they believe the SDGs can have a great impact on them, but the impact on their students' lives is perceived as even greater. This might be due to the young age of the students, indicating that teachers are aware of the continuously increasing importance of the goals, which will be even more critical for future generations. This hypothesis can be supported by the fact that, as demonstrated by the questionnaires' results, teachers tend to perceive environmental and climate issues as the core of sustainable development, and we know that the climate crisis will, without a doubt impact the younger generations.

Consistently, teachers think they can play a role in reaching the SDGs, but they are even more convinced they can have a role as professionals in making students aware of the SDGs. Once again, when they "see" the SDGs mediated by their students' eyes, the perceived effects are more intense. In this specific case, a similar result can mean they strongly believe in their educational potential and are more confident when they think about themselves as pedagogical figures instead of single individuals. By teaching, potential effects can be multiplied as they reach many more people with cascading effects. This reminds us that teachers are engaged in their mission and that PLACES should positively take advantage of this starting point.

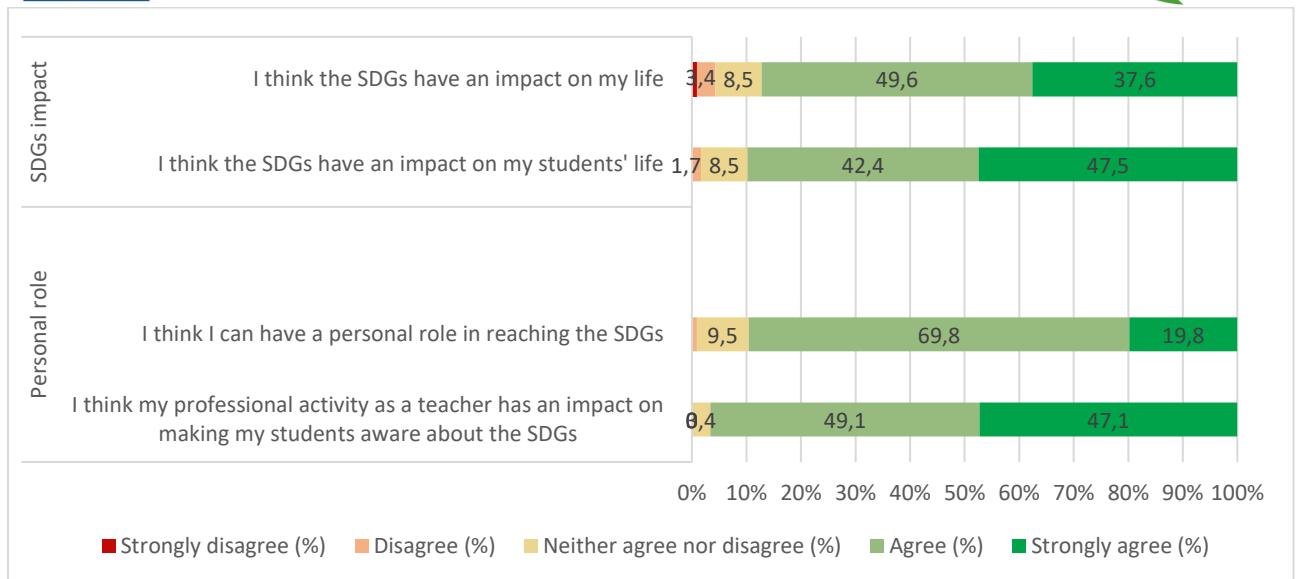


Chart 7. Impact of SDGs and personal role on SDGs. Response rates to “Please rate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following sentences”

- *Attitudes towards SDGs inclusion in school activities*

In line with their opinions on the relevance of the SDGs, teachers’ attitudes towards the inclusion of those topics in school activities also seem to be very positive. On one side, they would be personally happy of teaching the SDGs. On the other side, they would also welcome the official inclusion of the SDGs in the school curriculum and the provision of more dedicated time to do so. Thus, they appear willing to commit and be engaged both at the individual level and as part of the bigger school system.

However, when asked about the school they work for, they express slightly more negative feelings and believe the school does not always support the introduction of the SDGs in school teaching. This could be an indication of a gap between what would be ideally and theoretically desirable, and what is concretely feasible with the space and resources provided by the specific institution. School readiness and openness to innovation in general, will be further discussed in a dedicated paragraph.

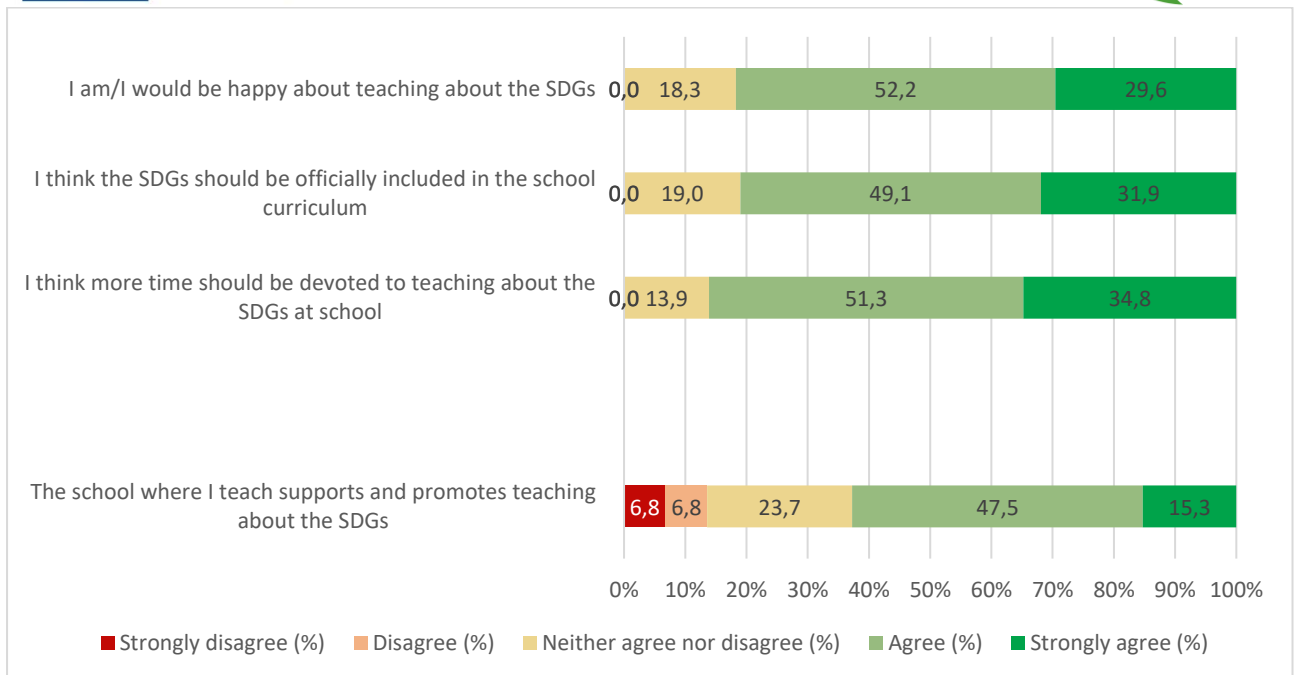


Chart 8. Attitude towards SDG inclusion at school. Response rates to “Please rate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following sentences”

- *Perceived positive effects of SDGs teaching*

In order to get a deeper understanding of teachers’ perspective, we investigated their opinion on potential beneficial effects that could arise from teaching the SDGs.

Overall, they agree with the positive effects identified (Chart 9) and recognize the multiple benefits that can be obtained thanks to SDGs teaching. This is true for benefits to students and to the school climate in general, but also for benefits to teachers themselves.

Analyzing the answers more in detail, it can be noted that with respect to positive effects on students’ outcomes, they believe SDGs teaching can impact more on health outcomes than on academic outcomes. This can mean that they fully understand the importance of the SDGs in achieving physical and mental health, but they might be a bit less aware of the direct and strong inter-connection between students’ health and their academic results. However, research on health promotion at school has long shown that healthier students learn better, and vice-versa, students with good academic achievements feel better and benefit from improved wellbeing.

When it comes to the positive effect on them, teachers believe it can be greater in terms of increased individual professional skills, rather than in terms of collaboration with colleagues. The difference is quite limited, and would probably be explained by a general persuasion of being more able to strengthen personal competences, while improving relationships with colleagues is usually more difficult.

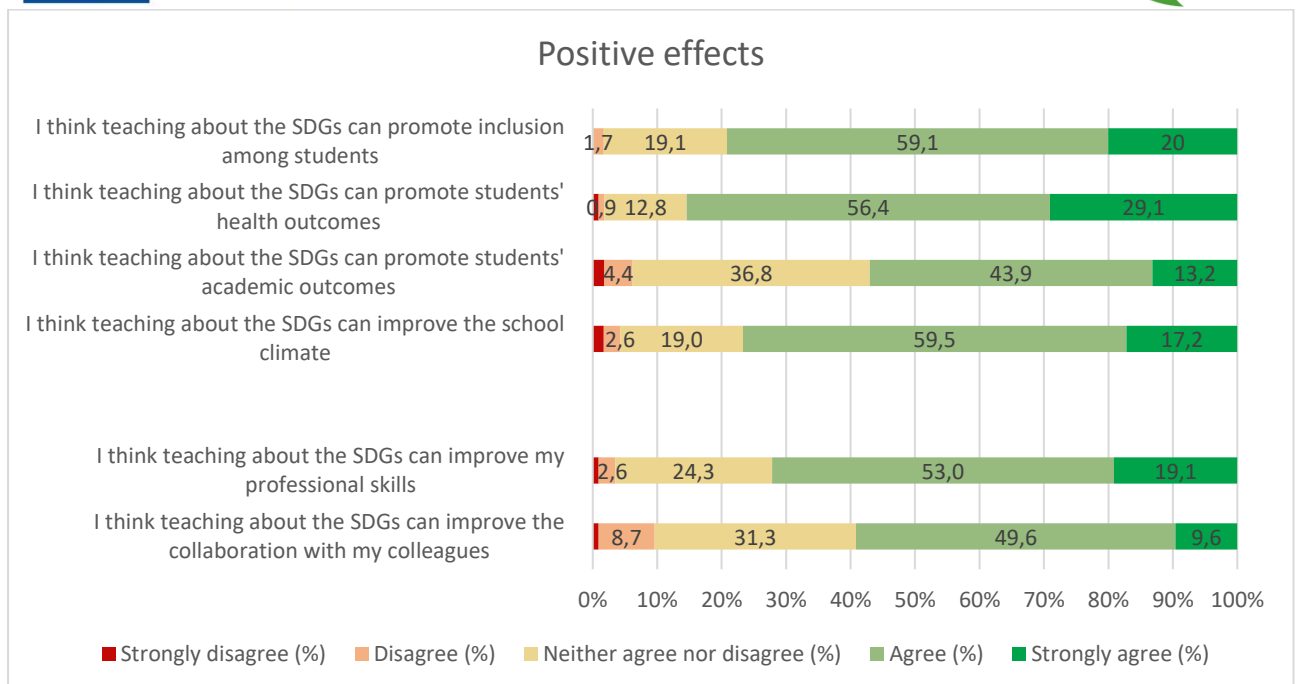


Chart 8. Positive effects of SDGs teaching. Response rates to “Please rate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following sentences”

- *Perceived barriers to SDGs teaching*

Teachers were presented with a list of potential barriers and obstacles that could hinder SDGs teaching, in order to understand whether agree or not with the importance of each barrier. The potential barriers displayed in the proposed list have to do with three broad conceptual areas: time constraints, lack of resources and relevance of the topic for the school. Overall, the answers tend to be distributed among the different options, which means teachers hold different opinions about a given barrier: some think it can prevent them from teaching the SDGs, some others are not influenced by that same obstacle.

Besides these general considerations, it’s worth focusing on some of these items more specifically, as the results can provide meaningful information.

The item related to the relevance is not perceived as a real barrier (45,2% strongly disagree and 47,8% disagree). This is consistent with previous results and confirms once again that teachers recognize the importance of teaching the SDGs: if they don’t, the reason needs to be found somewhere else and it’s not because they are not interested in the topic per se. Two items were referred to pupils’ families, but also in this case potential interference in family matters or parents’ disagreement don’t seem to be the main obstacle to teaching the SDGs at school. Similarly, the lack of self-efficacy and of confidence in their ability to teach the SDGs is not considered as a central element.

Things change when we take into consideration time availability: a significant percentage of teachers believe they wouldn’t have enough time to teach about SDGs topics or worry that it would be just an extra-assignment added on top of their tasks. This is confirmed by the fact



that, when asked if they could identify additional barriers, some respondents mentioned the issue of having to follow the curricular program. Such a result is deserving of attention, because it indicates teachers still find it hard to see the SDGs as something integrated in the school curriculum and cross-cutting the different disciplines. They need to be given the right support in order to make this shift: teaching the SDGs will be easier and perceived as less time-consuming if it becomes really integrated into the curriculum as recommended by policy documents.

Moreover, the barriers perceived as the most significant among all are the ones related to the lack of proper materials and training. This is once again extremely important for PLACES projects, that could respond to this need of having enough training and materials to address the SDGs properly. PLACES should not only provide these tools, but also make them accessible and easy to implement. To conclude, among the additional barriers mentioned by the respondents there are two elements that should be taken into account when developing dedicated materials or training courses: “the lack of evaluation methods” and “the absence of an adaptation for kids with special needs”.

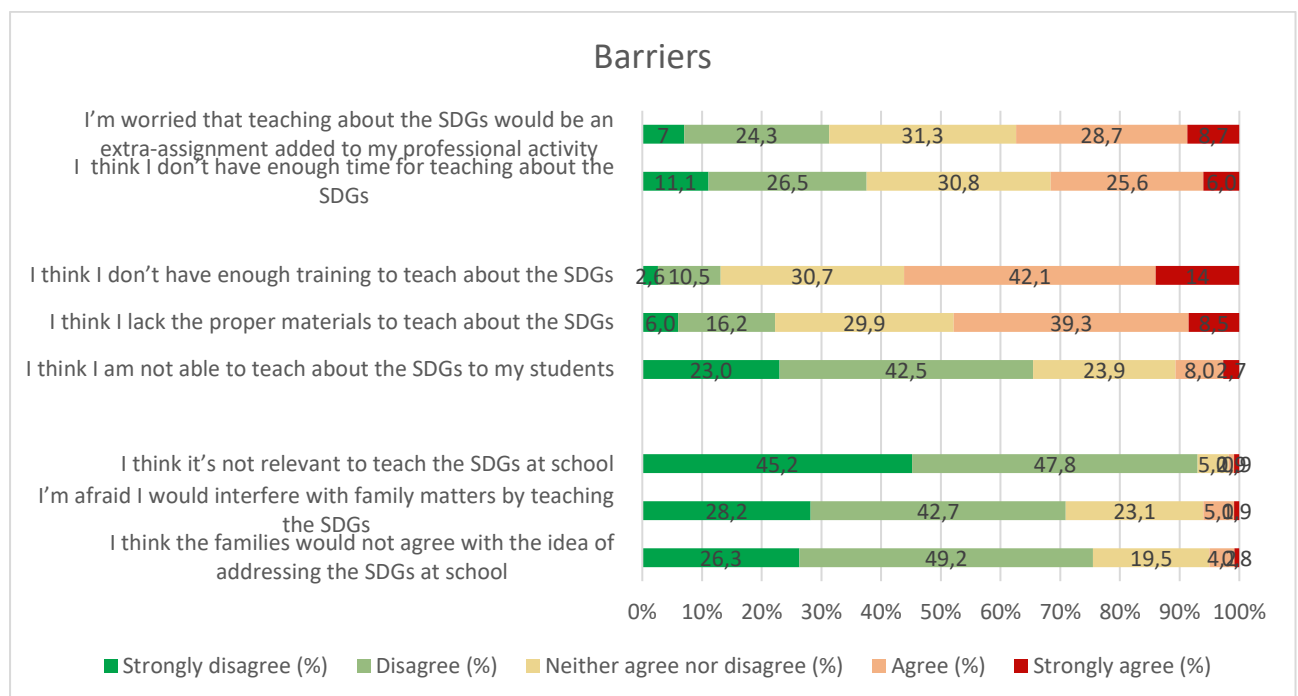


Chart 9. Barriers to SDGs teaching. Response rates to “Please rate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following sentences”

Implementation of SDGs activities at school

Following the analysis of teachers’ knowledge and opinions on the SDGs, it is important to have a clear understanding of if and how activities on the SDGs are practically included, implemented and delivered in schools.

First of all, teachers were asked if the SDGs, health promotion and environmental sustainability were included in their schools’ policies. As can be noticed (Chart 10), all topics



are included in the absolute majority of the cases, even if this happens more frequently on a voluntary basis instead of something mandatory for schools.

Sustainability and environmental topics are included more frequently, followed by health promotion. The SDGs, instead, are less frequently included compared to the other two. This is coherent with the results from the policy frameworks analysis, which highlighted how in European countries related topics and activities are often foreseen by policy documents, but the SDGs are addressed implicitly instead of being explicitly mentioned.

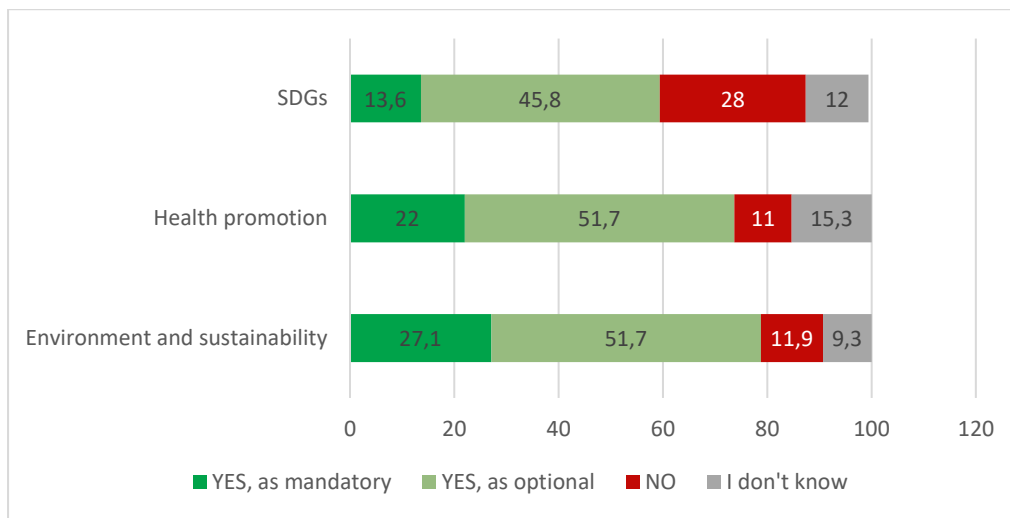


Chart 10. Topic inclusion. The response rate to “Are the following topics included in your school’s teaching policies?”

- *SDGs aspects specified in schools’ policies*

When the SDGs are included in the school policy, this is usually done through recommendations related to the general aims to be achieved with the students. Lesson contents are also specified quite frequently, while specific objectives to be achieved or teaching methods are less commonly included in those policies. This is once again consistent with the national and regional policy documents identified thanks to the European policy analysis, in which provisions and guidelines are usually broad and focused on general themes, while more specific choices and methodologies are left to each school’s autonomy. From the questionnaires’ results, it seems that national and regional policies patterns are reflected in schools’ policies as well.



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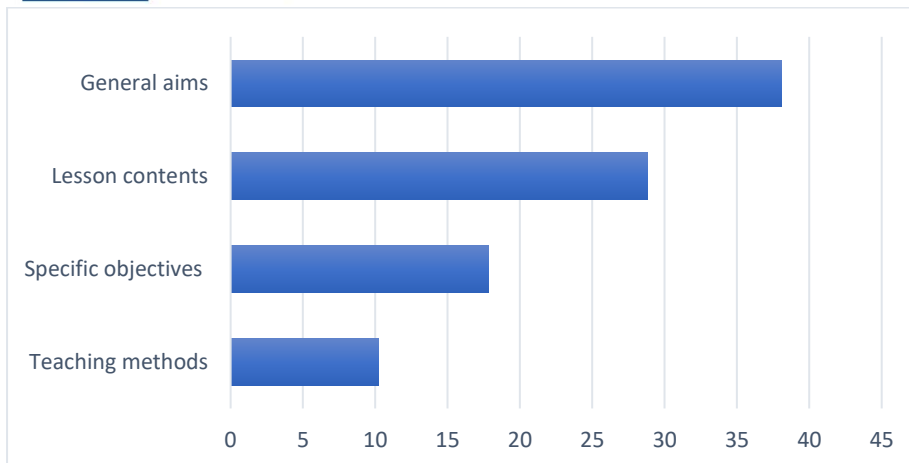


Chart 11. Aspects of the SDGs included. The response rate to “What aspects of teaching SDGs are specified in your school’s policies”

- *School subjects and SDGs*

The SDGs and the themes linked to environmental sustainability are extremely broad and touch upon a very large number of components of our lives. Thus, they could be addressed from a variety of perspectives and introduced into didactic contents through any discipline. In fact, international and national guidelines clarify that the best way to engage children is by integrating the SDGs in all subjects with a cross-sectional approach. However, “in all subjects” is still not the most frequent response among the teachers from our sample (Chart 12). Quite the opposite, the most recurring subject is social sciences and civics, closely followed by sciences; meaning that sustainable development topics are still partially confined to disciplines that are traditionally linked to environmental and citizenship issues.

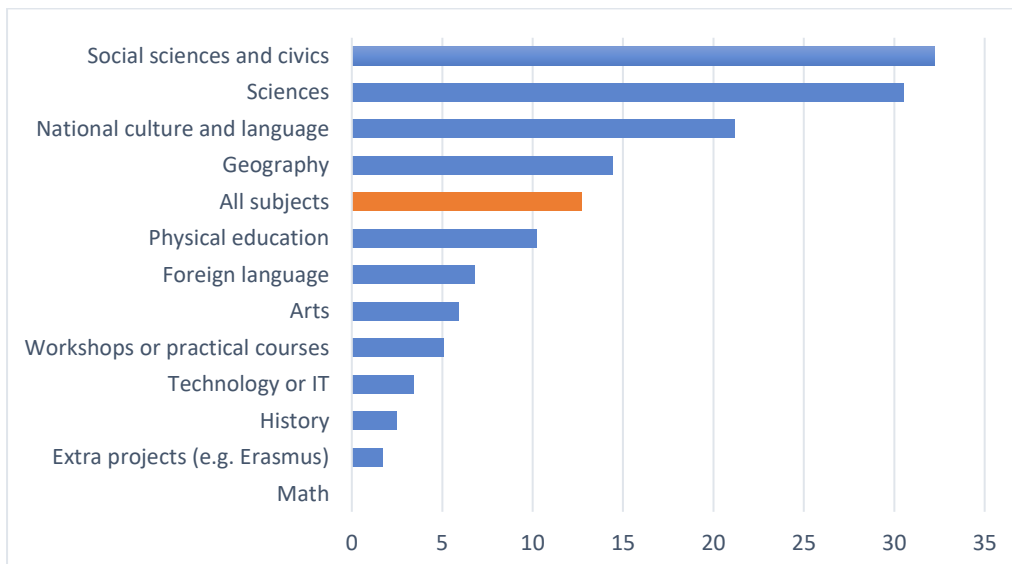


Chart 12. Subjects. Response rates to “In which subject(s) are the SDGs addressed in your school?”

- *Actor involved in SDGs activities delivery*

Addressing sustainability topics shouldn’t be an effort carried out by the school staff alone, because collaborations and connections with the surrounding community would be advisable.



However, this is not always in place, and when it is, the most frequently involved actor is represented by external experts. We know from research on health promotion activities at school that interventions by external experts are less effective than activities delivered by teachers, who are stable role models for children. This might probably be true for interventions on sustainable development as well.

Health services seem to be the least involved external stakeholder; however, their engagement could be valuable and should be promoted.

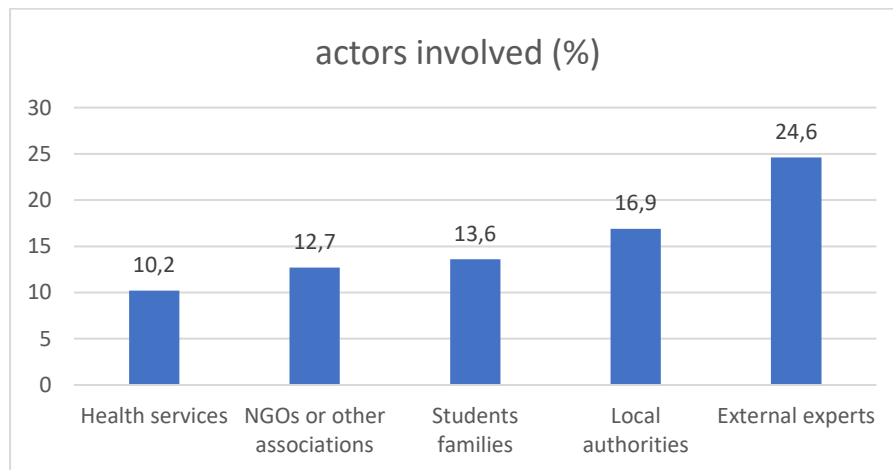


Chart 13. Actors involved. Response rates to “Are other actors involved in teaching the SDGs in your school?”

- *Teachers’ personal experience and practice of SDGs activities delivery*

Besides the school policies in place, we also wanted to understand what concrete personal experience respondents have with SDGs activity. This is key to be conscious of what practices are really undertaken day by day at school. Teachers have been asked to think about their teaching activities over the last three years.

Overall, teachers’ practices can vary a lot. However, the tendency to address health promotion and inequality reduction or SDGs related topics even if not familiar with the SDGs or without making explicit reference to the Goals seems to be widespread. At least, it is more common than explicitly talking about the SDGs during the lessons to improve students’ knowledge. This could be interpreted as encouraging data, since it can mean SDGs values are addressed with students in different disciplines more than it looks. If this is the case, it just needs to be brought to the surface in terms of explicit knowledge and literacy.

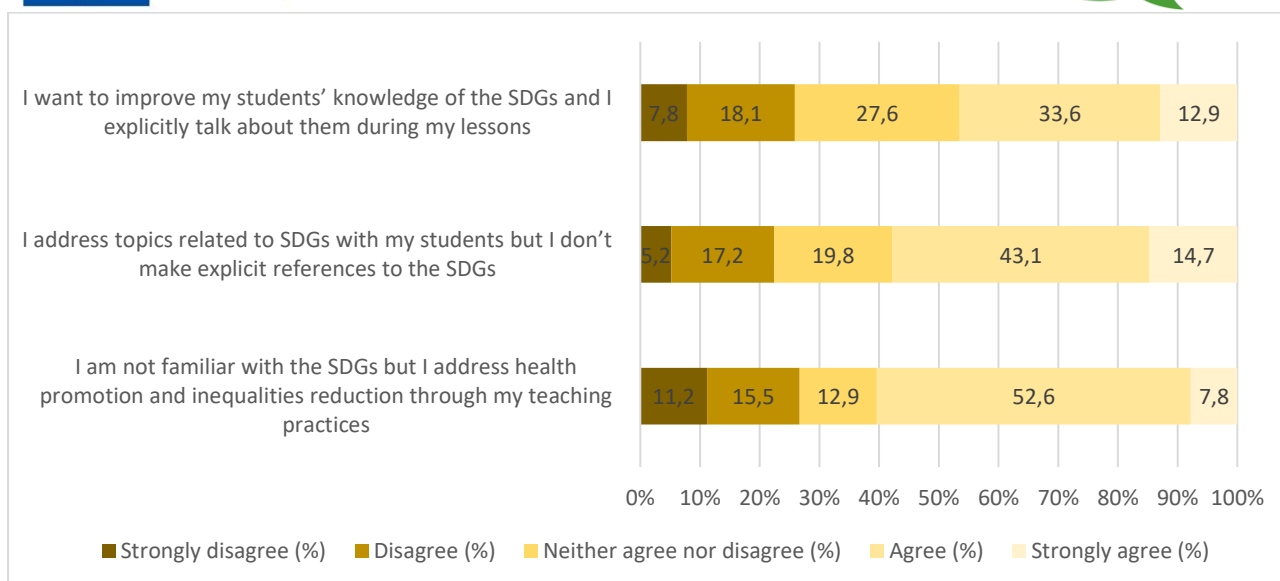


Chart 14. Teachers' experience with SDGs. Response rates to "Please rate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following sentences"

Not only the way to address the SDGs can vary, but also the amount of time devoted to teaching about those topics can differ a lot from teacher to teacher. When specifically asked, 10,3% of the respondents reported they never allocate time to deliver this kind of activity, 41,9% dedicates a few or some days a year, and 47,9% quite a lot of time, ranging from once a month to every week. This data shows that teachers are on average well engaged. This result could be due to the characteristics of our sample.

- *SDGs topics addressed by teachers*

To go more into the details of how teachers address the SDGs with their students, we did not only ask if they talk about those topics explicitly or not, but also which Goal(s) they target. In particular, we asked about Goals 3, 4 and 10, which are especially relevant for the PLACES project.

Responses are almost equally distributed among the option related to promoting the SDGs in general, the option of promoting SDG 3 on good health and well-being, and the option of promoting SDG 10 on inequalities reduction. Surprisingly, SDG 4 on quality education is a bit more overlooked. This probably happens because, being in school, it is taken for granted to some extent. In other words, teachers might feel the need to work on healthy behaviours and tackle disparities with their pupils, while quality education is not perceived as something "to be taught". However, this hypothesis should be further investigated, as this may also have to do with teachers' perceptions of what involves them or not. Moreover, in some countries, such as Greece, quality education is linked to national policies and depends on limited resources and funding for public education.

Respondents who reported working on other SDGs not included in the list of options, mentioned Goals that focus on the environment and climate change, once again confirming



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the existence of a representation of Agenda 2030 as something in which the environmental component prevails over the others.

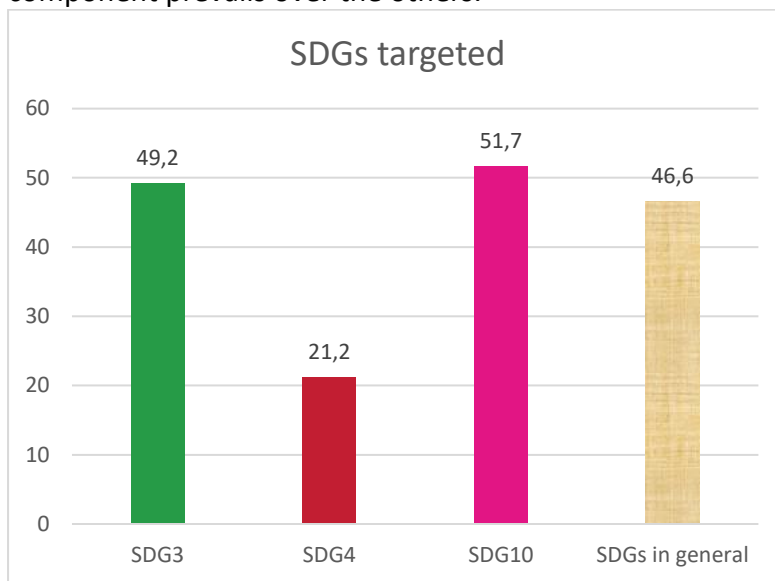


Chart 15. SDGs targeted. Response rates to “When teaching about the SDGs, which topic(s) do you target?”

- *Methods used for SDGs teaching*

Questionnaires results show that the teachers included in our research use a variety of methodologies to address SDGs topics with their students. As shown in the chart, traditional classroom taught lessons are still a common method, but active and innovative methodologies are just as common or even more in use. Moreover, 71,2% of the respondents adopts a combination of two or more methods at the same time. This is a very good starting point for PLACES, as the use of interactive methodologies is at the heart of the whole project.

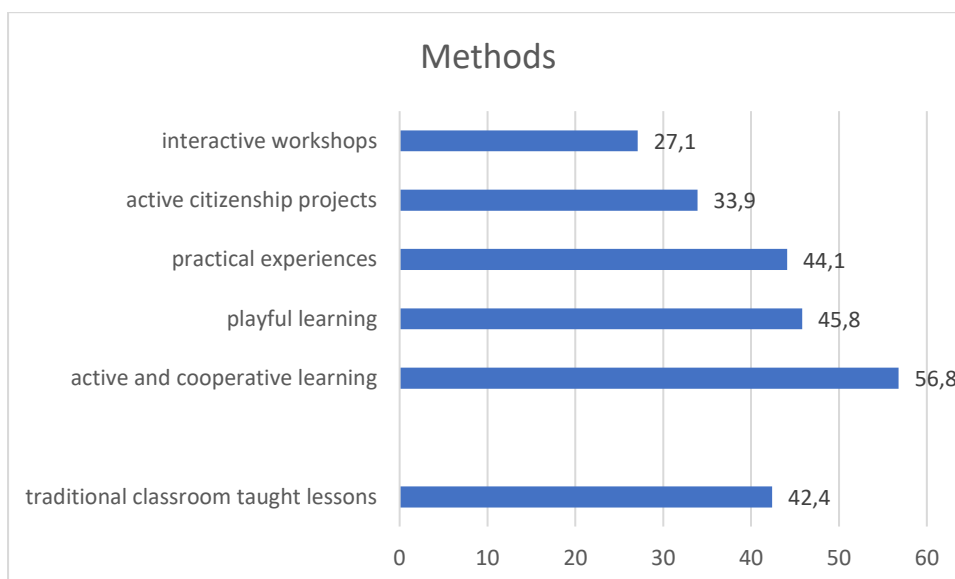


Chart 16. Methods. Response rates to “Which method(s) do you use to address the SDGs with your students?”

Knowledge, opinions and implementation of storytelling

As stated above, interactive methodologies such as storytelling, playful learning and design thinking are at the heart of PLACES. In particular, the project team will need to develop stories to be used by teachers to engage children in sustainable development. In light of this, the questionnaire also explored teachers' knowledge, opinions and practices related to the use of stories and of the storytelling method.

Respondents were given the following definition: "Storytelling is a story-based teaching approach that uses stories and playful ways to address a given matter. Presented with a storyline, students go through the learning process in a different way.". They were then asked to reply to a series of questions even if they didn't personally work with the storytelling method with their students.

- *Attitudes towards storytelling and perceived positive effects*

Teachers' opinions on the storytelling method are very positive overall. Most of them agree with the idea of including it in teachers' training curriculum and believe it can be used with all students, regardless of their age. Results also seem to debunk the myth according to which educators believe that stories can only be used with very young children. However, we need to consider that the teachers who gave their willingness to answer the questionnaire may already be sensitive to the issue.

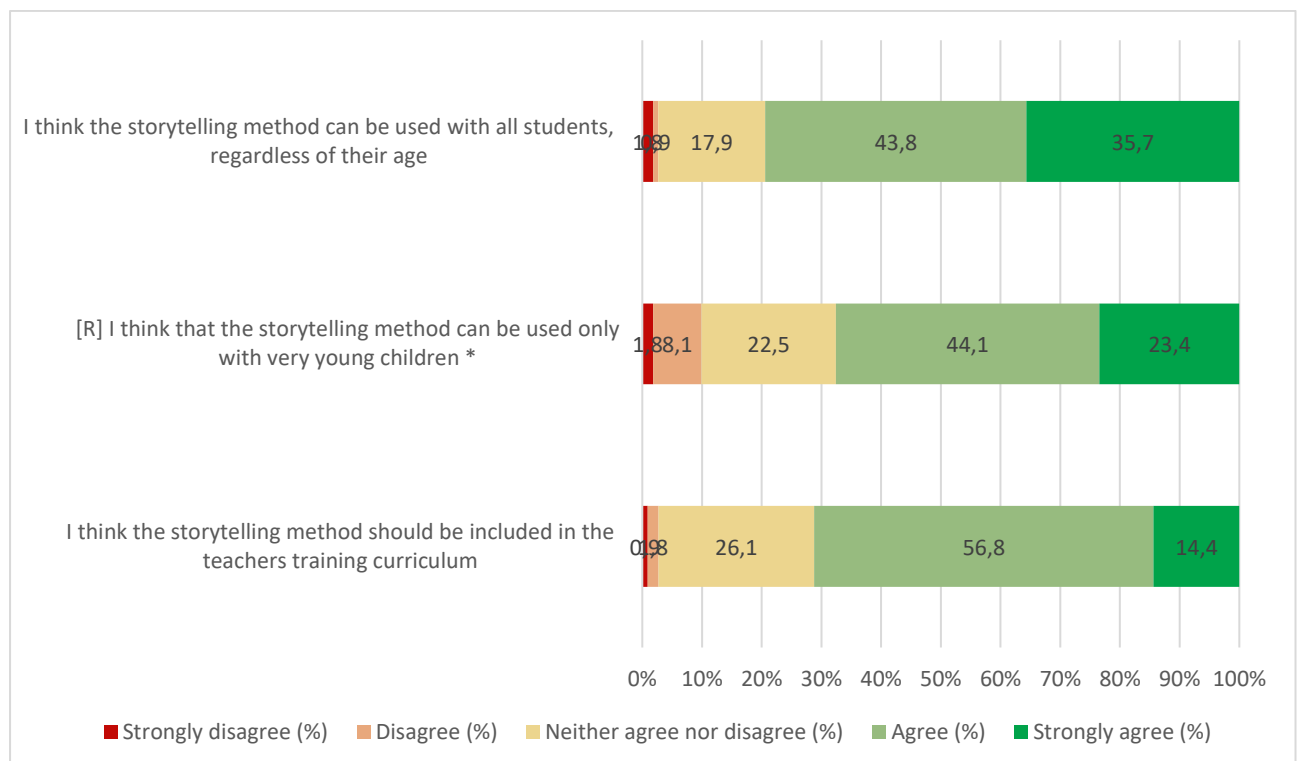


Chart 17. Attitudes towards storytelling. Response rates to items 4-5-10 of "Please rate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following sentences"



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** The replies to this item have been reversed for logical consistency reasons. Results are displayed reversed so the answers “agree” and “strongly agree” should be interpreted as positive attitudes towards storytelling.*

Moreover, similarly to what we did for the SDGs, we investigated teachers’ opinions on beneficial effects that could arise from the use of storytelling, to get a more detailed overview of their perceptions. Responses confirm they have a very positive opinion on this method, and they tend to agree that the magnitude of its effects can be significant on a variety of dimensions. In particular, they were asked to give their opinion with respect to potential impacts on didactics, on them as teachers and on students’ skills. More broad and general impacts were also assessed.

Teachers’ responses are extremely positive in all these areas. In particular, they seem to value storytelling as an educational tool and resource that can promote students’ curiosity, engagement and interest towards contents proposed at school. They seem to appreciate the creative stimulus that storytelling can give in presenting a subject in a new and more appealing light, rather than the cognitive potential (slightly more negative results for items related to reflection on learning and cognitive flexibility). As it happened for the SDGs, also with reference to the storytelling they believe the impact can be greater on students, rather than on teachers themselves (less positive results for improved collaboration among colleagues).

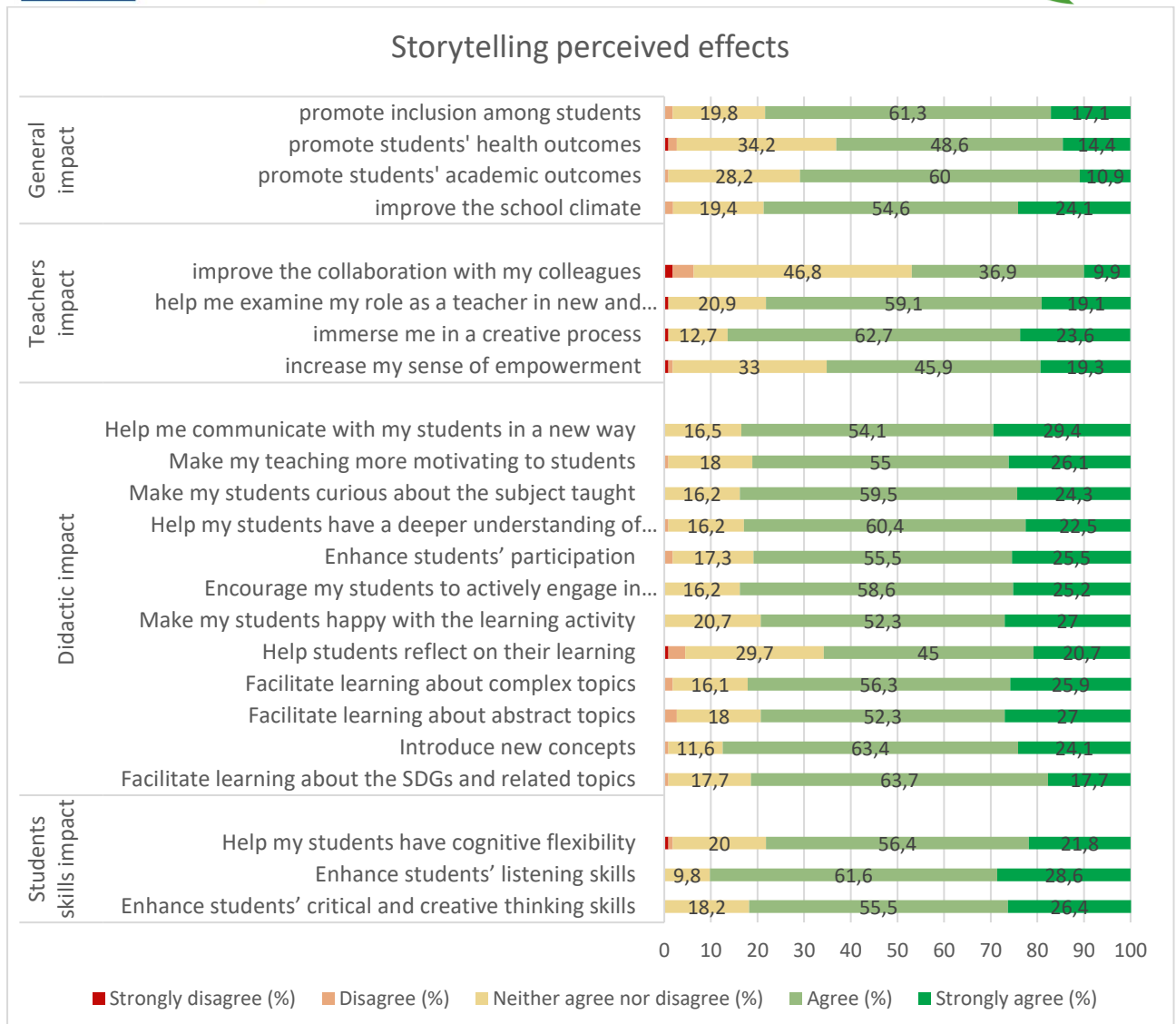


Chart 18. Storytelling effects. Response rates to “Using the storytelling method can...”

- *Self-efficacy and perceived barriers in relation to the use of storytelling*

Even if teachers agree on the importance and on the impacts of storytelling, they are a little bit less confident when it comes to using it and to their ability to use it. In particular, they don't seem convinced they own the necessary skills and knowledge to use this method. This is relevant for the PLACES project, which should respond to this need by developing training materials that can improve teachers' skills and knowledge, and consequentially increase their self-efficacy.

Even though we know that time constraints are school programs are an issue for many teachers, what emerged is that keeping curricular goals while using the storytelling method is not the main problem when it comes to self-efficacy: of course, teachers worry about that, but lack of knowledge and skills apparently come first in the list of priorities.

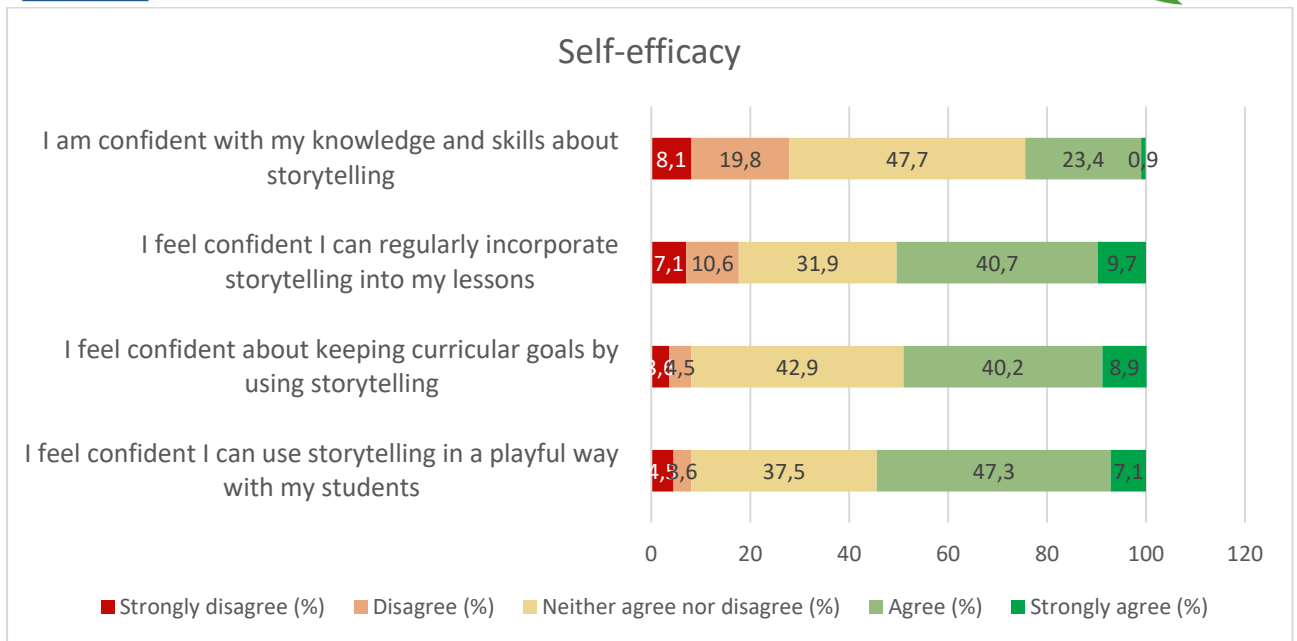


Chart 19. Self-efficacy and storytelling. Response rates to items 9-11-12-13 of “Please rate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following sentences”

Lack of self-efficacy is just one of the possible barriers to the use of the storytelling method. Therefore, as we did for the implementation of SDGs activities, through the questionnaire we cross-checked to further investigate potential barriers and to see if teachers believe other obstacles can make the implementation of storytelling more difficult.

Once again, results confirm that the main criticalities are connected to the lack of materials and training. Time issues exist and can be a barrier, but not as much as the training and materials. In contrast with this, personal efficacy or relevance of the storytelling as a resource, are way less taken into consideration by teachers.

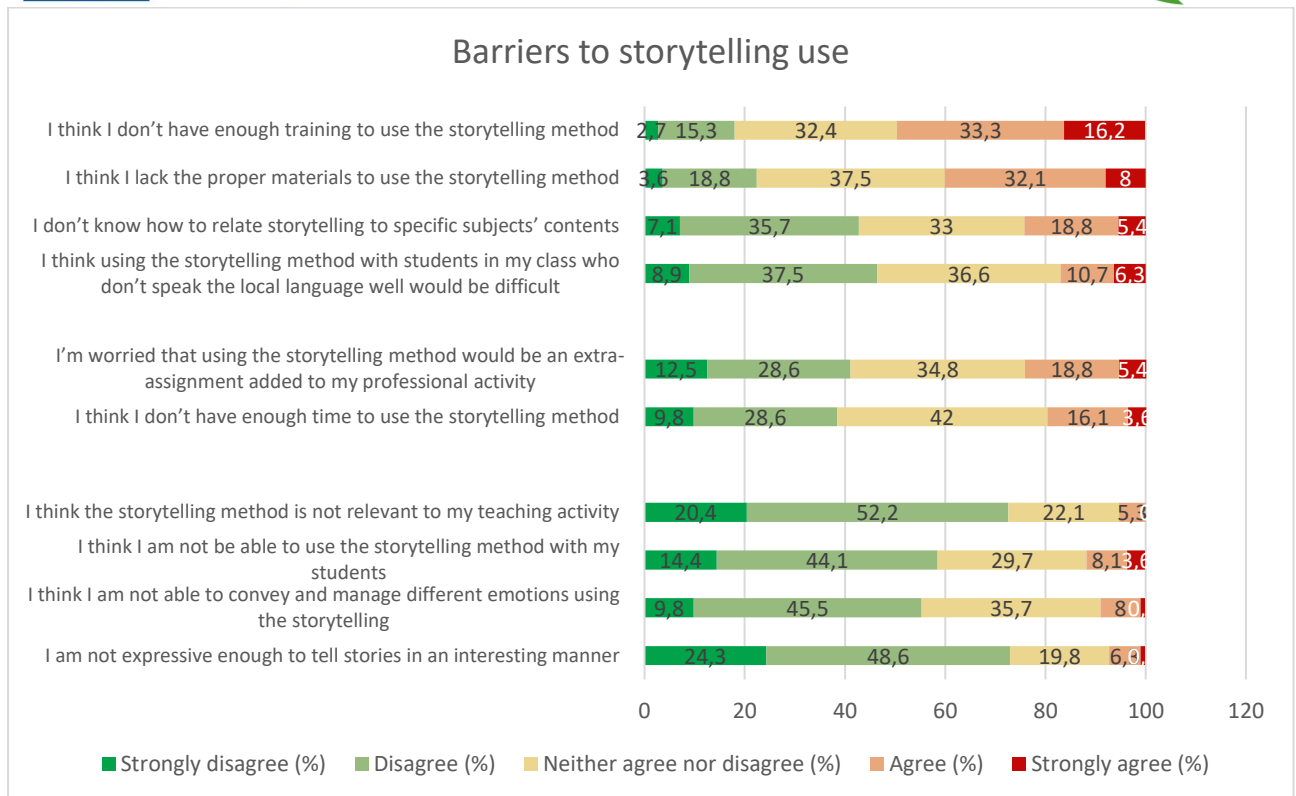


Chart 20. Barriers to the use of storytelling. Response rates to “Please rate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following sentences”

- *Experience with storytelling and implementation of the storytelling method*

The majority of the teachers affirms they are used to read and tell stories to their pupils, and that they have experience of listening and being told stories by others. However, quite interestingly, less than 45% believe they are familiar with the storytelling method and 25% state they never use it. This seeming paradox might imply that, despite being exposed to or using narration in their everyday life, they don't acknowledge storytelling as a true methodological resource or they don't know how to make use of stories in a structured way.

Moreover, since the questionnaire asked about reading or telling stories in the same question, teachers who answered that they are not familiar or don't use the storytelling, might have chosen that option because they are used to only “read” existing stories, instead of “telling” them. If we compare this answer to the findings emerged from the students' needs analysis, this interpretation is consistent. In fact, students mentioned that their teachers read stories to them, but don't usually invent or tell stories creating a real narration process. Needless to say, they would like to continue to develop their knowledge and skills in storytelling, and the vast majority confirms they never received proper training on this method. In addition to this, less than half of the respondents use storytelling with students in a playful way. Since PLACES also focuses on playful learning, this data reminds us how important it is to develop training materials that not only include stories, but also support teachers in developing the ability of handling stories in a fun a playful manner. Moreover, only 20,7% of teachers often use storytelling to deliver messages related to the SDGs. Therefore, the project is not only



required to train teachers on how to use storytelling in the right ways, but also to help them link SDGs topics to the stories more easily.

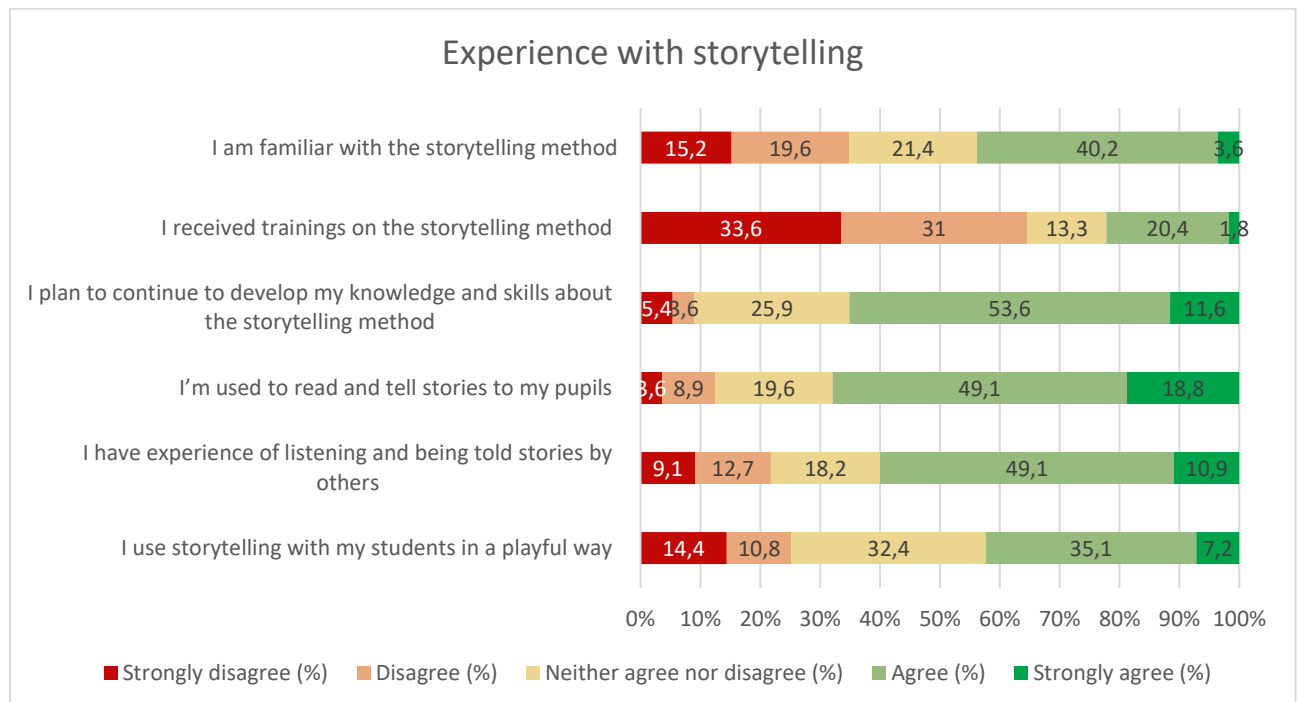


Chart 21. Experience with storytelling. Response rates to items 1-2-3-6-7-8 of “Please rate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following sentences”

School readiness

Through the questionnaire, teachers were also briefly asked to express an opinion on the school they currently work for. The aim of such questions was to assess to which extent the school is open to innovation and ready to welcome creative solutions, according to teachers. Since the PLACES project wants to reach some challenging objectives with teachers, the readiness of the environment they work for represents a key element to smooth the process. Results give us a picture of a situation that is neither good nor bad. The highest levels of disagreement can be observed in relation to teachers feeling of being rewarded and recognized when they propose innovative ideas. However, as shown in Chart 22, teachers’ responses diverge quite significantly between those who think the school provides room for communicating, sharing, experimenting innovative solutions and stimulating creativity, and those who think this doesn’t happen. This variability probably depends on the wide range of different contexts in which teachers work. Thus, developing materials and training that can be easily adapted to different contexts could be strategic for a successful implementation.

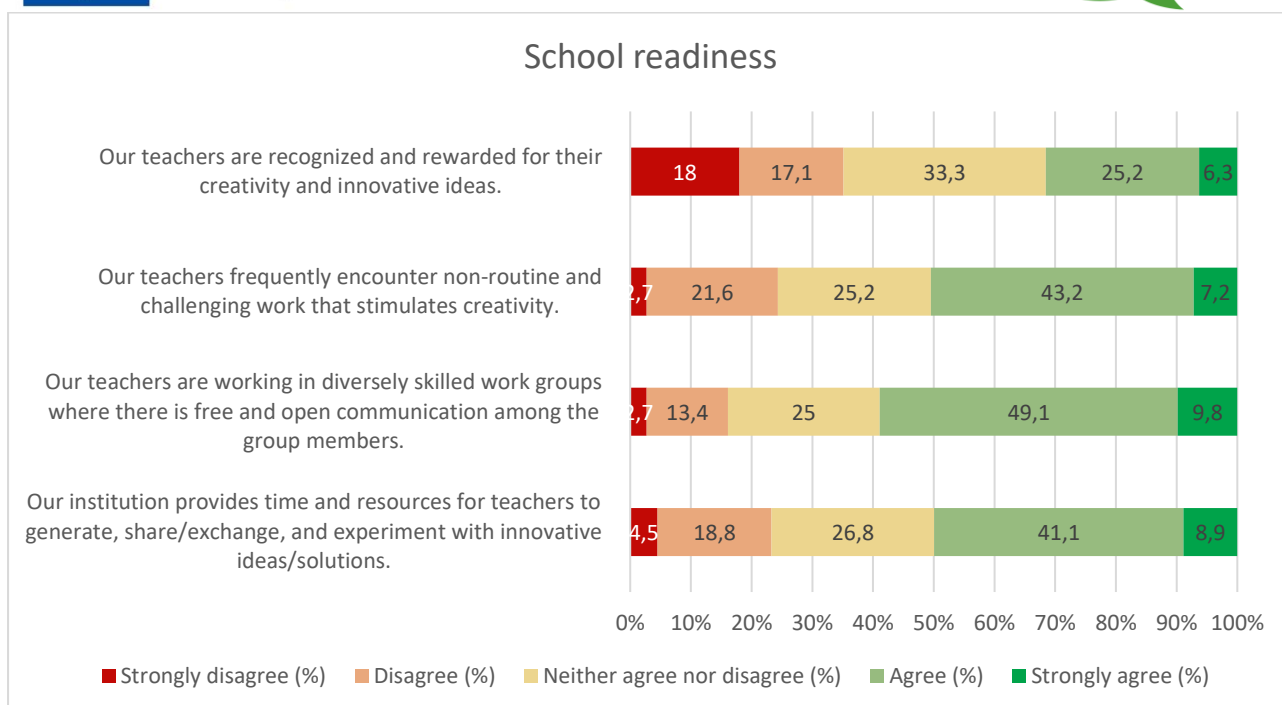


Chart 22. School readiness. Response rates to “Please rate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following sentences that refer to your school in general”

2.4 Conclusions

The needs analysis among teachers aims to assess their knowledge, opinions and practices about the SDGs, playful learning and storytelling. Many interesting and useful results emerged from this analysis.

As regards teaching the SDGs, the results showed that:

- teachers’ attitudes towards teaching SDGs are very positive: they recognize that the impact of the SDGs is significant, they believe they can play an important role in doing something in relation to sustainable development and they positively value the inclusion of those topics in school activities;
- environmental topics are still perceived as more closely connected to the SDGs than the rest;
- teachers fully understand the importance of the SDGs in achieving physical and mental health, but they might be a bit less aware of the direct and strong inter-connection between students’ health and their academic results;
- the vast majority of the teachers involved claims they would need additional training on the SDGs, both to be able to teach about the SDGs to their students and to improve their own knowledge about the topic;
- nowadays the teachers receive information about SDGs from non-work-related interests and not from professional training provided by the school system;



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- when asked about the school they work for, they express slightly more negative feelings and believe the school does not always support the introduction of the SDGs in school teaching;
- the two main barriers to teaching the SDGs are time and the lack of proper materials and training;
- SDGs are included in school's teaching policies in the absolute majority of the cases, even if this happens more frequently on a voluntary basis instead of something mandatory for schools;
- SDGs are still partially confined to disciplines that are traditionally linked to environmental and citizenship issues;
- the most frequently involved actor in teaching the SDGs in schools is represented by external experts, even if the scientific literature shows that they are less effective than teachers.

Other interesting results emerged about teachers' knowledge, opinions and practices related to the use of stories, the storytelling method and playful learning:

- teachers agree on the importance and on impacts of storytelling;
- they are a little bit less confident when it comes to using it and to their ability to use it; they don't seem convinced they own the necessary skills and knowledge to use this method;
- again, the main criticalities are connected to the lack of materials and training;
- despite being exposed to or using narration in their everyday life, they don't acknowledge storytelling as a true methodological resource or they don't know how to make use of stories in a structured way;
- less than half of the respondents use storytelling with students in a playful way;
- only 20% of teachers often use storytelling to deliver messages related to the SDGs.

These results are particularly interesting if we consider that we involved a selected sample which gave their willingness to answer the questionnaire. Probably they may already be sensitive to the issue. Anyway, they presented several barriers both related to their individual opinions and skills and to contextual factors, such as the availability of materials and professional training and school support.

PLACES project needs to value these results. Some practical implications are:

- the interest and expertise of many teachers about both teaching SDGs and using storytelling and playful learning are crucial starting points;
- PLACES project should work on teachers' representations about SDGs expanding them beyond the ecological anchorage and promoting a better perception of the inter-connections between SDGs, health and learning;
- PLACES project should respond to teachers' needs by developing training materials that can improve teachers' skills and knowledge, and increase their self-efficacy. It



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should provide accessible and easy to implement tools that teachers can use in everyday work;

- training materials should not only include stories, but also support teachers in developing the ability of handling stories in a fun playful manner;
- the readiness of the school environment and support represents a key element to achieve the PLACES project's aims, consistent with the whole-school approach of the Health Promoting School model.



3. STUDENTS NEEDS ANALYSIS

3.1 Introduction and methods

Together with the teachers' needs analysis and the policy and context analysis, the students' needs analysis constitutes the foundations of the European Needs Analysis foreseen by Work Package 2 of PLACES project. Gathering information from pupils' perspective is crucial for WP 3 activities, in particular for the development of springboard stories that respond to the real needs of children.

In this framework, the specific objectives of the students' needs analysis are:

- Investigating positive and negative experiences at school;
- Investigating students' perceptions and feelings about inclusion or exclusion at school;
- Exploring students' opinions about didactic methods proposed to them on a daily basis;
- Learning about students' experience with storytelling.

Through these objectives, the students' needs analysis can also provide insights on health, education and inequalities at school from the students' perspective. This means collecting relevant information on the topics addressed by SDG 3, 4, and 10, which are the PLACES project's main focus.

In order to get a more in depth understanding of students' feelings and specific experiences, this part of the needs analysis was carried out through a qualitative methodology. All PLACES partners were in charge of carrying out focus groups or group semi-structured interviews with pupils aged 6 to 14 who are currently attending primary schools or lower secondary schools in the partners' countries.

The focus group guide and instructions were developed by the working group from Bicocca University with the contribution of all the project partners, who agreed on the final version that was later translated into the 4 partners' languages. Focus groups lasted around 1 hour/1 hour and a half, but varied depending on the country and on the specific group of children. Participants had the possibility to intervene and discuss freely, as the moderator role was just to introduce the topics. The instructions suggested not to involve teachers in the discussion because their presence can interfere with children's disposition to express their opinion spontaneously. A thematic analysis of the focus group data was carried out through an inductive and "bottom-up" process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, transcripts and results were analyzed in each country individually by the project partners. Following, moderators and researcher had a group discussion and put together the results in order to carry out a joint European analysis.



3.2 Participants

Researchers met all the participants in April-May 2023. In each country, participants had to be selected in at least 2 different schools.

Following, participants engaged in the different PLACES countries are summarized.

| Country | Activity description | N° students primary school | N° students low high school |
|---------|---|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Belgium | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 group interview in a lower secondary school: 3 participants aged 11 and 14 • 4 interviews: 4 participants under 11 years of age | 4 | 3 |
| Denmark | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 focus group in a primary school: 5 participants aged 10 from the same class • 1 group interview in a lower secondary school: 2 participants aged 14 from different classes • 3 interviews from different schools: 3 participants aged 12, 13 and 14 | 5 | 5 |
| Greece | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 focus group in a primary school: 11 participants • 3 group discussions with 3 primary school classes: whole class • 1 group discussion with 1 lower secondary school class: whole class | 71 | 23 |
| Italy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 focus groups in a primary school: 10 + 10 participants from the same class • 1 focus group in a lower secondary school: 10 participants from the same class | 20 | 10 |

3.3 Results

Meetings with European children were extremely dense of information and touched a very wide range of topics and experiences. This report summarizes findings that can be traced back to two broad macro-areas of results. On one side, we have information that pertains to didactic methodologies that are detailed in the paragraphs on personalized didactics, physical and practical activities, playful learning and storytelling (see paragraph 1;2;6;8). The second macro-area accounts for topics related to health and inclusion. The related paragraphs analyze relationships with teachers and peers, roles, emotions and mental health (see paragraphs 3;4;5;7).

Overall, the majority of the findings from the meetings with European students were recurring in all the countries involved in PLACES project. This was surprising because it shows that students' needs, feelings and difficulties are shared and common regardless of the specific national context.



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When possible, we included boxes with relevant data from Health Behaviours in School-aged Children (HBSC). This allows for additional reflections and comparisons between our qualitative results and international quantitative data on the topics emerged. HBSC is a WHO collaborative cross-national study of students' health and well-being. The survey is undertaken every four years using a self-report questionnaire, to collect data from 11, 13, 15 (and more recently 17) years old. The latest available international data are from the 2018 edition.

Personalized didactics

One of the main topics that emerged from the focus groups refers to the educational approaches and methodologies that students would like to experience at school.

Regardless of their age, all the students enjoy destructured didactic moments and places. Traditional methodologies are perceived as boring and not effective, and they would rather be outside the classroom. Not surprisingly, their favourite places for learning are everything but the classroom itself: they like the playground, the gym, the arts lab, the music lab, etc... The same logic applies to their favourite moments at school, that are the ones when they can learn in unconventional ways. For example, Greek and Italian children mentioned school trips, lessons in outdoor locations and practical activities multiple times.

Teachers should be able to adapt their role to this kind of setting because destructured does not mean without rules: children still wish to be guided by their teachers, even during breaks. They need adult figures capable of providing inputs and giving them instructions and boundaries. In other words, they want to have the possibility to choose. They don't like being forced to do something, they rather wish to be guided by a teacher that can propose different methods and materials among which they can make their own choices. For instance, Italian children suggest that they would like to be given a choice between a range of 2 or 3 options presented to them in advance when they are assigned a book to read. Moreover, Danish focus groups highlighted that the selection of tasks and materials should be made out of understanding of the children, because using the same fixed process for every class doesn't take into account specific needs. Belgian interviews confirm these results: children want to be involved in decision making and want to express their opinions; teachers should not decide everything in advance, but rather have a scaffolding role. Greek students reported that they like to create their own characters and their own drawings when they have the opportunity to create a story.

This is not merely related to having an increased sense of agency, but also a matter of seeing individual needs recognized. The same method cannot be fit for everybody, because different needs require different processes. Teacher must be able to differentiate the tuition according to different levels in class and different interests or ways of learning.

Even if they should not impose things, teachers should be there to provide additional support when needed. However, this doesn't seem to happen all the time: Italian children claim that some teachers keep repeating that students can ask for help, but when they do teachers don't have time for them.



An interesting element to be noted is that, with reference to school spaces, kids from all countries shared that they really don't like crowded and loud places. To them, free and unstructured does not mean confusing. For example, Belgians would like their class to be calmer, to be able to work better. They don't like when their classmates shout the answers without being asked. Similarly, Italian primary school kids see the canteen as their least favourite space at school because it's crowded, messy, with children screaming and cutlery and dishes noises. Greek students don't like the staircase because it's too packed with people, heavy bags and difficult to move around.

Physical and practical activities

To learn better, focus group participants also feel like they need to move. They believe they spend too much time sitting down, whereas they need to stand up and move around in the classroom or outside. For example, the youngest Danish participants recall having experienced lessons in which language subjects or math were combined with sports, and they loved it. They want to be able to use their body to learn. This is confirmed by various successful learning stories, such as the one told by Italian students who learnt about decimal numbers by moving their body physically in the classroom as if they were a comma whose position changes from one figure to the other.

Insights from HBSC Survey: physical activity

HBSC data show that less than one in five adolescents meet the desirable physical activity levels. International guidelines recommend achieving the 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity daily. Levels seem to be declining over time and participation is particularly low among girls from poorer families. We know sport is important because it affects how we think and feel.

This is even more important if we consider that most adolescents are failing to meet current nutritional recommendations, undermining their capacity for healthy development. Moreover, between 2014 and 2018, overweight and obesity has increased in up to a third of countries/regions, affecting one in five adolescents.

These findings stress the importance of efforts to promote habitual daily physical activity by, for example, increasing opportunities for school-based activity.

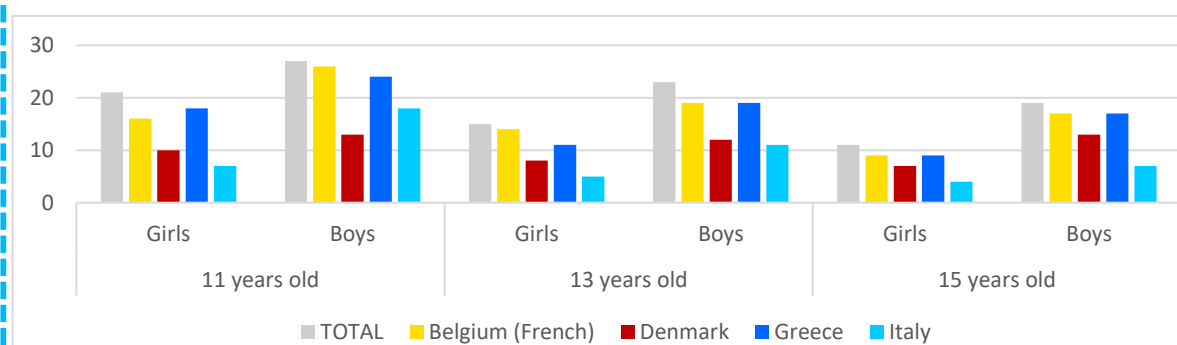


Chart 1. Rate of 11-13-15-years-old who report at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity daily



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Alongside being physically active, they like practical activities that allow them to create real products. They need concrete materials for product making and the time to learn how to use them. In particular, Danish pupils seemed to miss the tactility of real things that have been replaced by computers. This is confirmed by Belgian children, who choose their favourite subject based on whether it involves discussing things together and doing crafts and drawings instead of choosing French, or religion, or mathematics because of the specific contents. They also enjoy connecting different subjects, breaking traditional boundaries and also connecting what they study to what they might experience in real life. Seeing the link between a subject and real life makes it easier to understand and to find a purpose.

They also want to do things all together, and not be separated or alone. This is why some mention that in their ideal classroom desks are arranged in a way that lets them see everybody directly instead of seeing their classmates' backs. This shows that their preferences for active and practical activities carried out all together have an impact and consequences on how they would like the school spaces to be designed: they would like to have larger spaces, nice colours and more grass on the outside. Moreover, Italian kids pointed out that they would like to work outside more: since the Covid pandemic, even schools that have wide common spaces or backyards seem to take advantage of this opportunity less than they should.

All the above considerations partially explain why students often seem to like primary school while they don't like secondary school. In many countries, they start to feel bored in secondary school, to the point that boredom becomes tiredness or desire to go back to sleep. Practical and physically active lessons are quite frequent in primary schools, but less used in secondary schools because they are perceived as something that is only suitable to lower grades and young children from primary schools. Quite the opposite, responding to the need to move and do concrete activities could mitigate the phenomenon of boredom among older children.

Insights from HBSC Survey: school satisfaction

HBSC data show that just over a quarter of adolescents (28%) reported liking school a lot.

A significant decline in school satisfaction was observed in around one third of countries/regions between 2014 and 2018.

School satisfaction declined with age among both boys and girls in almost all countries/regions, even if wide cross-national variation in school satisfaction was evident within each age group. This means that the specific characteristics of each school system can have an impact on overall satisfaction levels.



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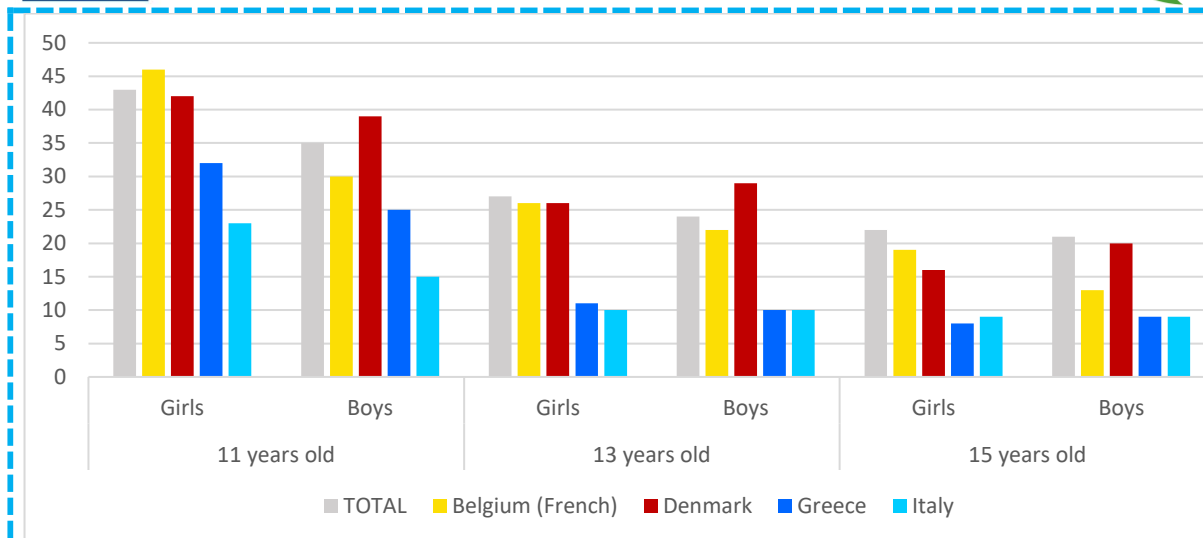


Chart 2. Rate of 11-13-15-years-old who like school a lot.

Adolescents who enjoy being in school and experience school as a nurturing and supportive environment are more engaged with school, leading to improved long-term educational outcomes and higher well-being. Research has shown that pupils who like school also have higher overall life satisfaction, lower risk of substance use and better mental health (McCarty et al., 2012; Guo et al., 2014; Joyce & Early, 2014; Vogel et al., 2015). It therefore is concerning to see that the most consistent changes since the last survey are decreases in liking school and increases in feelings of school pressure, with only a few countries/regions showing the opposite trend.

Relationship with teachers and emotions

From the discussion with students, several difficulties in the emotional connection with their teachers emerged. Of course, all the kids have teachers they like the most and teachers they like less, but even when they appreciate their teachers, bonding is not always easy. This is particularly important to understand because, as clearly expressed by interviews carried out in Denmark, teachers must be engaged in the subject and connect to the pupils because their attitude inflects the pupils' attitude.

If students don't feel connected to the teacher, they won't share their feelings. This is why teachers have to work on social well-being and connection as soon as possible, from first grade. This was largely confirmed by focus groups in all countries, such as Belgium, where participants explained that they like when teachers put their efforts into helping and counselling rather than transmitting information.

In children's opinion, a number of factors determine the lack of connection with some teachers. On one side, especially in lower high-schools, teachers seem to be too busy to devote to students' emotion the right amount of time and attention. While in primary schools' teachers value the creation of a strong bonding with pupils, some teachers who work with older kids don't seem to put the same effort in building a relationship with them, but tend to rely on traditional lessons and information transmission.



Sometimes, teachers struggle to understand students' emotions, don't devote time to elaborate feelings and tend to adopt superficial strategies to cope with those emotions. This does not necessarily mean they are not interested or don't pay enough attention. Rather, they don't always know how to deal with such situations and would benefit from dedicated training or tools. For example, some Italian children complained that, during moments of crisis, some teachers take care of the situation by telling them simple sentences as "Don't worry, everything is fine".

Children also feel that some teachers don't intervene enough to support them in solving conflicts with their peers. In addition to this, they tend to focus only on some specific persons instead of addressing everyone's needs. Of course, there is variability from country to country and from school to school. It also depends on each individual sensitivity and it's quite difficult to generalize. However, this emerged clearly in some Greek focus groups when students explained that if a student doesn't participate, there are some teachers who don't care and don't pay attention. They don't care if they understand what they say about the lesson and treat them as if they were all the same one person. They would like their teachers to see the complexity instead of comparing them to each other and separate them into "higher" and "lower" students. This kind of superficial categorization makes them feel uncomfortable and with less value.

In terms of feelings and relationships, one thing that kids appreciate a lot is when teachers facilitate them in sharing emotions in small groups because it's easier for them to do. Moreover, they value and welcome adults who choose to share their personal stuff with them, even if this is something that does not happen frequently. When teachers do that, emotional distances are reduced and students feel closer to them, improving the relationship. In students' eyes, it means teachers are committed and trust them enough to go beyond the mere delivery of a lesson. This is consistent with results indicating that students are aware of teachers' emotions. They can perceive when teachers are not feeling well, when they are too busy or too tired. Not surprisingly, some Greek pupils remarked that they really like when their teachers are relaxed.

Insights from HBSC Survey: teacher support

HBSC data confirm that teachers need to be approachable. However, there is a wide variation in levels of teacher support among countries/regions across all age groups. This might imply that cultural habits and differences in how the school systems work can have a huge impact.

Overall, global data are more encouraging than the focus group results, as they show that over half of adolescents (56%) reported high levels of support from their teachers. This was higher among younger pupils, with 72% of 11-year-olds reporting high support compared to only 52% by age 13 and less than half (44%) by age 15.



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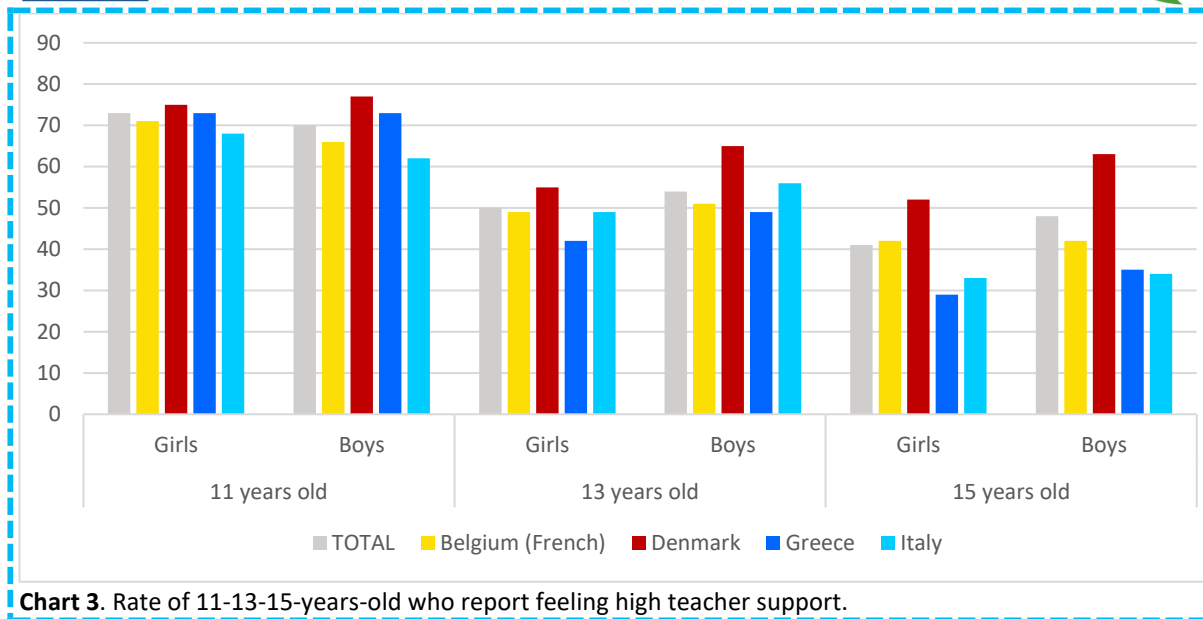


Chart 3. Rate of 11-13-15-years-old who report feeling high teacher support.

Anxiety

An alarming result that emerged from the interviews is that anxiety and its symptoms are way more widespread among students than we expected. This is especially true in secondary schools. For example, a 13-years-old Italian girl described, together with her classmates who supported her, different episodes of panic attacks that she experienced while at school. However, feelings of anxiety are often reported also in primary schools, where one would expect children to be more carefree.

Students seem to be very aware of these negative emotions, whether they are their own feelings or their friends' feelings. Sometimes students are even more aware than adults, who, as explained in the previous paragraph, often don't know how to cope with them.

Several psychosomatic problems were also reported in all countries. Results show that almost all the younger pupils know the feeling of headache or stomachache in school.

Anxiety and psychosomatic issues seem to originate from excessive school demands and the feeling of being constantly over evaluated. Students feel pressured and are worried about school performance. Both Danish and Italian kids report that when the pressure from tests and evaluations is too hard on them, they can't learn anymore. It just becomes too much, and they are no longer able to focus. This is also confirmed by Greek children, to the point that their least favourite place in school is the class because it's where grades and evaluations are assigned.

The fear of being judged and evaluated is closely linked to a broader issue with social comparison and social judgement. Children and adolescents are extremely worried by other people's opinions, and find it hard to accept a mistake as something that can happen to everybody. As such, a bad mark is not a problem per se, but it becomes one because it implies



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being embarrassed in front of classmates, parents or teachers. As a consequence, Italian participants claim they prefer written tests so as not to be assessed in front of peers. Danish students affirm that delivering oral presentations can be very hard. It means being exposed to judgement and they are afraid of others listening to them, especially if the class doesn't function well socially. Similarly, some Greek participants said they don't want to go to the teachers' office because they feel uneasy to ask for help for what they need in front of everyone.

During the focus groups, other elements that can cause anxiety emerged. In particular, children are very worried about fights with their peers, that are quite frequent and have an impact on how they feel. They worry they might be blamed even if it's not their fault and they know teachers will probably not help them solving the conflict. Moreover, they get stressed when there's a lot of noise or when the teacher is harsh, shouts or scolds them.

Insights from HBSC Survey: school work pressure

Not only school experience worsens with age, with school satisfaction and perceived teacher support declining, but also, at the same time, schoolwork pressure increases. Compared with 2014, 2018 students were more likely to feel pressured by schoolwork and less satisfied with school.

Overall, over a third (36%) of adolescents reported feeling some or a lot of pressure from schoolwork. Schoolwork pressure increased with age, from 26% of 11-year-olds to 44% of 15-year-olds. This is consistent with the focus groups results, that show how the situations becomes way more critical as students' age increases.

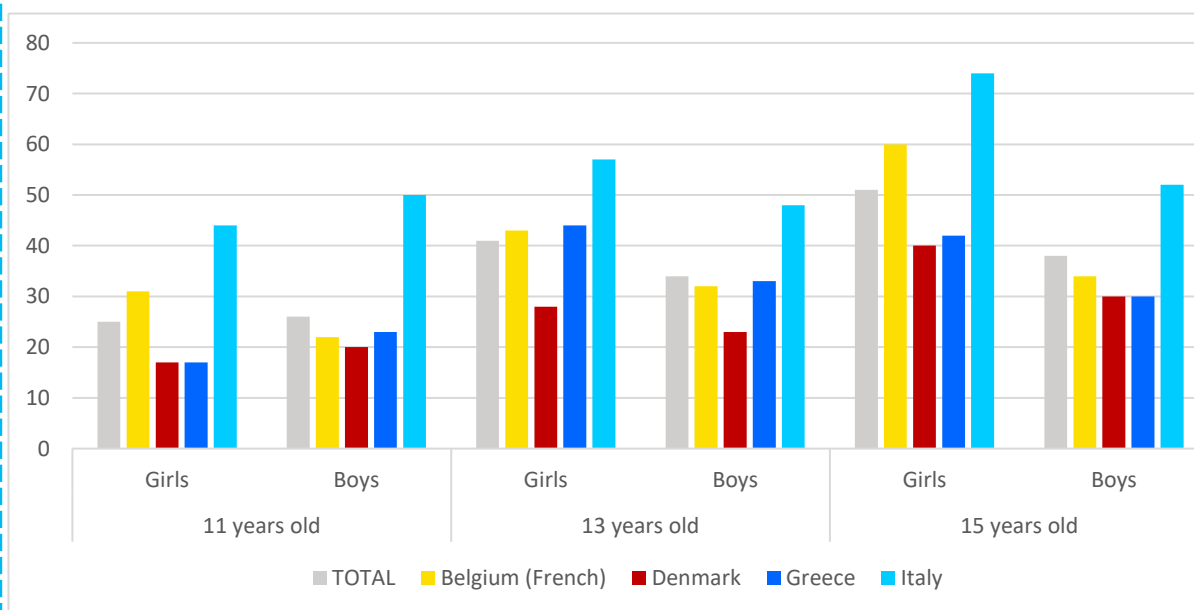


Chart 4. Rate of 11-13-15-year-olds who report being pressured by schoolwork.



Insights from HBSC Survey: mental health

Too often, mental health in young people is overlooked and seen as ‘just part of growing up’. Quite the opposite, good mental well-being is critical to ensuring healthy transitions to adulthood, with implications for overall well-being, growth and development, and social and educational outcomes. Young people should be taught the tools to be able to deal with stress and schools are especially well-positioned to play a role in this.

HBSC confirms the alarming data revealed by the focus group. Data show that, even though most adolescents report being satisfied with their lives overall, one in four adolescents report feeling nervous, feeling irritable or having difficulties getting to sleep every week.

Lower, but still significant prevalence rates were observed for somatic complaints: headache (15%), backache (13%), stomach ache (10%) and dizziness (10%).

Older adolescents reported higher levels of individual health complaints, but age effects varied by gender. Girls experienced individual health complaints more often than boys.

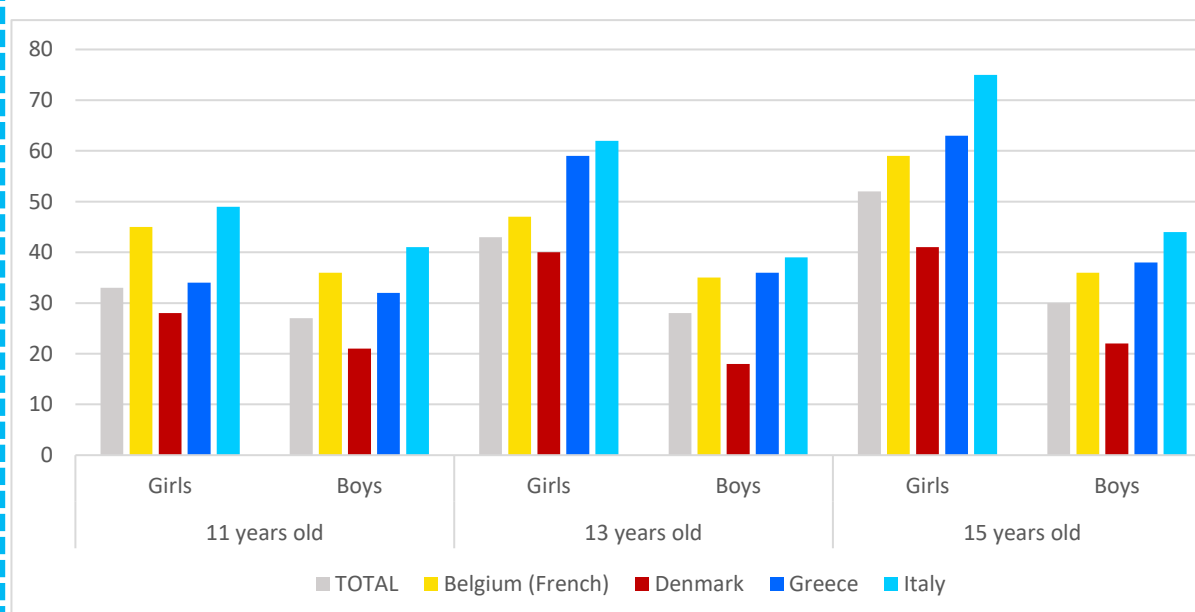


Chart 5. Rate of 11-13-15-year-olds who report multiple health complaints more than once a week.

No chance to change

Another interesting result highlighted by the focus groups is that students hold extremely fixed self-perceptions. Roles and labels attributed to them or to their peers seem to be unchangeable, which is alarming at such a young age. However, they seem compelled to fit into the role as if social roles must be repeated over and over with no possibility to change. In some occasions, kids believe they have to act according to the assigned role because it’s the only way to attract teachers’ attention. This is why, for example, the Italian kid who recognizes himself in the role of the “bad guy”, identifies as the black sheep and keeps behaving as one in order to be seen and listened to. Similarly, if a kid cries at school once, he/she will always be perceived as the one who cries all the time. Sometimes, teachers’ comments go in the same direction and reinforce the existence of these roles; as a consequence, children feel entitled and allowed to repeat what they hear or stick to the roles.



Such result is an indication and an alarming sign that students already feel powerless and convinced that they cannot change things. Greek and Italian children even mentioned the need “to be realist”, which shows an underlying need to be empowered in school and outside the school. Older Danish students also added that some classmates started functioning badly from a social point of view after Covid.

This feeling that change is too hard or impossible is consistent with kids’ difficulties in finding new solutions. Even when asked what they would do with superpowers, they were often not able to use their imagination to think of something creative and new in order to fix a problem. Quite the opposite, they ended up saying they would just use the superpowers to go away, to go back in time, stop time, change other people’s minds or pretend something never happened.

Looking for positive emotions and playful learning

Some students complain about being exposed to negative emotions more than they would wish. While in primary schools fun and playful learning are still used a lot, the feeling of being exposed to negative emotions is frequent in older participants from secondary schools. For example, an Italian group of students told us about a book they had to read as homework for the summer. The book was the story of an adolescent girl, but in their opinion, it was extremely sad. They were very interested in the topic of adolescence, but they wish it could be addressed in a different way, with a brighter and more positive tone.

In general, they are looking for jokes, playful and funny methods, but they feel like this is not always possible because teachers can be time pressured or tired, as mentioned in the paragraph dedicated to the relationship with teachers.

Especially with older students, humour is important to build and foster the teacher-student connection. Through jokes, they can even enjoy math. They love teachers who have fun with them, and don’t like teachers who are too serious. A Greek participant even said that, if he had superpowers, he would make some of his teachers happier because it looks like they don’t all like their job. However, students seem to think humour is a personal characteristic of the teacher that relaxes the classroom climate and not everyone has it. Instead, this might depend more on the educational methods teachers adopt rather than being the consequence of a personality trait. It’s an indication that investing in training to enhance didactic skills and to provide teachers with playful methodologies and resources could be an added value.

Peer support

Overall, a positive climate in the classroom has been reported in all the countries. Pupils seem very aware of their classmates’ feelings and are available to support and help each other. This is especially true in small groups that tend to take shape naturally and spontaneously. However, loneliness is harder to be expressed and shared with respect to other feelings, and the balance between inclusion and intimacy is not always easy. Generally, children have positive relationships with their peers, but would like to spend more time together. They want



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to be able to see each other more outside school and cherish informal moments and breaks when they have the chance to hang out with their friends. For instance, a Greek participant mentioned that his favourite moment is when he's waiting to be picked up from school because he gets to sit a little longer with his classmates. In a Belgian class, children enthusiastically described a table in the backyard where they can sit and chat. It's not always a matter of playing, but also the opportunity to spend time together discussing and talking. These examples highlight the importance of allowing some space to let friendships among peers grow.

Moreover, children and adolescents confirm the existence of exclusion dynamics that are traditionally common in school-aged children. For example, Greek kids mentioned the worry of not being picked or chosen first from the group and being left as the last one waiting. These dynamics arise especially during non-structured moments, and represent one of the situations in which children would like to have specific supervision from adults, to prevent disparities and exclusion from happening. Gender stereotypes are also present. The idea of girls sharing their feelings more than boys because "boys don't cry" is still brought up by students nowadays.

Insights from HBSC Survey: peer support

More than half of adolescents reported high support from their peers (65% girls and 55% boys). Significant age differences were found in almost half of countries/regions, with most of these showing higher prevalence among 11-year-olds.

Unfortunately, in 2018 overall levels of peer support had decreased since 2014, from 63% to 60%. This means that working to preserve good levels of peer support is important and cannot be taken for granted, because supportive peer (and family) relationships play a fundamental role in adolescent development, socialization, health and well-being. Adolescents who perceive their friends as supportive experience higher levels of psychological well-being and have better social competences and fewer emotional and behavioural problems.

It must also be noted that social inequalities in peer support were found in more than half of countries/regions for both genders. Compared to those from low-affluence families, adolescents from high-affluence families were more likely to report high levels of peer support (64% versus 56%).



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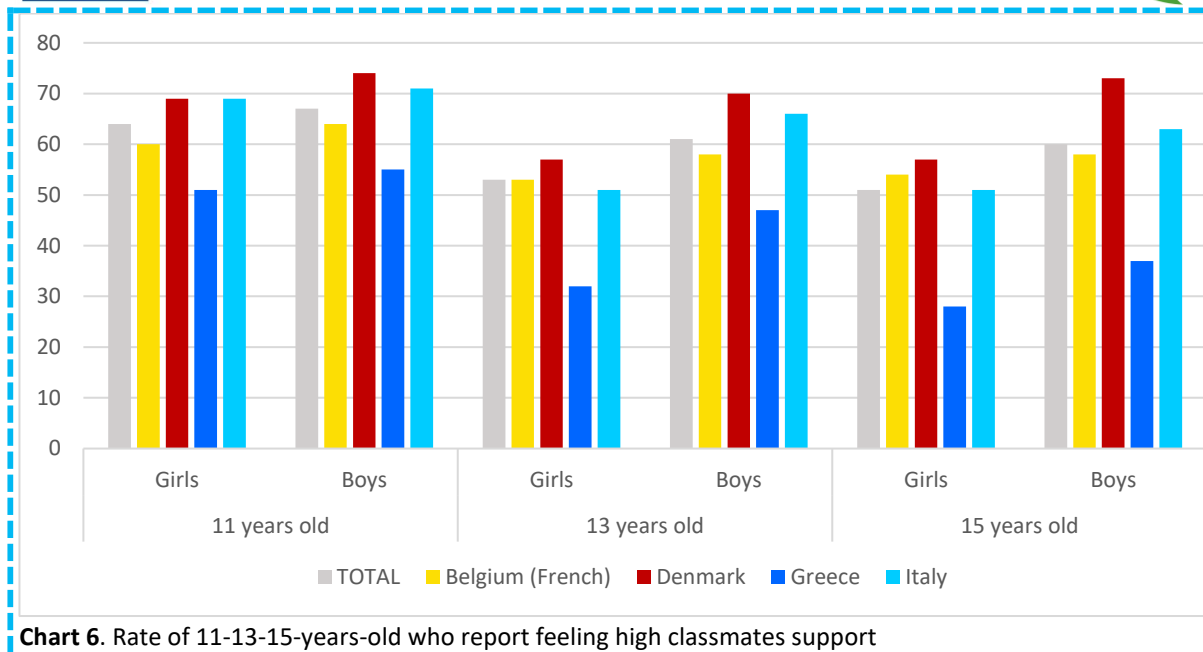


Chart 6. Rate of 11-13-15-year-olds who report feeling high classmates support

Storytelling

We tried to get some insights of students' experiences with stories and storytelling. Overall, they have experience of listening to stories and being told stories. When this happens, teachers often use specific tools and methods, especially with younger children. Theatre and drama methodologies are quite widespread. Students are also exposed to arts, videos, animation films and digital methodologies. They enjoy technological tools but Danish kids revealed that sometimes "real" paper books are more magic. In general, students always enjoy the use of stories, regardless of their age, and believe that it helps learning more efficiently. Both Danish and Italian children described teachers who teach their subject, such as history, in a story-like way. They love it and they remember the concepts introduced, also because teachers who choose to invent or tell a story appear to them as truly engaged in their subject. The same applies to theatre or role-playing methods: they are fine when the teacher is engaged and authentic.

However, even if they all experienced the use of stories at school, this is still something exceptional that is not regularly included in everyday lessons. This is even more true for stories in which students' creativity is directly involved: they are more used to listening to stories than to invent them. This is something that needs to be addressed because results show that, as for any other thing at school, they need and want to be involved and engaged. For example, two Belgium pupils create stories on their own at home because they can create something new, new characters, new adventures. Being requested to invent stories would help unblock and nurture their creativity since they seem to encounter several difficulties in being spontaneously creative. Not only they are not asked to invent stories enough, but also, when requested to write a story for an essay, they cannot do it in a free manner. Assignments proposed to them are so specific or analytical that there's no room to invent a real story.



3.4 Conclusions

To sum up, several relevant information emerged from the focus groups.

In relation to didactic and educational methodologies, students need or wish for:

- More participation and involvement.
- The possibility to choose, which means activities should be de-structured but guided by the adult.
- Positive emotions and playful activities.
- The possibility to move, incorporate physical activity and use school spaces other than the classroom during regular lessons (playground, labs, gym, etc.).
- A connection and significant relationship with teachers. Teachers should be engaged and share their experiences and thoughts with their students.

In terms of health and inclusion topics, it's important to focus on:

- The development of students' problem-solving skills and creativity in order to find new solutions and new ways to deal with what happens. It's also important to promote and enhance their hopes for the future and their sense of agency and empowerment.
- Addressing anxiety due to school pressure. Students need strategies to deal with stressful emotions and to be supported in the elaboration of difficult feelings.
- Creating room to share emotions and feelings of loneliness.
- Managing conflicts among peers and switching to a more inclusive communication that prevents the creation of labels and fixed roles.

Altogether, these findings are extremely useful for the next steps of PLACES project. Especially in the development of materials, we must take into account:

- The relevance of playful learning methods, which are highly recognized by students;
- Design thinking can be a useful method to support students in finding new solutions and transmit to them the idea that things can be changed. This is very important in order to reduce the feeling of being powerless;
- Many topics for the stories emerged, mostly related to health issues and inequalities. These should become the core of the stories and a starting point to build on. For example, mental health struggles cannot be overlooked;
- It's important for students (and teachers) to be directly involved in the creation of stories, which is something more than just reading or listening. They need and wish to be engaged and don't like being passive recipients;
- It is important to use the whole school approach to suggest a different way to be a school and become a health promoting school.



4. TEACHERS WORKSHOPS

As mentioned before, most results and findings from the focus groups were recurring in all the countries involved in PLACES project. Despite minor differences attributable to the specific context, this confirms that students' needs, emotions, wishes and struggles are mostly shared and give clear indications for the development of PLACES materials.

After the talks with students, partner organizations also organized some meetings and workshops with small groups of teachers in order to debrief and interpret the results. In particular, we collected results from workshops with teachers carried out in Greece and Italy. In Greece, 16 educators participated in the workshop: 13 teachers or headmasters from 5 primary schools and 3 teachers/headmasters from 1 high school. In Italy, 8 teachers participated in the workshop: 5 teachers from primary school and 3 from middle schools of different Italian regions.

Presented with what emerged from the kids, teachers were able to provide precious suggestions on how to explain and interpret some students' behaviours and opinions because spending time with them on a daily basis allows to put things into perspective and to make sense of the different dynamics. Moreover, teachers provided valuable advice on how to proceed with the development of PLACES project and materials.

Teachers were surprised as well, and didn't expect students from their country to share so many common feelings and experiences with those from other countries with different educational systems. Some teachers, listening to what was summed up from the students' focus groups at the European level, even said they thought they were listening to their own students.

Following are some relevant considerations pointed out by the teachers involved:

- The need to be physically active and do activities that are practical and imply moving is true, even if it's not always easy to implement.
- Active strategies are also useful with children who need to be stimulated continuously with new ideas because their attention span and skills are lower than in the past. They get bored very easily and are always looking for new interactive and playful activities.
- However, at the same time, students' creativity has decreased. They seem to need someone who can help them use their imagination because they are no longer able to do so by themselves. This confirms the need for spaces that are de-structured but supervised and guided by an adult at the same time.
- Even if creativity and attention skills are changing, children are developing new skills, such as digital ones. They don't like strict rules but are good at reaching a given goal through their own path and with their own time.
- Teachers agree with kids' complaints related to time constraints. It's true that innovative methods are necessary, but it's also true that getting used to these new methods requires a lot of time (for both teachers and students).



- The need to promote students-teachers relationships is highly acknowledged. If the relationship works, pupils trust the adult and follow what he/she proposes. In some schools, teachers are valued and recognized for their importance by everybody, included children and families. Conversely, when teachers are not recognized or don't feel good, the impact is apparent. Moreover, when school systems impose a high number of teachers rotating in one class, becoming a role model or gaining students' trust is difficult, and children don't find the necessary consistency in terms of educational methods.
- Teachers also agree that students learn better when they are involved and engaged in decisions. They feel considered and being aware of what to expect reassures them. Involving them is also important to assess students' real needs instead of relying on assumptions.
- Positive emotions are key. Positive feedback is powerful and it's important for teachers to switch to this logic instead of focusing on the correction of mistakes. Sometimes, having to evaluate students is an obstacle to the relationship.
- Positive emotions should also be taken into account when creating springboard stories. A successful story is a story with a positive ending, and students can feel empowered by hearing about somebody overcoming difficulties. PLACES stories should inspire trust, hope, empowerment and children/human/democratic rights.
- Social difficulties, fear of making a mistake and anxiety represent an issue. In some cases, students are smart but extremely afraid of performance, cannot deal with oral presentations because of other people's judgement, and worry about roles and self-labels. PLACES materials should include stories and resources about dealing with anxiety and stress.
- All the teachers confirm the importance of innovative methodologies and try to use those as much as possible. They mentioned a variety of interactive methods and strategies that encompass physical activity (life skills based activities, total physical response, theatre based methods, etc). Moreover, they recognize the importance of humour and playful attitude and techniques.
- They also adopt storytelling when possible. In particular, it is useful to create a relationship with new students. When using stories, it's important to adapt the language to children's way of talking.
- When creating stories, it's important to focus on reflexivity about the story narration and keep in consideration that each story can have as many versions as the people who listen to them and tell them. Also, stories should consider the uniqueness of each student.
- In general, teachers who took part in those meetings report that they already work with the issues that emerged from the focus groups with students (i.e. they get students to talk to each other after conflict, focus on ethos/values and good practices). Some also report working with stories and paintings on SDGs topics such as inclusion and inequalities or climate change.
- Teachers recognize the need to share and disseminate good practices.



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CONCLUSIONS

The European Needs Analysis collected important information to create the best foundation for the development, testing, sustainability and upscaling activities which will be carried by the PLACES project. First, a context analysis analysed how the participating countries and the European Union introduced the SDGs in their societal development strategies and the existing projects in this area. Then, teachers' opinions, experience and knowledge about SDGs, playful learning and storytelling were investigated. Moreover, students' needs related to SDG 3 "Good Health and Well Being", SDG 4 "Quality Education", and SDG 10 "Reduced Inequalities" were collected. Finally, the students' need analysis results were shared with some teachers to understand their interpretation and have precious suggestions for the project.

This European Needs Analysis gives many insights for the PLACES project activities. In the conclusions section of each chapter, specific suggestions and implications for the project are described.