

# CHESION

*citizenship education  
on social inclusion*

## REPORT END- USER MEETINGS

TEACHERS AND PARENTS

2019



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# TABLE OF CONTENT

<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	2
<b>COMBINED RESULTS TEACHERS</b> .....	3
Contact with parents: .....	3
Discussing difficult topics: .....	3
Citizenship curriculum:.....	4
<b>COMBINED RESULTS PARENTS</b> .....	6
Contact with children and school:.....	6
Discussing difficult topics: .....	6
Citizenship curriculum:.....	7
<b>CONCLUSIONS AND PROJECT IMPLICATIONS</b> .....	9
Parent-teacher meetings: .....	9
Discussing difficult topics: .....	9
Citizenship curriculum:.....	9



## INTRODUCTION

As shown in the literature reviews, it is essential to consider the needs of the target audience during the development of lesson material. In the case of Cohesion, this means we need to incorporate and accommodate where possible the ideas, views and wishes of both parents and teachers. Of course, teachers are the ones who need to work with the material, so their insights are valuable input. Considerations they have now, might influence (or even determine) their willingness to work with the program in the future. Therefore, identifying their needs is necessary to develop materials that are likely to be used and have an positive effect on the actual target audience, the student.

Including the needs of parents is done for two reasons. First of all, citizenship education at school touches (if not overlaps) with the ways parents educate their children at home. This makes the issue more sensitive than math or geography. Therefore it is important to understand how parents look to such interventions and think of the potential subjects that should be discussed in class. Secondly, rather than influencing only one of the two most important 'worlds' of children and adolescents, Cohesion seeks to foster bonds between them. In other words, promote connection between teachers and parents - between the school and home environment. For this it is important to understand how parents relate to the schools of their children (and it's teachers). How much contact is there already? Should such contact be promoted in their eyes? And if so, in what ways can this be shaped?

### Overview participants

<b>Belgium</b>	
Parents	15
Teachers	9
<b>Denmark</b>	
Parents	41
Teachers	3
<b>The Netherlands</b>	
Parents	5
Teachers	2 <sup>1</sup>
<b>United Kingdom</b>	
Parents	17
Teachers	14
<b>Total</b>	
Parents	78
Teachers	26

To be able to include the opinions of parents and teachers, questionnaires were developed for both groups. As the Cohesion team is spread over four countries, the questionnaires were made available in English, Dutch and Danish. This report discusses the results from questionnaires filled in by 78 parents, 26 teachers and 2 educational organizations in Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. In particular it seeks for the conclusions one can draw, based on these results, for the development of the materials for primary and secondary schools. For country-specific results, one can consult the appendices.

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<sup>1</sup> The questionnaires were discussed with two organizations working in the Dutch educational system. Although their input is very relevant for the project, these organizations are not included in the total amount of teachers as such.



## **COMBINED RESULTS TEACHERS**

When analyzing the results from the questionnaires filled in by teachers, one can identify three main themes: the contact between teachers and their students' parents, the discussing of difficult topics in the classroom, and their ideas on a citizenship curriculum. The findings in these sections regard all four countries if not stated differently.

### **Contact with parents:**

The results on this issue differ between the four countries. However, there is one commonality: the majority of contact is problem-based. Parents are invited to school especially when their child is reason for concern. This can be a behavioral issue, but also grades-related. Parents are indeed invited for special occasions like theater, student presentations and teacher-parent nights, but as to be expected, such special events occur on a less regular base. The amount of such meetings differs quite a lot between schools in all countries.

At the participating schools in Belgium and the UK, regular (uninvited) teacher-parent contact is higher than in the Netherlands. In Denmark, the type of school might play a role in the amount of contact, as this regards special education.

Regardless the differences, and thus sometimes an apparent lack of regular and often contact, the teachers generally see their current amount of contact with parents as enough.

### **Discussing difficult topics:**

The teachers who have participated in the questionnaire research had rather similar ideas on this issue, regardless the country they are teaching and living in. Overall we can identify one very important result: teachers think it is important to discuss difficult topics like radicalisation, discrimination and extremism in class. Most of them feel comfortable enough to do so too. However, their willingness to engage in these discussions is sometimes inhibited by their own lack of knowledge. Especially in Denmark this led to reluctancy to cover such topics in class. Across all four countries, teachers indicate a lack of (trust in) existing materials on these difficult topics. They would like to be informed or trained more, or provided with lesson materials that include this knowledge. Only when they are absolutely sure that an intervention cannot fail or have adverse influence on the students, teacher will be willingly to use that program.



In the Netherlands, especially primary school teachers feel comfortable discussing difficult topics in class. Although their students often have heard about topics like radicalization and discrimination, they are not bothered by it yet, which makes the discussions less sensitive.

British teachers sometimes feel concerned about parents' reactions on discussing different cultures and belief in class. There is also a slight fear of the unwanted effects of confronting these children with difficult topics, especially when it comes to younger students (primary education).

### **Citizenship curriculum:**

In none of the four countries in which teachers have been interviewed, there is a fixed curriculum regarding citizenship education. In the Netherlands, Belgium and Britain, there is indeed the obligation for schools to address topics related to it. For example in Britain, it should cover the variety of beliefs and cultures and instill a degree of tolerance for both the ones students are familiar with and the ones with which they are not. However the implementation and specific selection of topics is more or less up to the schools themselves. This is shown by the variety of programs that were used in the schools of the interviewees (e.g. *Cand.selv* and *Step by step* in Denmark and *ZILL* in Belgium). As a result of the 'free' implementation, some schools work with complete programs, whereas others work with topic-specific lessons which teacher try to integrate in other lessons.

In almost all cases, teachers indicated a lack of time as the main reason for limited attention for citizenship education and accordingly as a potential problem for future implementation. Even one of the special education schools in Denmark agrees with this problem, but due to the type of education they offer, they are able to allocate much more time to the issue than regular schools. Additionally, the Belgian teachers see some other trends that might adversely affect citizenship education. According to them, lessons should be positive. Tell students what they should or can do, rather what they should not or cannot. Furthermore they fear the possibility of moralizing lessons due to the own values and beliefs of the teacher or the majority within a school, something that is mentioned during interviews in the Netherlands and Britain too.

Regarding the time that should be focused on citizenship education, we've found a remarkably consistent view amongst the teachers. Almost all of them would like to see around one hour per week in which they are able to discuss topics that are mentioned in the figure above. being said, most of them also indicate



that topics often are already integrated in other lessons, thus expanding the time being spend on citizenship-related topics. And as already mentioned above, incidents that cause media coverage, are seen as an incentive to discuss the related topics more often, more thorough and more specific.

Proposed curriculum themes	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Diversity</li><li>▪ Religion</li><li>▪ Democracy</li><li>▪ Violence/aggression</li><li>▪ Mindfulness</li><li>▪ Perspective-taking</li><li>▪ Conflict resolution</li><li>▪ Positive identity</li><li>▪ Group pressure</li><li>▪ Extremism</li><li>▪ Racism</li><li>▪ Dialogue techniques</li><li>▪ Online false 'truths'</li></ul>	<p>Nevertheless, there is also a rather general and strong belief that at least most of the proposed topics in the interviews (see figure) should be discussed in class. Especially social development, resilience and perspective are indicated as important. In the Netherlands and Denmark, positive elements (especially democracy, inclusion and identity) are often included in other lessons. Something that is indicated as desirable by British and Belgian teachers too. However, the Danish teachers indicated that some important themes are not integrated yet. This is shown in the fact that they even started to look online for particular lessons on fake truths or perspective taking for example, to be able to discuss such topics in class.</p>

Teachers lack topic specific lessons on 'negative' themes like radicalisation, discrimination and polarization. These can be used in crisis-situations (e.g. the day after an attack). In Belgium, teachers tend to agree on this, albeit more visible in the allocated time they deem sufficient for covering such themes. They indicate that when a shocking (inter)national event occurs, giving extra attention to related topics should be possible. A lesson should be 'on the shelf' for a situation in which it's needed.

In Britain, teachers indicated that there should indeed always be attention for social competences, character development and resilience. Maybe a bit more outstanding however, they suggested British values and leadership as important elements of citizenship education too.



## **COMBINED RESULTS PARENTS**

### **Contact with children and school:**

Regardless the country the interview was held in, most parents do have daily contact with their children. Also a far majority is willing and comfortable to discuss difficult themes at home too. However, this was not the case in the UK, where parents generally felt insecure about discussing radicalisation and other difficult topics with their children, whereas they feel they do not have enough knowledge/information. Although they feel less secure discussing such topics, they feel like this is still a very relevant and important part of the personal development. This is thus a share feeling amongst parents from all four countries.

There is more difference in the amount of contact moments between parents and the teacher(s) of their child(ren). Most of the interviewed British and Belgian parents had daily contact with school and some every few days. In Denmark however, parents indicate that they do not speak to the teachers of their children on a very regular base. Not even a fifth indicates that they have weekly contact. Moreover, almost half of the interviewed parents see and speak to the teachers only a few times per year on occasions planned by school. Nevertheless, they do indicate that the contact intensifies when there is need for it (problems with marks or behavior etc.). This being noted, the attitude towards the amount of contact moments between parents and teachers is rather univocal. Almost all parents feel they have enough time and possibility to talk to their children's teachers.

Parents are invited for school meetings on a less regular base, generally a few times per year. The interviewees tend to find this enough. In Belgium it seems to be the case that parents who are invited less by the schools of their children would like to see this type of contact to be intensified though.

### **Discussing difficult topics:**

Basically anything should be open for discussion in the classroom according to the parents that have been interviewed. Also the discussion of more difficult topics is deemed very important. In the case of the British parents maybe even more so because they do not feel fully equipped to do so themselves.

Although most topics were primarily seen as constructive elements of educational programs, there were some concerns regarding discussing difficult topics in class too. First and foremost: teachers should be absolutely sure that they do not discriminate in any way during such discussions. Furthermore, some parents questioned the knowledge of teachers or their ability to exclude personal beliefs or values from



the lessons due to their young age and inexperience. Finally, although it might not show from these results, some parents saw a potential problem in the fact that parents might react reluctantly.

Also within the potential problematic issues, there were some identifiable country specifics. The British participants were residents of the very diverse London borough of Newham. Especially regarding the discussion of religion and extremism, these parents voiced their concerns about the sensitivity. They indicated that family values and cultural backgrounds might play a restrictive role. The differences in views and values within the class room, which are the result of this multicultural environment should be handled cautiously.

### **Citizenship curriculum:**

According to the data from the interviews, one can definitely say that parents generally agree on that citizenship and social competencies should be integrated or included in the curriculum at school. Even though there is an national demand for part of the curriculum, most parents in both the United Kingdom and Belgium are not aware if and how these themes are integrated in the curriculum of their children's schools. Likewise, there is much similarity in the time parents see as sufficient to cover the citizenship topics. Although some feel it is integrated in other courses and lessons, the overall response was 1 hour a week.

In the interviews, the parents were presented a list of topics and asked whether they thought these topics should be part of a citizenship curriculum. This was the same as the one for the teachers. Participants could check 'yes' or 'no' boxes, or leave the topic blank. This means that a table showing the appreciated topics in order of significance is not completely the opposite of a list of the topics parents feel should not be introduced in schools. The two tables below offer an overview of the answers of the participants from all four countries.

The tables show the results from different countries, and since the number of participants was rather different between them, it is necessary to take a closer look to some country specifics too. In Belgium for example, more difficult or sensitive topics scored higher than in the over-all picture. Here, religion, democracy, diversity, extremism and racism were most appreciated amongst parents, whereas these scored lower in the general table.





### Appreciated topics

Democracy	70
Group pressure	67
Religion	66
Positive identity	66
Conflict resolution	64
Racism	64
Dialogue techniques	64
Violence/aggression	62
Online 'false truths'	61
Extremism	60
Perspective-taking	58
Diversity	56
Mindfulness	48

### Criticized topics

Mindfulness	17
Extremism	9
Religion	7
Violence/aggression	6
Racism	5
Dialogue techniques	4
Online 'false truths'	4
Diversity	3
Group pressure	2
Conflict resolution	2
Positive identity	1
Democracy	0
Perspective-taking	0



## **CONCLUSIONS AND PROJECT IMPLICATIONS**

### **Parent-teacher meetings:**

It is remarkable that both parents and teachers seem satisfied with the amount of contact that is currently the case. However, closer examination of this, reveals that this especially has to do with the 'type' of contact. 'No news is good news', seems to be the general approach to this. Schools will contact the parents when there is the need for it. This can be bad grades, bad behavior, or other issues. Common tendency: the reason for contact is *negative*. Therefore, this calls for a different approach.

Especially in consideration of the schoolbased family support programme, the underlying reason for contact needs a positivity-boost. This might include showing the parents what the class is currently doing in school. This prevents a focus on grades, and offers parents the opportunity to discuss similar topics at home, since they know what their children are occupied with.

### **Discussing difficult topics:**

When it comes to discussing difficult topics in class, both parents and teachers agree that this should be done. However, parents sometimes seem uncertain about the abilities of teachers. They fear (unintentional) discrimination or even the influence of the teachers' own personal values. Teachers, in turn, are aware that some parents might not be supportive towards the discussion of more sensitive topics in class. Potentially influenced by this, teachers indicated that they do not always feel comfortable working with the materials they are provided with. With critical parents watching over their shoulders, teachers do not seek for materials or lessons that can provide them with positive results. Rather they'd be looking for materials that cannot fail or result in problems with parents.

This therefore asks for a twofold solution. First of all, teachers need to be provided with lesson material with which they feel comfortable to talk about all sorts of topics in class. Secondly, the parents need to be informed at forehand to prevent misinterpretation of the lessons. For example it might comfort both parties if a module is introduced to parents during a parent-teacher meeting.

### **Citizenship curriculum:**

In the four countries in which Cohesion is active, there is no obligation to use a certain method or module. Parents and teachers do see the provided themes as important for a school discussion though. Nevertheless, teachers do indicate that a time consuming intervention is almost doomed to end up on the shelf, simply due to a lack of time. About an hour per week to discuss citizenship-related issues seems fit for both parents and teachers.



All proposed themes/topics found at least some support from the interviewed parents and teachers. Teachers do indicate that they at least need a back-up for incidents that are covered by the media – both local and (inter)national. Especially these incident-related topics would include more difficult or sensitive topics.

First of all, a citizenship curriculum is seen as fitted for in schools. The same goes for the themes that were proposed to the interviewees. These results indicate that lesson material should be modular. Topics like extremism or terrorism might not be included in a 'normal' curriculum, but should be available when needed. Explaining to parents when, why and how such sensitive themes are discussed in class might take away earlier mentioned concerns. Again, this may ask for an informative meeting on the lesson material or module, attended by parents. Finally, mindfulness is a theme that is most frequently criticized. As research shows that mindfulness-related exercises are very beneficial for students, it might be an option to look for a different term to describe them.

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