



This paper is taken from

*Creating Communities: Local, National and Global
Selected papers from the fourteenth Conference of the
Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe
Academic Network*

London: CiCe 2012

**edited by Peter Cunningham and Nathan Fretwell, published in London by CiCe,
ISBN 978-1-907675-19-5**

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Kyridis, A., Vamvakidou, I., Petrucijová, J., Zaleskiene, I., Zagkos, C., Ene, C. & Papoutzis, L. (2012) 'Social responsibility versus social vulnerability: Students propose ways to face the economic crisis - The case of Greece, the Czech Republic and Lithuania', in P. Cunningham & N. Fretwell (eds.) *Creating Communities: Local, National and Global*. London: CiCe, pp. 286 - 307.

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Lifelong Learning Programme

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Acknowledgements:

This is taken from the book that is a selection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- The CiCe administrative team at London Metropolitan University
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The Lifelong Learning Programme and the personnel of the Education and Culture DG of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

Social responsibility versus social vulnerability: Students propose ways to face the economic crisis - The case of Greece, the Czech Republic and Lithuania

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Abstract

During the last two years Europe has experienced an unprecedented economic crisis, leading the Greek population into a situation of unbearable financial difficulty. Large groups of the population live in a situation of social fragility and the political system seems unable to establish new alternatives or solutions. We planned and implemented a project in secondary schools Greece, the Czech Republic and Lithuania, that aimed at mobilising pupils to deal, both virtually and practically, with the social consequences of the financial crisis. The pupils' community proposed, agreed and planned ways of facing unemployment and poverty through direct political participation, direct democracy, and by developing an extremely high level social and political responsibility.

Keywords: Social responsibility, citizenship, Greece, Lithuania, Czech Republic

Introduction

Social responsibility-that is, a personal investment in the well-being of others and of the planet-doesn't just happen. It takes intention, attention, and time (Berman, 1990). Nevertheless some may question Berman's definition of social responsibility:

- What constitutes "well-being"?
- Exactly who are the "others"?
- Will the well-being of others be promoted by free trade agreements?
- By immigration reform?
- Others may question whether social responsibility can be taught.

World Business Council for Sustainable Development in its publication *Making Good Business Sense* by Lord Holme and Richard Watts, used the following definition. "Corporate social responsibility is the continuing commitment by business to behave ethically and contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce and their families as well as of the local community and society at large" (Baker, 2004, 76).

The definitions of Social Corporate Responsibility (SCR) have different connotations, and different dimensions such as:

- The environmental dimension which refers to natural environment
- The social dimension which refers to relationship between business and society
- The economic dimension which refers to socio-economic or financial aspects, including CSR in terms of business operation
- The stakeholder dimension which refers to stakeholders or stakeholders groups
- The voluntariness dimension which refers to actions which are not prescribed by law (Dahlsrud, 2006).

Teaching social responsibility

Students can learn skills to help them work productively in a group, as well as skills in organizing, problem-solving, consensus-building and decision-making. They can learn skills to help them think critically, to inquire, to engage in dialogue and listen well. They can also learn skills in conflict resolution. Students can gain understanding as well. They can learn about our global interdependence-socially, economically and ecologically. They can apprehend the complexity of many public issues and multiple points of view on these issues. They can learn about the power of individuals and groups to make a difference. They can consider possible solutions.

Even if social responsibility can't be taught directly as knowledge, it can be "caught" in a variety of ways-through observations of the behaviour of parents, friends and others; through reading and discussions; through a sense of injustice that demands personal action. It can also be caught through schools that encourage community service in some form or through immersion in a class project that, whatever its success, can transform a person's life.

Considerations of what a socially responsible education may mean in terms of educational content seem more vexed and complicated. Thus we can think of two kinds of responsibility: responsibility to that which is social, and responsibility for that which is social. There may be some responsibilities which are both.

The expression "that which is social" is used instead of the word "society" as there are many social structures within society at large which make claims of responsibility on us (e.g., my social circle, mi barrio, my homeys, my religious group, my colleagues, my teenage clique, my platoon, etc.).

An education that is interested in conveying responsibility to "the social" needs to teach students "cultural fluency," i.e., an understanding of the cultural rules, signals, mores, etc.– and this includes the responsibilities incumbent on membership in that particular "the social" (Forbes).

Citizenship and social responsibility in schools

Most school curricula nowadays neither provide guidance on how to promote socially responsible citizenship nor the time necessary for it. Administrators usually are more

concerned with orderly classrooms than with the substance of the teaching and learning that takes place in them. Some teachers consider of citizenship and social responsibility as confined to flag pledges, voting, philanthropy, completing assignments and obedience. Many teachers also are fearful about promoting active citizenship and some parents and community members think a school's primary function is to get students to memorize facts and score well on tests so they can get into universities. Thus it seems that there are many obstacles in relating citizenship and social responsibility in schools and there are many parents and community members who may protest student involvement in controversial public issues.

The research and the method

The whole project is constructed in a context of a two phases of pre and post action research. We used a weighted scale which measures the social responsibility of the students and a weighted scale which measures their political socialization. Pupils and their teachers carried out a project concerning the awareness about major social problems such as unemployment and poverty in European societies in order to cultivate a spirit of social responsibility and active participation in everyday problems.

The Sample of the research consisted of 46 students from northern Greece, 50 students from Lithuania (Vilnius) and 50 students from the Czech Republic (Ostrava). 50 students from Secondary schools aged 15 -17 from Vilnius region were randomly selected for filling out questionnaires. Most of them have a motivation to study at universities after finishing schooling. They come from different family social background. In general, all of them have positively achieved in their studies, almost all are active in different civil society organizations. Some of them see their future in politics. Motivation for participation in the research can be evaluated as high.

This survey deals with democratic rights and responsibilities, differences among people, personal responsibility, and community mindedness. We attempt to understand the different opinions that are held by students, as well as the actions that students take.

In this piece of research we have selected the questionnaire as a research tool for the following reasons: a) The questionnaire attracts the interest of the people questioned more easily and increases their participation in the research procedure (Anderson, 1990, Javeau, 1988), b) The necessity of using a large sample of subjects (Davidson, 1970), c) The questionnaire is suitable for the collection of information, such as perceptions and opinions, which cannot be easily observed (Verma & Mallick, 1999, Fraise & Piaget, 1970) and d) The questionnaire is a research tool that provides the opportunity for continuous trials and interventions, in order to be constructed in the best possible way (Javeau, 1988) The questions/ statements had to be answered by a fixed answer on the basis of Likert's five-point scale (1: *Strongly Disagree*, 2: *Disagree*, 3: *Neither Disagree nor Agree*, 4: *Agree*, 5: *Strongly Agree*). The questions with negative implications were reversed in order to derive positive implications. The questionnaire includes 31 sentence-statements which investigate the above mentioned issues. The corpus of data was analyzed on the basis of Factor Analysis, which is widely applied in Social Sciences. Factor Analysis was employed with a view to investigating the social subjects'/ students'

response motif which enables interpreting a complex set of variables, reducing them to a smaller number, each of which is equivalent to a greater number of the initial ones. In addition, Factor Analysis enables identifying the variables, which are typical of each factor (factorial axis) and conducive to its development. Finally, the specific analysis facilitates the identification of the groups of students, in terms of their attitudes/views to social responsibility. The internal consistency of the questionnaire was estimated in terms of alpha reliability. Alpha coefficient (Cronbach's α) is the means of all the probable dichotomy reliability values for the questionnaire and was applied because it is not dependent on the statement layout ($\alpha=0,771$).

Results of the research

The case of Greece

Table 1. Students' opinions regarding issues of social responsibility

	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral or unsure (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)
Problems between people are best handled by working together to find a solution.	0	8,7	13	63	15,2
I think about how my decisions will affect other people.	2,2	10,9	60,9	21,7	4,3
Students need to accept responsibility for their actions.	4,3	2,2	2,2	37	54,3
I sometimes find it difficult to see things from the other person's point of view.	4,3	10,9	39,1	41,3	4,3
Greece is a better country because people from many different cultures live here.	8,7	13	37	28,3	13
Other people's problems don't bother me.	32,6	41,3	19,6	4,3	2,2
I base my decisions on what I think is fair and unfair.	0	4,3	30,4	47,8	17,4
No matter how angry someone makes me, I am still responsible for my own actions.	8,7	8,7	19,6	47,8	15,2
All people should have equal chances to get a good education in Greece.	2,2	2,2	10,9	37	47,8
People should be judged for what they do, not where they are from.	2,2	8,7	19,6	34,8	34,8
Problems like pollution and poverty are not important to me.	65,2	23,9	6,5	2,2	2,2
Teenagers should find ways to help others in the community.	2,2	2,2	30,4	45,7	19,6
I don't care about what's happening in politics.	15,2	19,6	32,6	15,2	17,4
Teenagers have a responsibility to do what they can to protect the environment.	2,2	6,5	13	47,8	30,4
I feel that I can make a difference in my community.	4,3	15,2	50	21,7	8,7

People should discuss social and political problems that affect the future Greece.	0	2,2	30,4	30,4	37
The world would be a better place if people were free to do what was best for themselves.	8,7	8,7	19,6	47,8	15,2

Figure 1. “You learn about a law that discriminates against certain groups of people, and you think that it is unfair. What would you most likely do?”

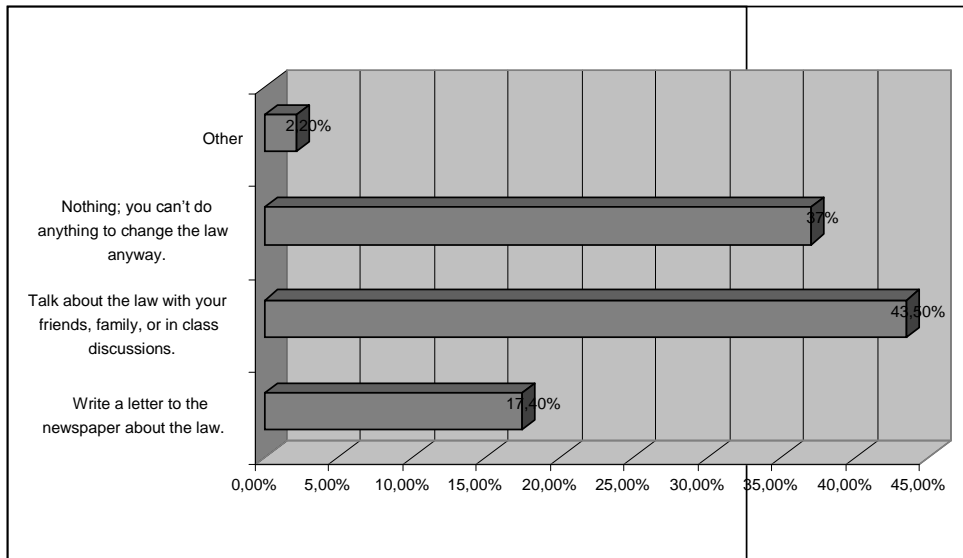


Figure 2. “You are part of a group working on a project, and no one else is doing any work. What would you most likely do?”

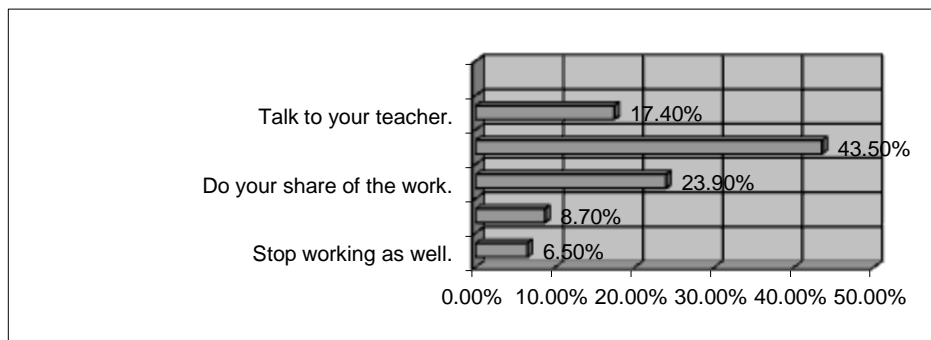


Figure 3. "Your school is holding elections for student council. What would you most likely do?"

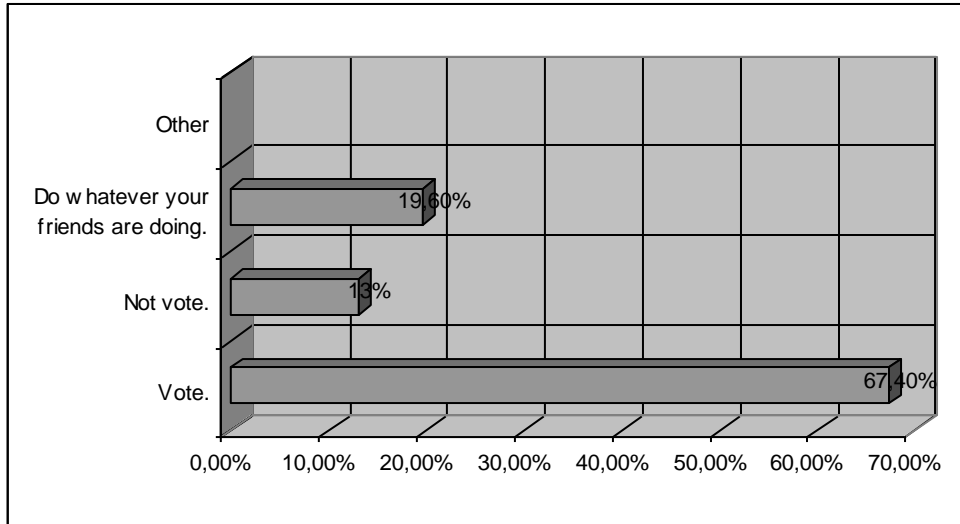


Figure 4. "You find a \$20 bill in the back of the classroom. What would you most likely do?"

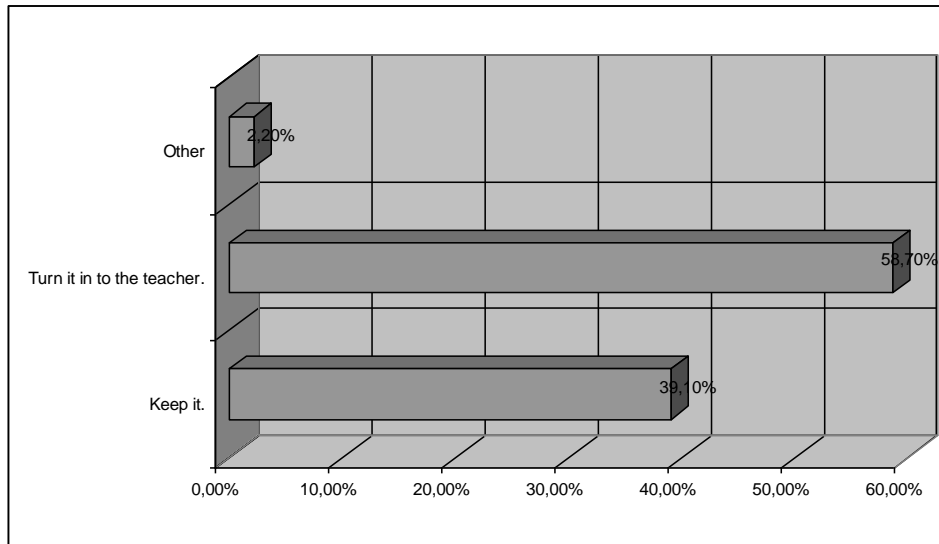


Figure 5. “You are talking to your friends and one of them refers to people of a different culture by a racist name. What would you most likely do?”

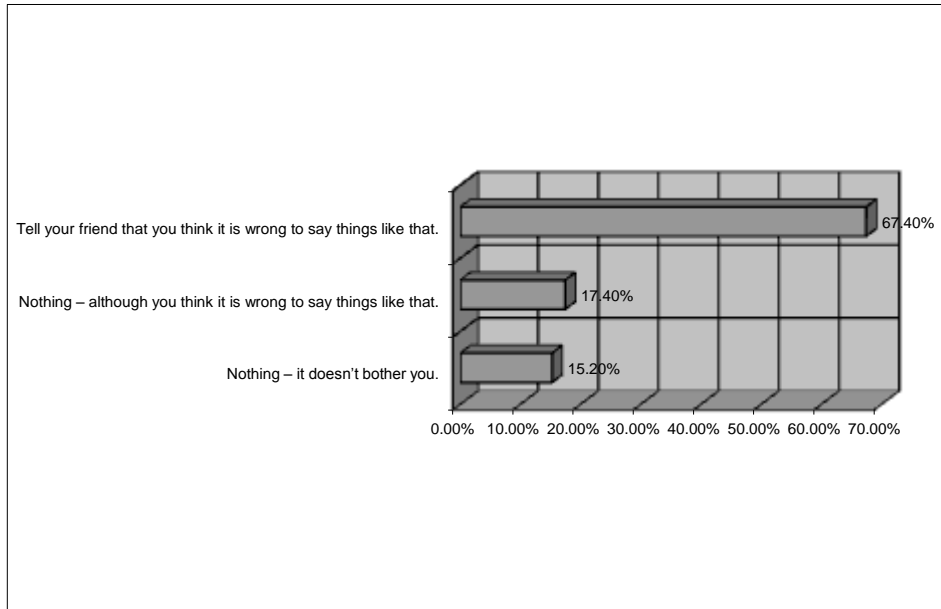


Figure 6. “You are walking down the hallway and you hear a student saying mean, unfair things to another student. What would you most likely do?”

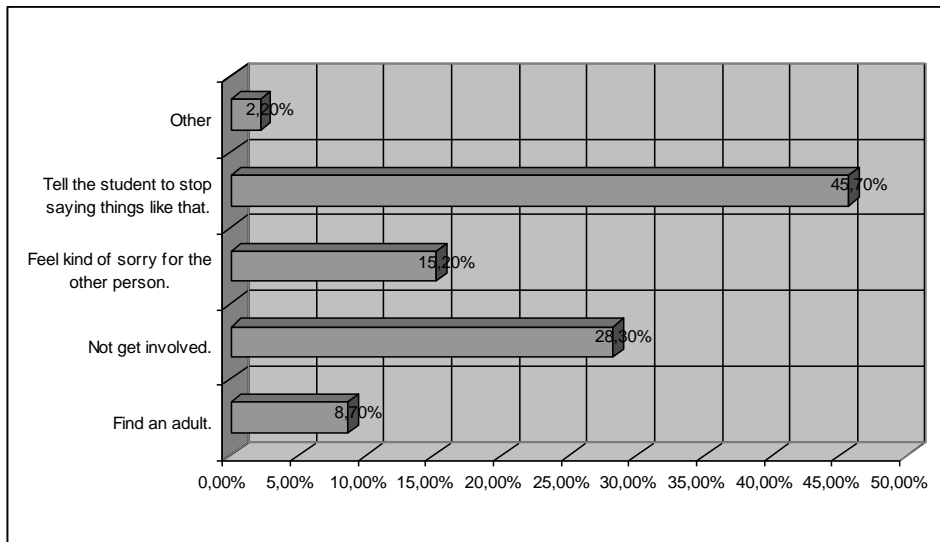


Table 2. "When you have the opportunity, how often do you....."

	No time (%)	Few times (%)	Sometimes (%)	Many times (%)	All of the time (%)	Not applicable
Try to be nice to other students when they are sad about something?	2,2	2,2	37	23,9	32,6	2,2
Try to be quiet when others are studying?	10,9	4,3	23,9	23,9	34,8	2,2
Help other teenagers when they have a problem?	2,2	10,9	23,9	26,1	32,6	4,3
Think about how your behaviour in school will affect other students?	8,7	23,9	26,1	19,6	15,2	6,5
Take the time to listen to other people's arguments, even when you think they are wrong?	13	19,6	30,4	28,3	6,5	2,2
Talk with your friends about how you can stop racism?	39,1	39,1	8,7	6,5	6,5	
Speak out when other students use negative language to talk about people from other cultures?	19,6	23,9	21,7	13	15,2	6,5
Talk with your friends about government and politics?	52,2	26,1	6,5	2,2	6,5	6,5
Help neighbours or relatives when a job needs to be done?	6,5	21,7	32,6	15,2	19,6	4,3
Talk to your friends about issues like world peace or global warming?	30,4	45,7	10,9	2,2	8,7	2,2
Participate as a volunteer in a community organization or event?	30,4	43,5	4,3	8,7	6,5	6,5
Talk to your friends about what is happening in other countries?	23,9	37	15,2	13	8,7	2,2

The case of Czech Republic

Figure 7. Students' opinions regarding issues of social responsibility

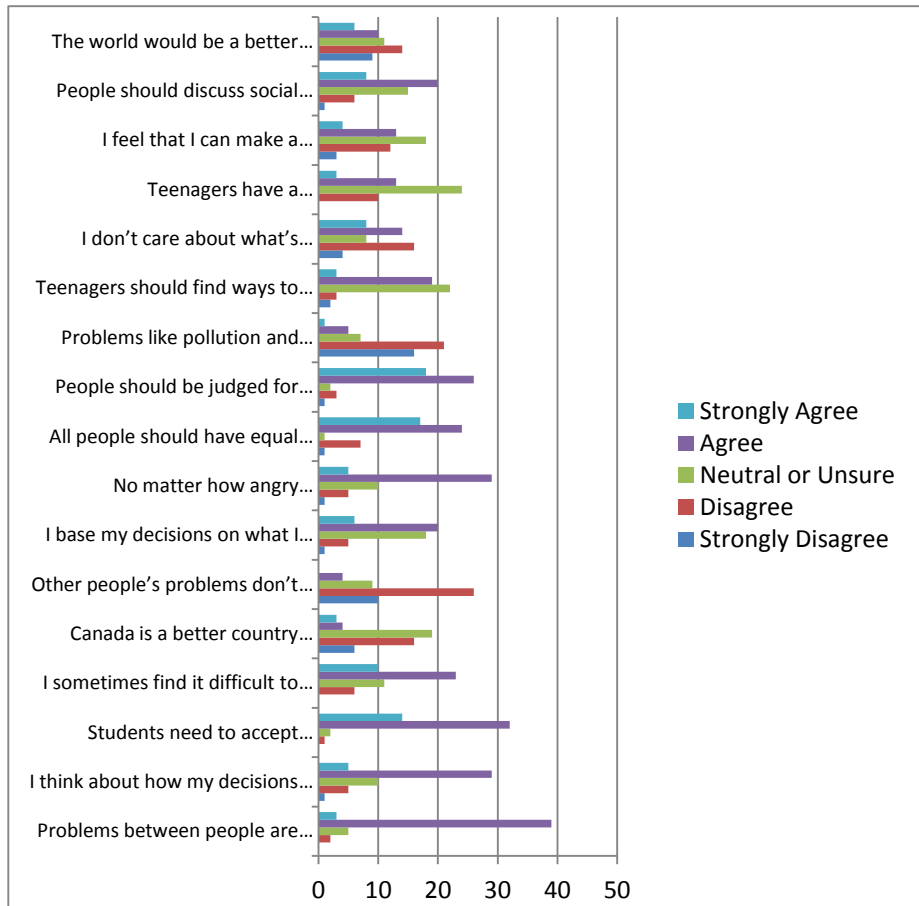


Figure 8. “You learn about a law that discriminates against certain groups of people, and you think that it is unfair. What would you most likely do?”

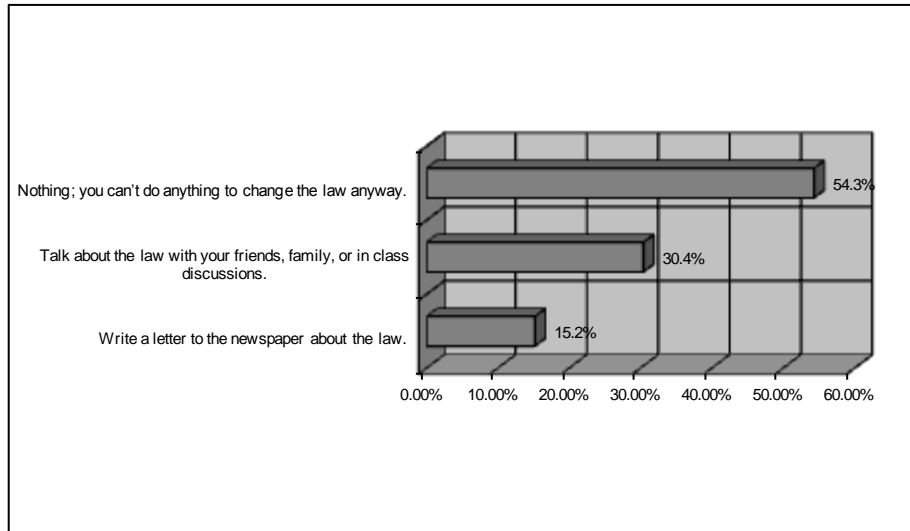


Figure 9. “You are part of a group working on a project, and no one else is doing any work. What would you most likely do?”

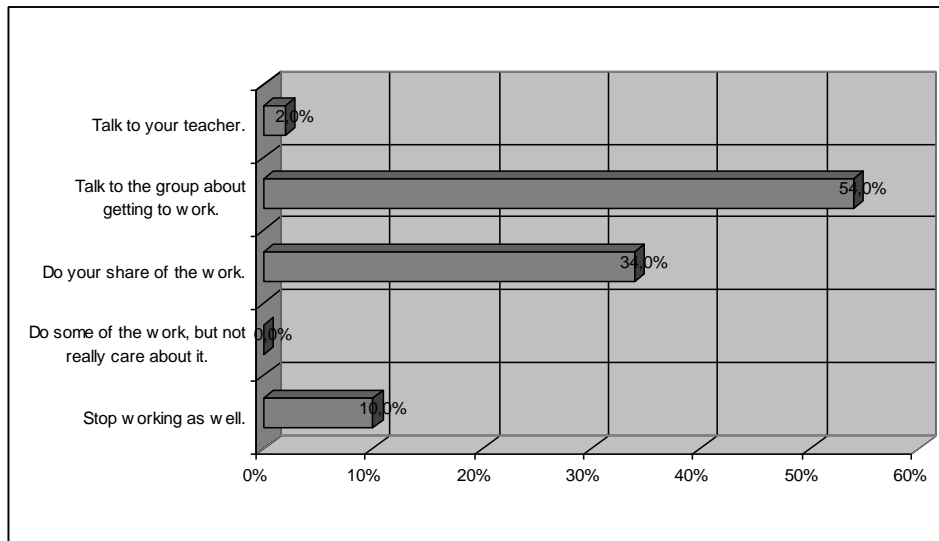


Figure 10. "Your school is holding elections for student council. What would you most likely do?"

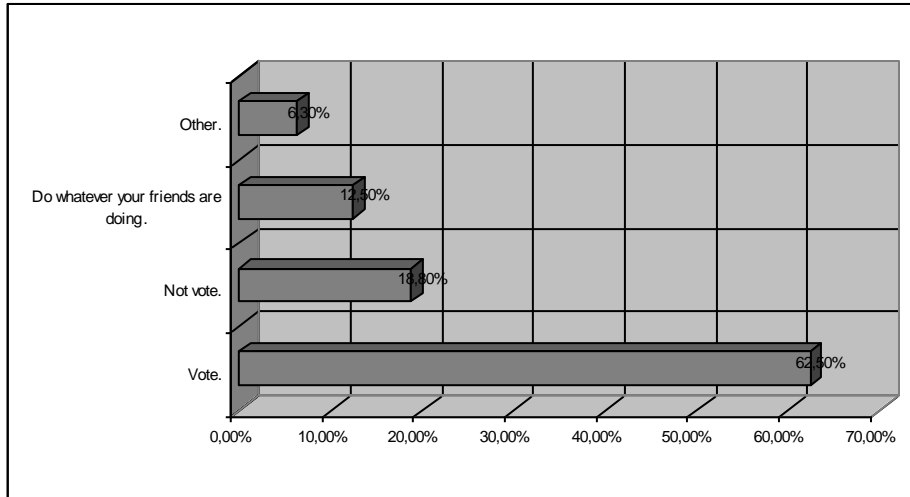


Figure 11. "You find a \$20 bill in the back of the classroom. What would you most likely do?"

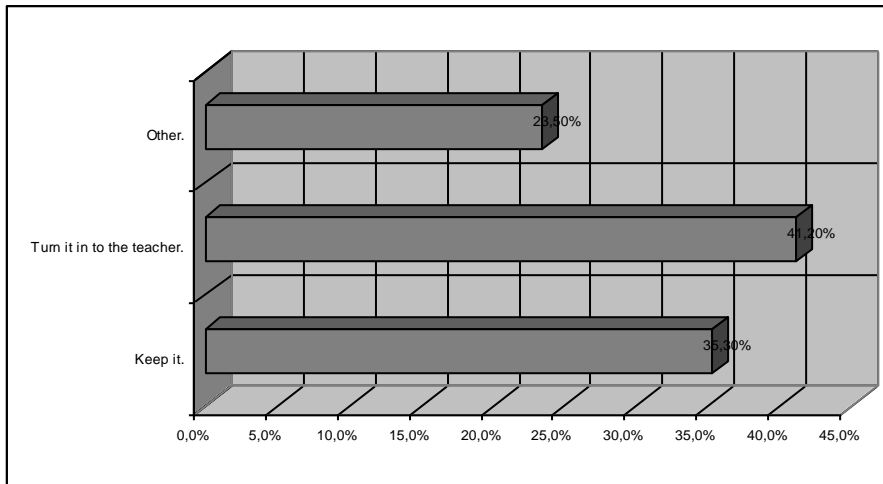


Figure 12. “You are talking to your friends and one of them refers to people of a different culture by a racist name. What would you most likely do?”

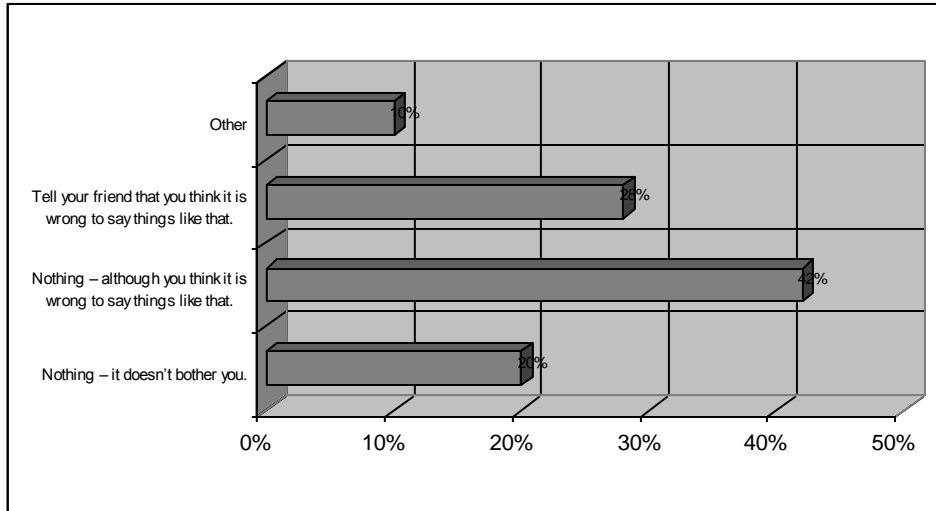


Figure 13. “You are walking down the hallway and you hear a student saying mean, unfair things to another student. What would you most likely do?”

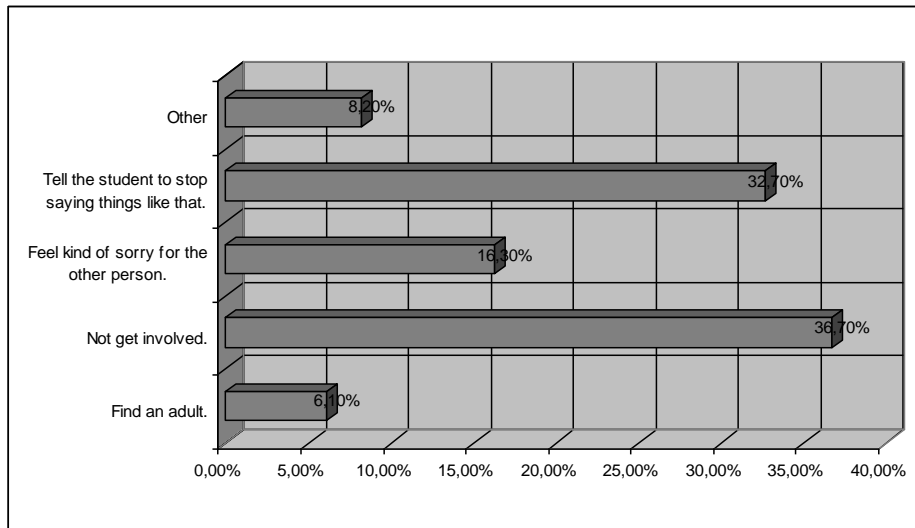
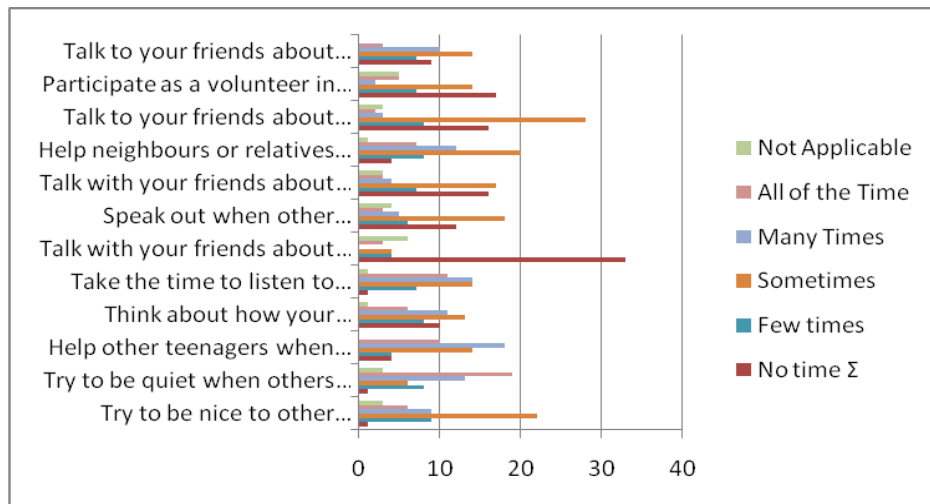


Figure 14. "When you have the opportunity, how often do you...."



The case of Lithuania

Table 3. Students' opinions regarding issues of social responsibility

	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral or unsure (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)
Problems between people are best handled by working together to find a solution.	0	9,7	12	60	18,2
I think about how my decisions will affect other people.	3,2	9,9	58,9	23,7	4,3
Students need to accept responsibility for their actions.	4,3	2,2	2,2	33	50,3
I sometimes find it difficult to see things from the other person's point of view.	4,3	10,9	39,1	41,3	4,3
Greece is a better country because people from many different cultures live here.	8,7	13	37	28,3	13
Other people's problems don't bother me.	22,6	51,3	19,6	4,3	2,2
I base my decisions on what I think is fair and unfair.	0	4,3	30,4	47,8	17,4
No matter how angry someone makes me, I am still responsible for my own actions.	8,7	8,7	14,6	51,8	15,2
All people should have equal chances to get a good education in Greece.	2,2	2,2	10,9	37	47,8
People should be judged for what	4,2	6,7	19,6	34,8	34,8

they do, not where they are from.					
Problems like pollution and poverty are not important to me.	60,2	28,9	6,5	2,2	2,2
Teenagers should find ways to help others in the community.	2,2	2,2	35,4	40,7	19,6
I don't care about what's happening in politics.	15,2	19,6	32,6	15,2	17,4
Teenagers have a responsibility to do what they can to protect the environment.	2,2	6,5	13	47,8	30,4
I feel that I can make a difference in my community.	4,3	15,2	50	21,7	8,7
People should discuss social and political problems that affect the future Greece.	0	2,2	30,4	30,4	37
The world would be a better place if people were free to do what was best for themselves.	8,7	8,7	14,6	51,8	15,2

Figure 15. "You learn about a law that discriminates against certain groups of people, and you think that it is unfair. What would you most likely do?"

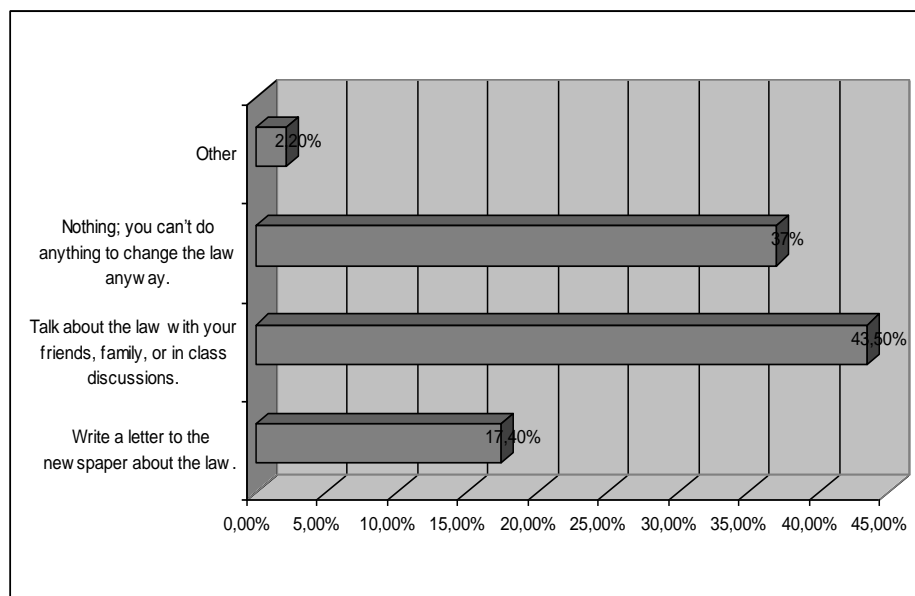


Figure 16. "You are part of a group working on a project, and no one else is doing any work. What would you most likely do?"

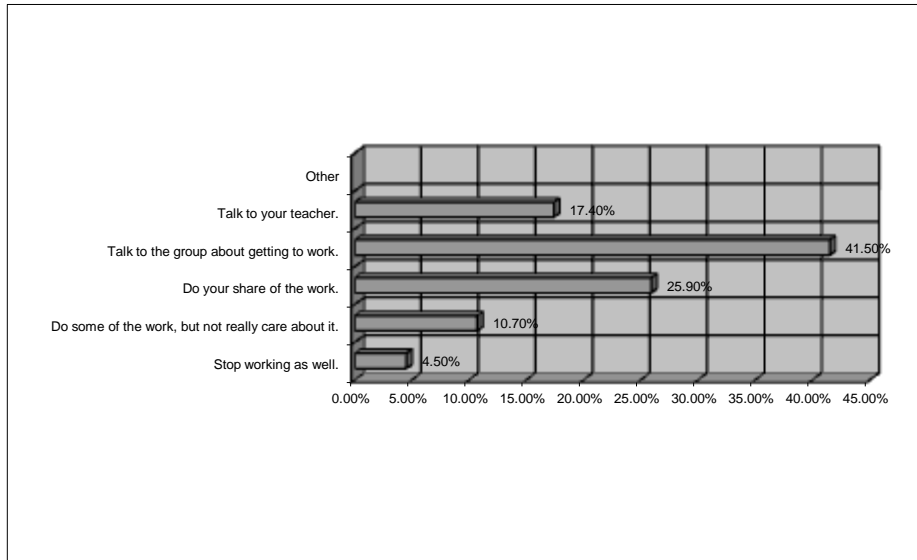


Figure 17. "Your school is holding elections for student council. What would you most likely do?"

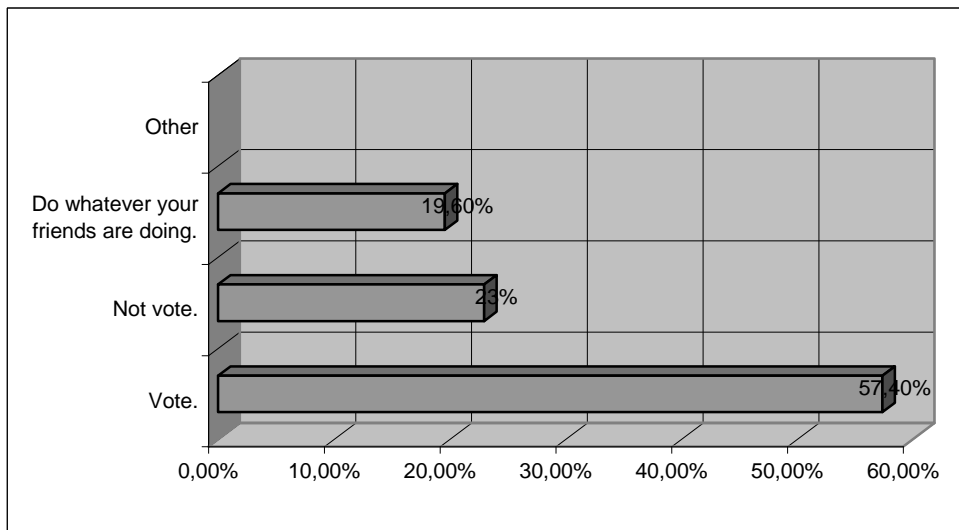


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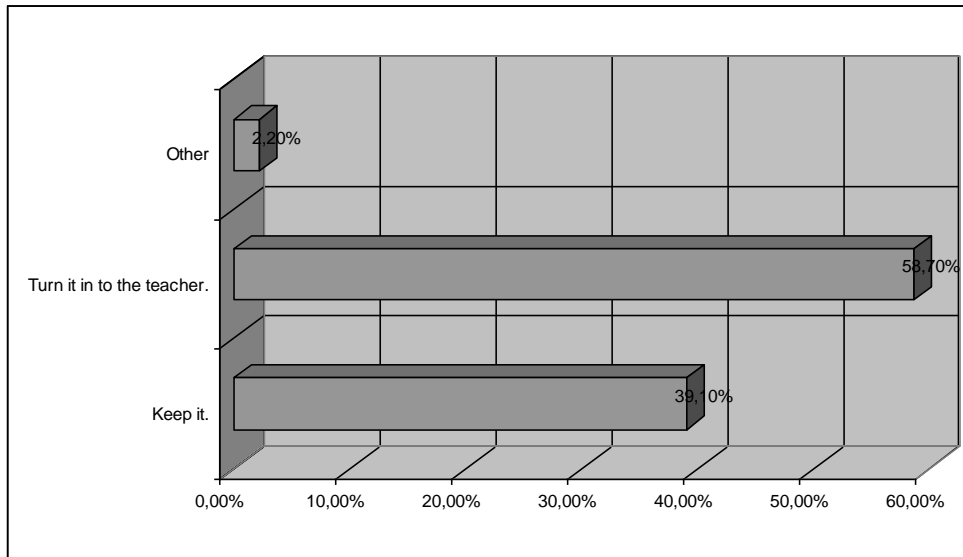


Figure 19. “You are talking to your friends and one of them refers to people of a different culture by a racist name. What would you most likely do?”

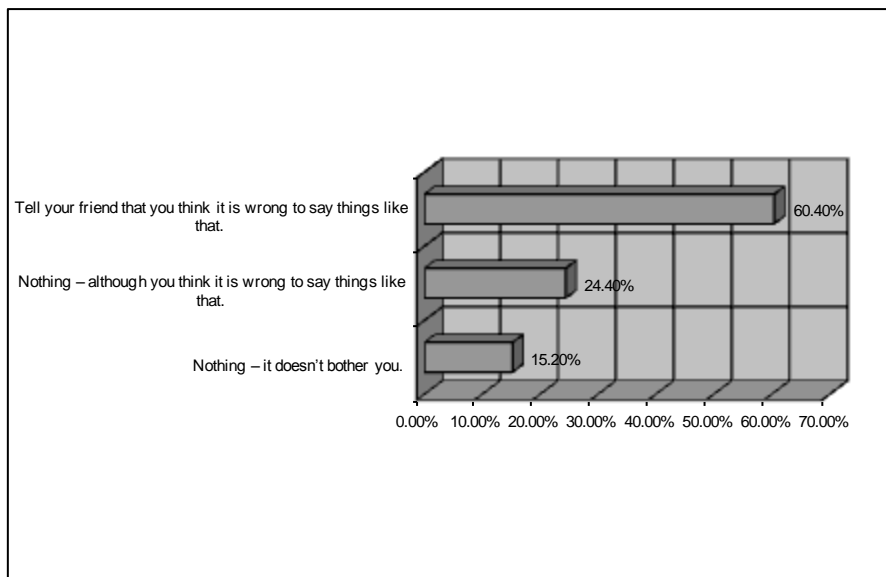


Figure 20. “You are walking down the hallway and you hear a student saying mean, unfair things to another student. What would you most likely do?”

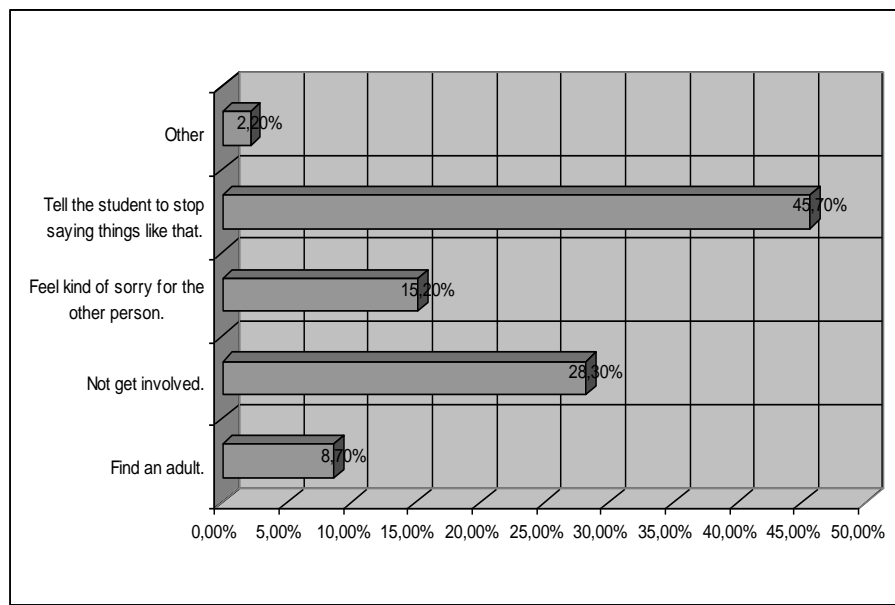


Table 4. “When you have the opportunity, how often do you.....”

	No time (%)	Few times (%)	Sometimes (%)	Many times (%)	All of the time (%)	Not applicable
Try to be nice to other students when they are sad about something?	2,2	2,2	34	26,9	32,6	2,2
Try to be quiet when others are studying?	10,9	4,3	23,9	26,9	31,8	2,2
Help other teenagers when they have a problem?	2,2	13,9	20,9	28,1	30,6	4,3
Think about how your behaviour in school will affect other students?	8,7	20,9	29,1	19,6	15,2	6,5
Take the time to listen to other people's arguments, even when you think they are wrong?	13	19,6	30,4	28,3	6,5	2,2
Talk with your friends about how you can stop racism?	36,1	42,1	8,7	6,5	6,5	
Speak out when other students use negative language to talk about	19,6	24,9	20,7	13	15,2	6,5

people from other cultures?						
Talk with your friends about government and politics?	52,2	25,1	7,5	2,2	7,5	5,5
Help neighbours or relatives when a job needs to be done?	6,5	21,7	34,6	15,2	17,6	4,3
Talk to your friends about issues like world peace or global warming?	30,4	45,7	8,9	4,2	8,7	2,2
Participate as a volunteer in a community organization or event?	34,4	39,5	4,3	8,7	6,5	6,5
Talk to your friends about what is happening in other countries?	20,9	40	15,2	13	8,7	2,2

Discussion

In general the personal beliefs and the opinions of students in Greece did not seem to change dramatically after the implementation of the project. More specifically, after the project (post-test) the students agreed more strongly with statements such as:

- *Problems between people are best handled by working together to find a solution.*
- *I think about how my decisions will affect other people.*
- *Other people's problems don't bother me.*
- *No matter how angry someone makes me, I am still responsible for my own actions.*
- *People should be judged for what they do, not where they are from.*
- *Problems like pollution and poverty are not important to me.*

Furthermore, after the implementation of the project the students declared that from now on more frequently they will:

- *Talk to their friends about what is happening in other countries.*
- *Participate as a volunteer in a community organization or event.*
- *Talk to their friends about issues like world peace or global warming.*
- *Help neighbors or relatives when a job needs to be done.*
- *Talk with your friends about government and politics.*
- *Speak out when other students use negative language to talk about people from other cultures.*
- *Talk with their friends about how you can stop racism.*
- *Take the time to listen to other people's arguments, even when they think they are wrong.*
- *Try to be nice to other students when they are sad about something.*

Analyses of Lithuanian national policy documents shows how important for society are education social values and responsibilities of young generation. According the Law on Education of the Republic of Lithuania (2003) it is stated that the educational system

“guarantees continuity of the values that make a person's life meaningful, that grant social life coherence and solidarity....” (Law on Education of the Republic of Lithuania, 2003)

In the light of the challenges faced by society today, as well as taking into account that knowledge society, secure society and competitive economy are defined as priorities in the Long-Term Development Strategy of the Lithuanian State, the mission of education is stated as: “to help an individual to understand the contemporary world, to acquire cultural and social competences and to become an independent, active and responsible person who is willing and able to learn and create a life of his own and life of society” (The National Education Strategy 2003–2012 Provisions, approved by the Parliament of Lithuania, 2003).

Stated mission of Education is implemented into national Core curriculum: “While learning social subjects as cognitive knowledge and understandings....., students develop their social competences and values...” (Core Curriculum for basic education in Lithuania, 2008, p. p. 3-4)

Besides Curriculum students at age 12-16 has to have “Social activities” (2 hours per week) as an obligatory extra curriculum activity. During these hours students do different service work in communities as volunteers, in nongovernmental and youth organizations under supervision of teacher. It is expected that participation in these activities will help students to develop social responsibility, sense of community, practical civic competences, etc. There is developed manual and recommended guide for teachers supervising social activities of students (Zaleskiene, 2006).

The Lithuanian students believe that they will be:

- Aware of actions towards helping others
- More friendly to each other and their environment
- Prepared for making their surroundings more beautiful and nice
- Practically oriented towards their future professions;
- Participating actively in civic and social actions in the schools and communities;
- Taking actions towards building peaceful life;
- Acting against bullying at schools
- Resisting cyber bullying
- Helping elderly people and children in their neighborhoods

In Czech Republic, the first pre-test stage of survey has been held in two provincial town schools of the industrial part of the country located near the border with Poland and Slovakia. Considering human opinions and patterns of behavior to be results of interactions with environment the people live in, we offer a brief description of surrounding the survey respondents influenced by. The region the respondents live in is an important centre of heavy industry (mining and metallurgy) and multicultural area with numerous groups of indigenous communities such as Polish, Roma and Slovakian minorities and the groups of new-comers such as Vietnamese and Ukrainians. In the

last ten years it has been the region with one of the highest rate of unemployment in the country.

The situation of children in the Czech towns/cities is influenced by the general context of urban life (negative impact of unemployment on the situation in families, environmental problems caused by industrial pollution, rapid stratification of the social groups in last two decades, etc.), intra-group relations within urban communities and inter-group relations between urban communities (including tensions between them).

The most significant opinions pupils agree with are:

- Students need to accept responsibility for their actions – 92% of affirmative answers;
- People should be judged for what they do, not where they are from 88 % of affirmative answers;
- Problems between people are best handled by working together to find a solution – 82 % of affirmative answers;
- All people should have equal chances to get a good education – 82 % of affirmative answers.

Pupils disagree with the statements:

- Problems like pollution and poverty are not important to me – 74% of pupils reject.

At the same time they were primarily unsure in two cases:

- Teenagers have a responsibility to do what they can to protect the environment – 48 % of respondents;
- Teenagers should find ways to help others in the community – 44 % of respondents.

Answers of the question: “You learn about a law that discriminates against certain groups of people, and you think that it is unfair. What would you most likely do?”, are different between sexes. Students – boys don’t believe in option to change law in any way (34% of them) despite of girls who are more optimistic (only 18% of girls share the opinions of male coevals). Girls would be more active in public discussions and writing to newspaper.

Girls seems to be more active and independent, they would continue working, energize coevals not asking for help their teachers.

In the case of the question “Your school is holding elections for student council. What would you most likely do?” the students are active (60% of them would participate in elections), only 9 students would reject voting. 4 boys would follow their friends; meanwhile only two girls would do the same.

Question: “You are talking to your friends and one of them refers to people of a different culture by a racist name. What would you most likely do?” The most often reply for both sexes (42%) is “Nothing – although you think it is wrong to say things like that“. Rather high percentage of boys (20% of the total number of both sexes respondents) don’t

bother about racist names. Girls (24% of the total number of respondents) would interfere and say that “it is wrong to say things like that”.

Question: You are walking down the hallway and you hear a student saying mean, unfair things to another student. What would you most likely do? The students’ answers reveal interesting results: 36% of respondents would not get involved in the situation (13 boys, i.e. approximately 55% of male respondents and 5 girls, i.e. approximately 18% of female respondents). 32% of respondents would interfere with them (primarily girls).

The general psychological attitudes of students (their respect and thoughtfulness towards other persons), their awareness of actual problems, engagement into the life of the (school and out-school) community are analyzed in the part C of the questionnaire.

The answer with the highest rate of student’s rejection (answer “no time”) is “Talk with your friends about how you can stop racism?” 66% of respondents have never talked about the topic (even though the topic of tension between communities such as so-called major society and Roma minority is often discussed in TV and newspapers).

The most frequent answer “sometimes” (56%) refers to the question “Talk to your friends about issues like world peace or global warming?”. The second one with 40% of affirmative answers is “Help neighbors or relatives when a job needs to be done?”

In the category of answer “many times” the most frequent answer (36%) is used in the case of the question “Help other teenagers when they have a problem?”

The students’ interests are more oriented on the problem of the community of their close friends and schoolmates, a lot of them are not aware of such important problems as racism. At the same time approximately 42% of the students declare their voluntary participation in community organizations or events despite 34% of them answered that they have never been involved as volunteers.

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