



The InCreaProject: Enhancing Inclusion and Wellbeing in Secondary Education

Anca Colibaba¹, Irina Gheorghiu², Simona Hulţoană³,
Claudia Elena Dinu⁴, Ovidiu Ursa⁵, Cintia Colibaba⁶

¹EuroEd Foundation Iasi, Romania

²Albert Ludwigs University Freiburg, Germany

³EuroEd School Iasi, Romania

⁴Grigore T.Popa University Iasi, Romania

⁵Iuliu Hatieganu University Cluj-Napoca, Romania,

⁶University of Life Sciences Iasi, Romania

Abstract

The article is based on the InCrea Project (Number: 2020-1-LT01-KA227-SCH-094736), which focuses on social inclusion, an important dimension of European education. The project promotes students' wellbeing through the implementation of arts content and practices. It aims at enhancing teachers' skills and competencies on social inclusion and to this end, it provides teachers with learning materials, resources and activities meant to reduce differences in the field of education. The article presents the objectives and outputs of the InCrea project, which can help teachers deliver educational content to students more inclusively and innovatively. It gives insights into the methodologies and practices on how to use educational arts activities to develop students' 21st-century skills and enhance inclusion and wellbeing in secondary education.

Keywords: *inclusion, wellbeing, education, arts content and practices*

1. European Context and the InCrea project

The COVID-19 pandemic has widened educational inequalities and increased school drop-out rates in Europe, requiring a more holistic approach to inclusive education. The Arts, which meet a range of students' needs and preferences, can support an inclusive school culture, stimulate students' wellbeing and develop the 21st-century skills [1, 2].

The InCrea+ (Inclusive CREATivity through Educational Artmaking) project targets students (between 11 and 16 years old) and teachers. Its focus is on promoting artistic activities that stimulate creativity, critical thinking and multicultural dialogue, develop the skills necessary in the 21st-century and create an inclusive environment where all students can achieve their potential [3].

2. The InCrea Project's Outcomes

The partnership made up of organisations from Lithuania, Spain, Turkey, Italy, Romania and Bulgaria has created useful material for teachers, which has been collected in a guide on educational art activities to develop students' 21st-century skills and enhance inclusion and wellbeing in secondary education.

2.1 The Survey

The guide was based on the findings of a survey carried out on 100 teachers from seven diverse primary, middle and high schools from the six partner countries [3]. The teachers had different teaching experiences and familiarity with inclusive education (generally limited: only 39.4% used inclusive strategies in their activities). They taught a wide range of school subjects (language, literature, history and geography or STEM - 63% whereas arts or art-related subjects - 27%). The survey collected information about teachers' needs, opinions, knowledge and challenges related to inclusive education. The survey highlighted teachers' perspectives on how arts can contribute to stimulating inclusive education in schools. The data was collected in April - June 2021.

Thus, the challenges to inclusive education selected by participants were grouped into several categories: socioeconomic (low-income families, job issues of parents, limited access to educational, technological, or other resources - 44.9%), socio-emotional (depression, behavioural problems in self-



expression, managing stress and anger- 61%), cultural (religion, language, migration), intrapersonal (physical, cognitive, and relational) and related to Giftedness and Talent aspects.

The survey revealed that although the participants were so different they all supported inclusive education and arts as an effective means of achieving it.

As for the benefits students would have from the project, 80% identified at least three benefits for students from the mainstream, relational and communication skills getting the highest percentage; as far as SEN students are concerned, 82 % appreciated the increase in cognitive and relational skills as the most important benefits. Creativity (40%), language (34%) and teamwork (24%) skills are the benefits teachers themselves thought they would gain from participating in the InCrea project. Participants were also asked to express their opinion about the role that art experts could play in the project (60% thought they were mandatory) as well as the role art can play in supporting 21st-century skills. The results of the survey identified teachers' current needs and were used to choose the activities addressing professionals interested in promoting InCrea goals, the topics and methodological choices to be further used when elaborating the InCrea guide.

2.2 The InCrea Guide

The Guide has been elaborated taking into consideration the conclusions of the survey [3]. The first two chapters look into inclusive education and its challenges related to inequality, disability, ethnicity, language, migration, displacement, gender and religion, which have been enhanced by the Covid-19 pandemic. Chapter 2 also draws attention to possible risks if the current education systems do not manage to solve them.

Chapter 3 presents inclusive education and the 21st century skills that students need to develop to succeed in the information age. Chapter 4 presents the foundations for inclusive educational artmaking, which may develop along three strands: Positive Youth Development (PYD), educational psychology and Universal Design for Learning and Lavickain and Matonute's innovative experiences based on communication through the arts. All these principles and strategies can be transferred to and used in all educational contexts and for inclusive purposes.

Chapter 5 describes a series of art-based good practices focusing on inclusive education, provided by the InCrea+ project. Thus, Romania offered two best practices developed within communities: *Classic is fantastic!*, and *Alecart*. The main objectives of *Classic is fantastic!*, initiated by the George Enescu Philharmonic Institute in Bucharest, are to instill the love of music in young people, make classical music accessible and educate young people in the spirit of harmony and understanding among people. The *Alecart* section in the FILIT Event (Iasi International Festival of Literature and Translation) and the *Alecart* magazine have published young people's opinions on a wide range of topics (inclusion, diversity, life, communism, achievements, happiness vs unhappiness, and wellbeing) and their literary works since 2008. The FILIT event aims at promoting young talents and their literary works as well as developing young people's creative and critical thinking skills, inducing the love of reading and helping young people to find their voice in society and fully contribute to its development. The above-mentioned good practices, implemented at the community level, are centred on a series of challenges to inclusion, especially social and socio-economic and less of cultural, physical, cognitive and behavioural nature. Chapter 6 completes the series of good practices at the school level. Partners identified and shared about 35 diverse practices. For instance, *Parsifal, the Legends researcher* is a good example on cultural challenges. Participants collected stories related to their local cultural heritage, shared them with their peers from other countries and then they carried out a comparative analysis pointing to common European roots. Chapter 7 explores the role of the cultural and creative sector in inclusive education through artmaking. This chapter is built on art integrated learning, an innovative teaching and learning approach which aims to attract and maintain learners' attention, motivate them, encourage students' active participation, develop their thinking, creative abilities and other 21st century skills. Chapter 8 presents digital tools for educational artmaking and their benefits and provides readers with materials on how to use digital tools for educational artmaking. Chapters 9, 10 and 11 present the InCrea Curriculum: foundations and choices, the content and structure of the curriculum, the UDL principles as well as plenty of good practices and practical activities.

3. The InCrea Project Training Course

The participants were 30 teachers of language, science and art subjects from a range of schools in Iasi, Romania. The teachers were recruited according to their availability and interest in arts and inclusive education. Their familiarity with inclusive education and integrating arts into the learning processes varied from experienced to beginners. The focus of the course fell on improving and refreshing teachers' knowledge about inclusive education and on enabling participants to implement



art educational activities to develop students' 21st century skills and enhance inclusion and wellbeing in classes.

3.1 Teachers' Questionnaire

The teachers' questionnaire (Table1) had six yes/ no questions asking them to assess their perception and feelings about the course. They also had to describe the challenges and benefits they as teachers saw in the method.

Table 1: Teachers' questionnaire

Question	YES/ NO
1. Was the InCrea training course informative and useful?	75% YES
2. Was the content clear and easy to follow?	90% YES
3. Were there enough examples and practical applications?	65% YES
4. Did the training course help you to implement educational arts activities to develop students' 21st-century skills and enhance inclusion and wellbeing in your classes?	75% YES
5. Do you consider that it is difficult to prepare your lessons using the InCrea method?	40% YES
6. Would you recommend the InCrea method to your colleagues?	100% YES

3.2 Questionnaire Results and Analysis

The feedback from the teachers shows clear advantages of using the InCrea method in the classroom. 75% of teachers found the course informative and useful. Most of them (90%) appreciated the content as clear and easy to follow and 65% held that the guide has enough examples and practical applications. 75% believed that the training course helped them to improve their competences and said that they would implement educational arts activities to develop the skills students need in the 21st century and enhance inclusion and wellbeing in their classes. As for how difficult it is to prepare such lessons 40% thought that it could be difficult for them to deliver such lessons considering their still limited experience with the method. All of them would recommend the use of the method in the classroom to their colleagues.

Participants were confident in the success of the method as students get a lot of enjoyment and fun from lessons integrating arts and also gain a deeper engagement in and satisfaction with their learning process. They also stated that it is this combined feeling of enjoyment and satisfaction that means the arts have a visible impact on students' personality, behaviour and school achievement. Teachers signaled an increased knowledge and understanding of the arts, which triggered an interest in and positive attitudes towards the arts but also an enhancement in students' creativity and their critical, communication and relational skills.

All teachers appreciated the quality of the materials on integrating art with other disciplines. They all supported this idea and highlighted its various benefits to students. Thus, all teachers agreed that arts help students grow intellectually, develop their autonomy and find their freedom of expression. Arts boost enthusiasm and commitment, inspire students to attain higher outcomes and promote a can do mentality. They widen students' horizon enabling them to look at the world from different perspectives, raising their cultural awareness and improving tolerance towards cultural differences. Most respondents saw the arts as having a therapeutic value and a calming and comforting effect offering students a release from their problems and hopes in a better world and future.

The results of the survey are in line with ideas promoted by current literature on the issue: arts are the most pleasant and inspiring way of encouraging students' attendance and participation in school activities. Arts introduce variety and diversity in school programmes, keeping mind and soul in balance, appealing to all types of intelligence [4,5,6].

4. Conclusions

Although the study has some limitations (the number of participants and the length of the experiment), the results are favourable. The course promotes an innovative method of inclusive education through the implementation of arts educational content and practices, which will structure the cultures, policies and practices in schools to respond to the diversity of students and address all students' needs.



All teachers agreed that the creative integration of artistic methods and practices in schools can help all students acquire the skills required in the 21st century, raise their interest and motivation, and make learning processes more attractive and meaningful.

However, they also held that 'implementing the method requires skilled professional arts teachers and trained school teachers, complemented by successful partnerships between education and cultural systems and communities'.

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