2025

ROUND TABLE REPORT

EMPOWERING TOMORROW - THE ROLE OF CIVIC EDUCATION IN SHAPING ENGAGED YOUTH

Executive Summary

"Empowering Tomorrow: The Role of Civic Education in Shaping Engaged Youth"

was designed as a forward-thinking initiative to address the mounting challenges facing democratic societies, including political polarization, misinformation, and a growing disconnect between youth and civic engagement. Held from 30 March to 1 April 2025 in Warsaw, the event brought together key stakeholders from Poland and Norway to share insights and collaboratively shape the future of civic education.

Over two days, participants engaged in a series of interactive sessions—including identifying current challenges, envisioning an ideal civic education system, and developing as well as testing practical solutions. The event's structure, outlined in the project plan , promoted cross-national dialogue and collaborative problem-solving.

Participants explored themes such as:
- Civic Education for Agency and Action: Emphasizing the need to transform theoretical knowledge into practical civic engagement, while addressing barriers like ageism and generational gaps.
- Inclusion and Diversity in Education: Tackling issues of marginalization and stereotypes to promote equitable and inclusive learning environments.
- Mental Health & Well-Being in Schools: Recognizing the importance of supportive educational settings that foster both academic success and emotional resilience.

The outcomes, detailed in accompanying documentation, underscore the identification of key obstacles and the formulation of actionable recommendations—from establishing community spaces for after-hours collaboration to integrating well-being mentors in school systems. Overall, the initiative not only highlighted the transformative potential of empowered youth but also set the stage for ongoing efforts to enhance civic education across borders.

Introduction

The current era is marked by complex challenges to democratic values, with political polarization, misinformation, and authoritarian trends threatening the foundational principles of rule of law and human rights. In this context, the active engagement of youth emerges as a critical lever for societal change. The "Empowering Tomorrow" project was conceived against this backdrop, aiming to reimagine civic education by equipping young people with the knowledge, skills, and platforms necessary for active and informed participation in their communities.

Drawing on a comprehensive plan, the project brought together diverse voices from Poland and Norway. The initiative was structured around a series of dynamic sessions that encouraged participants to:

1 **Identify and Analyze Challenges:** Through interactive workshops, groups mapped current deficiencies in civic education, highlighting issues such as limited practical engagement, prevalent ageism, and barriers to youth participation.

2 **Envision an Ideal Future:** Participants collaboratively designed a vision for a transformative civic education system, one that is inclusive, responsive, and geared towards real-world action.

3 **Develop and Refine Solutions:** Using design-thinking and role-playing techniques, the groups tested innovative strategies aimed at integrating civic education into both formal curricula and community practices.

Informed by the outcomes documented in the project's follow-up , the event not only provided a platform for sharing best practices but also sparked a meaningful exchange of ideas on improving educational inclusivity, enhancing mental health support in schools, and fostering greater civic engagement. The insights gained set the stage for a more resilient and participatory democratic society, where youth are empowered to influence both local and international change.

Project overwiev

The "Empowering Tomorrow" project was conceptualized to address the growing challenges within civic education, particularly in an era marked by political polarization, misinformation, and disengagement among young people. With recent reforms in the Polish educational system—such as the introduction of a new subject designed to transform civic education—and active debates in Norway regarding inclusive education and the integration of digital tools, the project aimed to bridge theory and practice.

Specifically, it sought to:

- Enhance civic agency by moving beyond traditional classroom approaches and promoting practical, action-oriented civic education.

- Foster inclusivity by creating opportunities for dialogue between diverse groups, ensuring that the voices of marginalized communities are heard.

- Develop actionable solutions that directly address systemic barriers, such as ageism and societal stereotypes, thereby increasing youth participation in democratic processes.

Although originally designed as a multi-national initiative, the event ultimately brought together participants solely from Poland and Norway. This focused collaboration allowed for a deeper exploration of the distinct challenges and opportunities within each national context, ensuring that the strategies developed were both relevant and immediately applicable to the local environments. Detailed event agenda constitutes Annex 1.
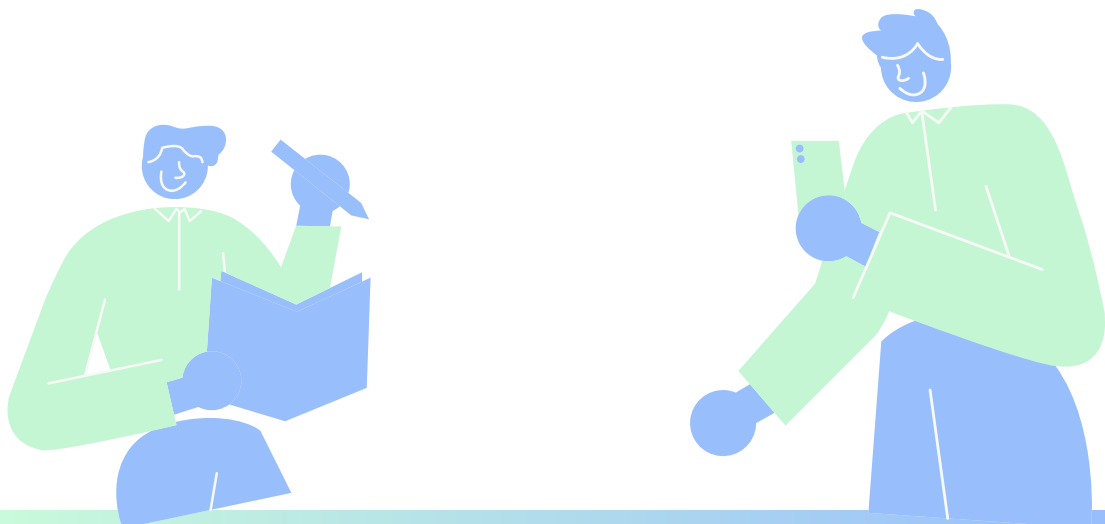
Methodology and Workshop Techniques

The event was structured around four core sessions designed to progressively build understanding and drive actionable outcomes. Each session was crafted with a specific objective in mind:

- Session 1 – Identifying the Challenges:

Participants engaged in an interactive workshop aimed at mapping existing challenges in civic education. Utilizing brainstorming and mind mapping techniques, the session encouraged delegates to articulate barriers such as ageism, low voter turnout, and limited practical civic engagement.

- Session 2 – Vision for an Ideal Civic Education System:

This session fostered collaborative vision-building. Participants worked in small, mixed groups to conceptualize an ideal framework for civic education that bridges theoretical knowledge with real-world application.

- Session 3 – Practical Solutions and Implementation:

Focused on translating ideas into actionable strategies, this session combined structured workshops with group activities. Participants shared innovative practices from their respective contexts and developed proposals tailored to overcome the identified challenges.

- Session 4 – Testing and Refining Solutions:

In this iterative phase, role-playing scenarios and feedback loops were used to test the feasibility of proposed solutions. The session was designed to refine ideas through live simulation and group debriefings, ensuring the strategies were robust and practical.

Participant Engagement

Polish and Norwegian round table representation allowed for a deep dive into the specific challenges and opportunities present within each national context.

- Poland:

Participants included representatives from national and local youth councils, educational institutions, and civic organizations. Their insights were particularly valuable in discussing the integration of new civic education curricula and addressing issues such as ageism and disengagement in democratic processes.

- Norway:

Delegates from organizations such as the National Youth Council of Norway, the School Student Union, and other youth groups brought forward perspectives on inclusivity, tackling societal polarization, and enhancing civic engagement through innovative educational practices.

Detailed Session Outcomes

The sessions were organized into four phases—identifying challenges, envisioning an ideal system, developing actionable solutions, and refining those solutions. The outcomes from these sessions have been synthesized into three thematic areas:

Civic Education for Agency and Action

Throughout the discussions, participants underscored the need to move beyond theoretical instruction in civic education and promote active, real-world engagement. Key outcomes include:

Key Issues Identified

- The sessions revealed that despite a robust curriculum, a significant barrier exists—ageism—which hampers youth participation and undermines confidence in the democratic process.
- Topics such as the role of NGOs, the practical dimension of civic education, and low voter turnout were at the forefront of discussions.

Vision of a Perfect World

- An environment where every individual can participate equally in democracy, with enhanced trust in democratic institutions.
- A reduction in generational gaps and the fostering of a culture where local activism thrives.
- Inclusive public spaces where all groups, including minorities and special-need communities, have a voice.

Proposed Solutions

- Establishing accessible public spaces and community hubs available after standard hours.
- Promoting knowledge-sharing events and informal group meetings to nurture a sense of togetherness and civic responsibility.

Detailed Session Outcomes

Inclusion and Diversity in Education

Norwegian participants focused on the challenges of creating an educational environment that fully embraces diversity and inclusivity. The outcomes include:

Key Issues Identified

- A multi-layered set of issues ranging from a resistance to change within the education system and curricula to deeper social challenges like stereotypes, fear of diversity, and conservative mindsets.
- Recognition of systemic factors such as inadequate mental health support for educators and infrastructural shortcomings that exacerbate social exclusion.

Vision of a Perfect World

- Initiatives like a "New school opening day" and regular cultural moments (e.g., human library sessions, sports, and mentor programs) that emphasize inclusivity.
- A reformed grading system, enhanced extracurricular activities, and structured opportunities for students to engage across diverse backgrounds.

Proposed Solutions

- The introduction of well-being mentors—integrated into the school system — to guide and support inclusivity efforts.
- Emphasizing cultural exchange through events that celebrate diverse traditions and foster intergroup understanding, with input from both students and educators.

Detailed Session Outcomes

Mental Health & Well-Being in Schools

The sessions addressing mental health drew on insights originally noted in the Icelandic context, highlighting systemic challenges in supporting student well-being. Outcomes include:

Key Issues Identified

- Insufficient inclusivity measures, a lack of effective after-school programs, and an inadequate system to address bullying and related issues.
- Overburdened teaching staff, outdated educational practices, and a critical deficit in the emotional intelligence of school staff, which impedes the implementation of preventive mental health measures.

Vision of a Perfect World

- Schools should become nurturing communities where safety, inclusivity, and holistic growth are paramount.
- An ideal school environment would support not only academic achievement but also the emotional and psychological well-being of students, making it a space where every individual feels valued and connected.

Proposed Solutions

- Implement regular sessions with qualified psychologists and adjust the curriculum to better address the mental and emotional needs of students.
- Establish "healthy stations" and flexible schedules (including options such as half-courses) to reduce pressure and foster a more supportive learning atmosphere.
- Introduce comprehensive training for teachers and management to develop key emotional intelligence competencies—such as empathy, communication awareness, and motivation.
- Utilize anonymous feedback tools to continually assess and improve mental health support systems within schools, alongside organizing community-building events that encourage open dialogue and collaboration.

These detailed session outcomes not only reflect the challenges identified in the current systems but also provide a roadmap for transforming civic education, fostering inclusivity, and enhancing mental health support in educational settings.

Embedding in national realities

Norway

In Norway, the approach to civic education is characterized by its integration across various subjects rather than as a standalone discipline. This integrated method, while reinforcing democratic participation as a fundamental value, can dilute the focus on active civic engagement[1], resulting in challenges such as persistent ageism and low youth voter turnout.[2] Additionally, the uneven quality of implementation across different municipalities further hampers the consistent development of civic competencies.[3] Strengthening structured mechanisms for student participation, establishing community hubs for civic learning, and expanding teacher training programs—such as those under the "Competence for Quality" initiative—are seen as vital opportunities to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical engagement.[4]

When it comes to inclusion and diversity in education, Norway faces significant challenges that stem from entrenched conservative mindsets and stereotypes, which continue to act as barriers to fully embracing diversity within schools. Systemic inequities, influenced by socioeconomic factors and regional disparities, further complicate efforts to provide equal educational opportunities.[5] A particular challenge remains in integrating Sámi traditions into mainstream curricula while respecting their cultural heritage.[6] Addressing these issues calls for initiatives such as cultural exchange programs, revised grading systems that acknowledge diverse learning needs, and the scaling of diversity action plans from higher education down to primary and secondary levels, all aimed at institutionalizing inclusivity.[7]

Norwegian schools also grapple with significant hurdles in supporting mental health and overall well-being. Limited resources, such as a shortage of dedicated mental health professionals and overburdened teachers, create an environment where addressing students' emotional needs is challenging, compounded by the lingering stigma surrounding mental health issues.[8]

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[1]https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/norway/57-learning-to-participate-through-formal-non-formal-and-informal-learning

[2]https://www.scup.com/doi/full/10.18261/9788215053417-2022-06

[3]https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/improving-school-quality-in-norway_179d4ded-en.html

[4]https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/norway/57-learning-to-participate-through-formal-non-formal-and-informal-learning

[5]https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/improving-school-quality-in-norway_179d4ded-en.html

[6]https://www.scup.com/doi/full/10.18261/9788215053417-2022-06

[7]https://www.nord.no/sites/default/files/2025-01/Action-Plan-Equality-Inclusion-and-Diversity-2025-2028.pdf

[8]https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/public-health/articles/10.3389/fpubh.2024.1454280/full

Embedding in national realities

To overcome these obstacles, a whole-school approach that embeds mental health services into the daily fabric of school life is essential. Introducing flexible learning models—like half-courses to alleviate academic pressure—and fostering robust partnerships between educational institutions, health services, and community organizations can create a more coordinated and effective support system for students' mental well-being.

Iceland

In Iceland, while civic education is deeply valued, it often remains confined to theoretical frameworks rather than offering students ample opportunities for practical engagement. The limited real-world application is evident in the declining voter turnout among young people, and frequent shifts in education policy further disrupt the continuity of civic initiatives.To bridge this gap, structured programs—such as student councils and community projects—could be introduced to provide clear platforms for youth participation. Enhanced teacher training in civic education methods and stronger local collaborations among schools, municipalities, and NGOs would also support a more hands-on approach, fostering active citizenship among students.[1]

In terms of inclusion and diversity, Iceland's education system, despite its strong policy framework, faces significant implementation challenges. Practical application of inclusivity measures is inconsistent, largely due to ambiguous guidelines and a shortage of necessary resources, which is especially pronounced in rural areas. Teachers often rely on traditional methods that may not fully address the diverse needs of their students, limiting the effectiveness of inclusive practices. To counter these issues, initiatives such as cultural exchange programs—like human libraries and cultural events—could be introduced to nurture mutual understanding. Additionally, increasing funding for inclusive education and providing ongoing professional development on inclusive pedagogy would help ensure that all students receive equitable educational opportunities.[2]

Mental health and well-being have become critical concerns in Icelandic schools, where rising mental health issues among youth are met with inconsistent support systems and overburdened staff. The shortage of dedicated mental health professionals and the heavy workload on teachers impede the establishment of a consistent care network, leaving many students without the support they need.

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[1]https://skemman.is/handle/1946/47071?locale=en

[1]https://opinvisindi.is/bitstream/handle/20.500.11815/4217/Paper_I_10.5.2023.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y

[2]https://www.beltz.de/fileadmin/beltz/downloads/OnlinematerialErziehungswissenschaft/03_Gudjonsdottir___Oskarsdottir.pdf

Embedding in national realities

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive, whole-school approach that integrates mental health services directly into the school environment. By embedding mental health professionals within schools, adopting holistic wellness initiatives that combine mental and physical health, and implementing effective feedback mechanisms, Iceland can create a more supportive and resilient educational setting for its students.[1]

Lichtenstein

In Liechtenstein's education system, civic education faces challenges rooted in its small, centralized governance structure, which limits opportunities for active youth engagement. The disconnect between theoretical instruction and practical application is compounded by declining trust in public institutions and persistent socioeconomic disparities that affect civic participation. To overcome these hurdles, localized civic projects—such as partnerships between schools and municipalities—could offer hands-on democratic experiences, while curriculum reforms incorporating project-based learning and the establishment of youth councils would empower students to participate more actively in shaping their communities.[2]

When it comes to inclusion and diversity, Liechtenstein grapples with the realities of a relatively homogenous population and conservative attitudes that often resist progressive inclusivity measures. These factors, along with resource constraints inherent in a small education system, limit efforts to foster intercultural understanding and prepare students for an increasingly globalized world. However, by launching cultural exchange programs in collaboration with neighboring countries like Switzerland and Austria, adopting interdisciplinary teaching methods such as simulation-based learning and role-play, and revising curricula to emphasize global citizenship, schools can create more dynamic and inclusive learning environments.[3]

In the area of mental health and well-being, Liechtenstein faces growing challenges as rates of anxiety and depression among youth rise under academic pressures and societal expectations. The limited availability of mental health professionals within schools and the ongoing stigma around mental health further hinder timely support and intervention. Addressing these issues calls for embedding psychologists and counselors directly into the school setting to provide consistent care, implementing early intervention programs through universal screening, and fostering collaborative networks among schools, families, and community organizations to build a more cohesive and supportive mental health infrastructure.[1]

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[1]https://www.eschoolnews.com/?p=221735, https://skemman.is/handle/1946/47071?locale=en
[2]https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2025/02/civic-education-as-a-pathway-to-inclusive-societies_6d52238a/3f128be8-en.pdf
[3]https://rm.coe.int/16802f7040

Embedding in national realities

Poland

In Poland, civic education is a critical yet challenging component of the educational landscape. While it is integrated across subjects such as history, social studies, and ethics, this approach tends to remain theoretical and falls short in preparing students for active participation in democratic processes. Low trust in public institutions and political polarization further contribute to a disconnect between civic ideals and practice, compounded by teacher training deficiencies that weaken effective delivery. However, opportunities for improvement exist through experiential learning—using simulations, debates, and community projects—to bridge theory and practice. Establishing youth councils or forums within schools and the introduction of civic education as a dedicated subject in secondary schools starting in September 2025 offer promising avenues to empower students and promote active citizenship.[1]

In the realm of inclusion and diversity, Poland's education system grapples with significant challenges that mirror broader societal inequalities. Socioeconomic disparities persist, with rural areas often lacking access to high-quality education and resources, while refugee students face additional hurdles such as language barriers, cultural differences, and the lingering effects of trauma. Moreover, resistance to change among some segments of society hampers progress toward more inclusive practices in schools. To address these issues, targeted support programs like "School for All"—which provides intercultural assistants and tailored resources funded by European Social Funds—can play a crucial role. Coupled with professional development initiatives for educators and cultural exchange events such as human libraries and multicultural celebrations, these measures can foster a more inclusive and supportive learning environment.[2]

Mental health and well-being are emerging as urgent priorities in Poland's schools, with alarming rates of mental health challenges among students, including a significant number reporting suicidal ideation. The inadequacy of support systems, characterized by a shortage of mental health professionals and a persistent cultural stigma, further complicates early intervention efforts. To counter these challenges, community-based care models—as envisioned in the National Mental Health Protection Programme (2023–2030)—could shift the focus from inpatient to school-based mental health services. Implementing regular sessions with psychologists, utilizing anonymous feedback tools, and launching holistic well-being initiatives that integrate both physical and emotional health education will be essential steps toward creating a more nurturing and resilient educational environment for all students.[3]

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[1]https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/poland/
[2]https://brokenchalk.org/educational-challenges-in-poland-a-deepening-crisis/
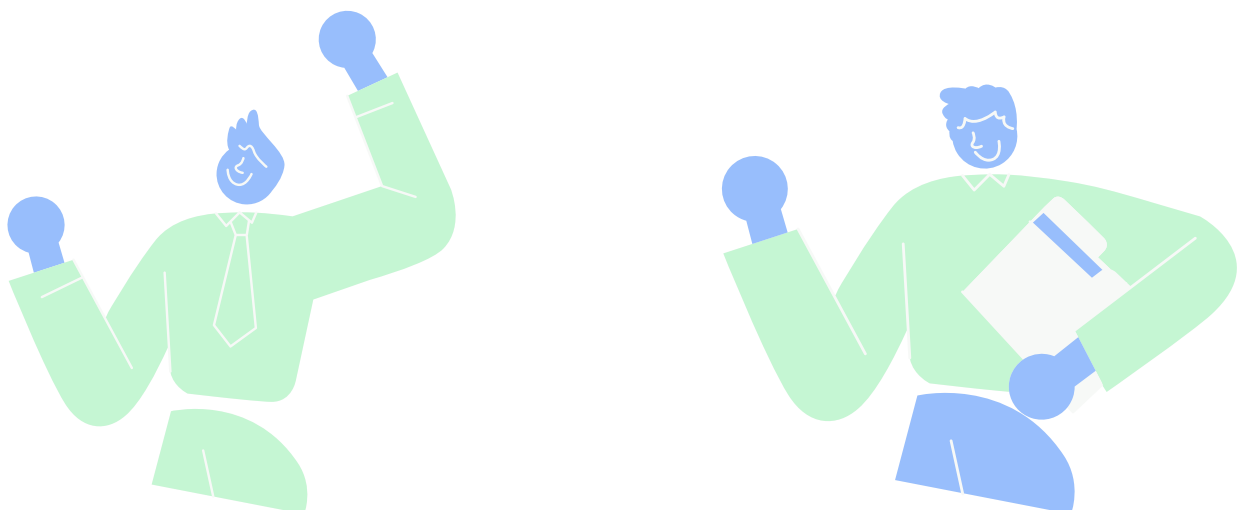[3]https://www.who.int/europe/news-room/events/item/2024/06/06/default-calendar/

Analysis and Discussion

The sessions revealed a nuanced picture of the current state of civic education, inclusion, and mental health in the participating contexts. Participants from Poland and Norway highlighted that, despite shared democratic values, the integration of civic education into existing curricula often remains theoretical. In Poland, the challenge of transforming theoretical knowledge into practical civic engagement was underscored by concerns such as ageism and low youth voter turnout. Meanwhile, Norwegian contributions emphasized the need to balance inclusivity with a robust focus on active participation, noting that dispersed civic education efforts can inadvertently dilute the call to action. Both groups recognized the importance of experiential learning, structured platforms for youth engagement, and comprehensive teacher training as critical levers for bridging this gap.

In addition, discussions on inclusion and diversity brought forward systemic challenges, such as socioeconomic disparities and conservative mindsets, that hinder the full realization of an inclusive educational environment. Polish delegates pointed to regional inequalities and the difficulties faced by marginalized groups, including refugee students, while Norwegian participants stressed the importance of cultural exchange and revised assessment practices to foster genuine inclusivity. The dialogue revealed that effective inclusion requires not only policy adjustments but also a reorientation of pedagogical practices toward empathy, diversity, and active engagement.

Mental health and well-being emerged as a cross-cutting issue critical to the success of both civic education and inclusive practices. Participants from both countries acknowledged the rising mental health challenges among students, the overburdening of teachers, and the need for accessible, school-based support systems. The discussions pointed to the benefits of early intervention, the integration of mental health professionals in schools, and the adoption of holistic well-being initiatives. Collectively, the session outcomes stress that sustainable progress in these areas depends on a coordinated approach that aligns educational practices with the evolving needs of students in a dynamic societal context.
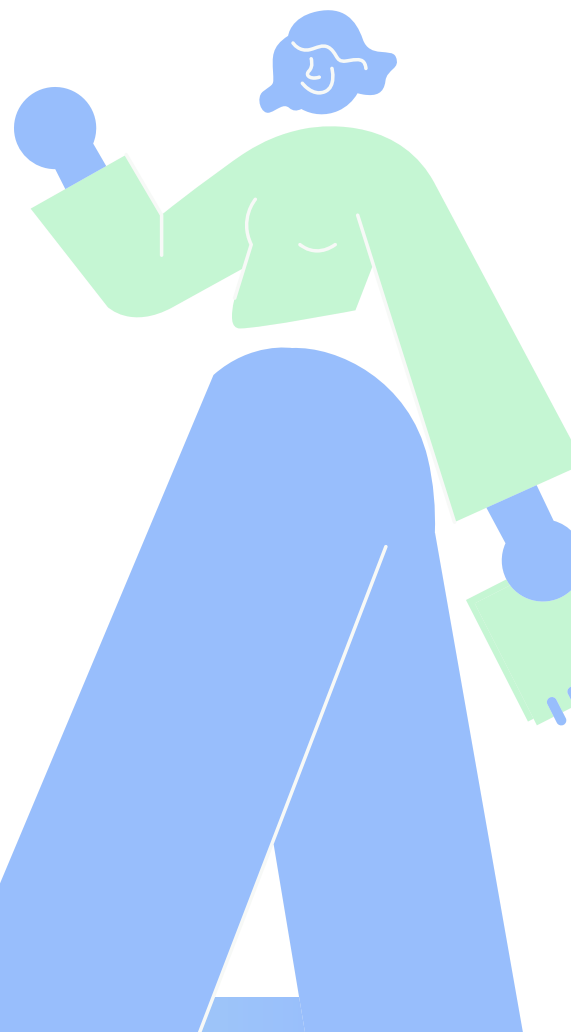
Recommendations and Future Actions

Building on the insights from the sessions, several targeted recommendations emerge to transform civic education, enhance inclusivity, and bolster mental health support. For civic education, it is essential to adopt structured mechanisms that move beyond traditional classroom approaches. This includes integrating experiential learning methods —such as simulations, debates, and community projects—into the curriculum, as well as establishing formal platforms like youth councils to give students a direct role in democratic processes. Enhancing teacher training programs to include innovative civic education methodologies will further empower educators to foster active citizenship.

In the realm of inclusion and diversity, the recommendations call for a multifaceted strategy that addresses both systemic inequities and cultural barriers. Initiatives such as targeted support programs for marginalized and refugee students, ongoing professional development in inclusive teaching methods, and the implementation of cultural exchange programs can bridge existing gaps. Moreover, revising curricular frameworks to incorporate global citizenship education and creating opportunities for interdisciplinary, simulation-based learning will ensure that students are better prepared to thrive in a diverse and interconnected world.

Regarding mental health and well-being, immediate and long-term actions are necessary to create a supportive school environment. Embedding mental health professionals within schools can provide students with accessible support while alleviating the burden on teachers. Implementing early intervention programs, such as regular mental health screenings and anonymous feedback mechanisms, will enable timely responses to emerging issues. Additionally, developing holistic well-being initiatives that integrate both physical and emotional health education can contribute to a more resilient student body. Future actions should include collaboration among policymakers, educators, mental health experts, and community organizations to secure sustainable funding and develop comprehensive frameworks that address the intertwined challenges of civic engagement, inclusivity, and mental health.
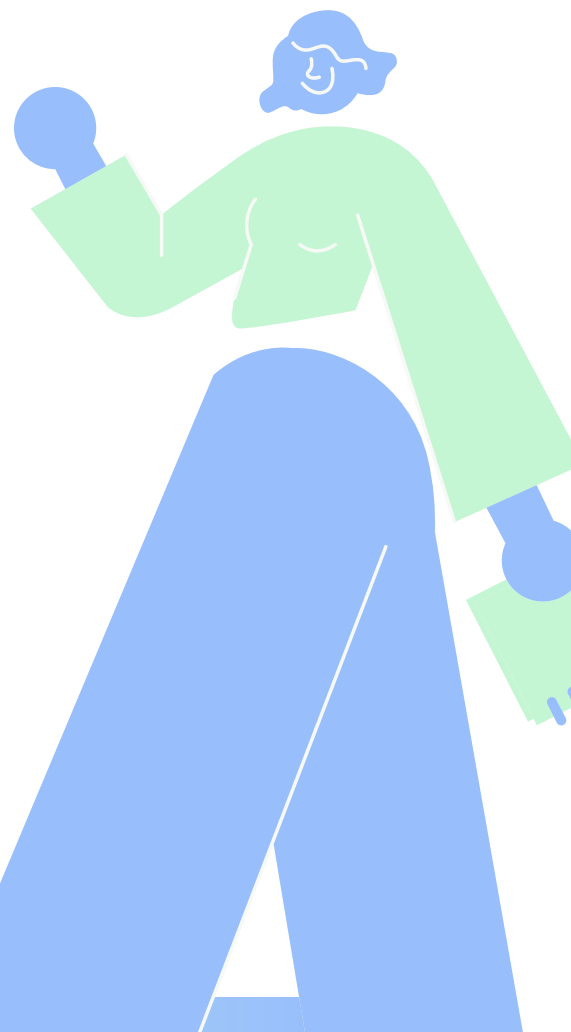
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Conclusion

The "Empowering Tomorrow" project has served as a vital platform for examining and addressing the pressing challenges within civic education, inclusion, and mental health across different national contexts. By bringing together participants from Poland and Norway, the project fostered a rich exchange of ideas that highlighted both common obstacles and unique national realities.

The sessions underscored the need for practical engagement in civic education, the importance of inclusive practices that transcend traditional teaching methods, and the critical role of robust mental health support in creating nurturing educational environments.

Ultimately, the collaborative dialogue and targeted recommendations emerging from the project provide a clear roadmap for transforming theoretical frameworks into actionable strategies. Moving forward, sustained efforts from educators, policymakers, and community stakeholders will be essential to realize an educational landscape that empowers youth, embraces diversity, and prioritizes well-being.

2025