

Country Report: Croatia - Teaching Ethics in Schools in Croatia

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In Croatia, Philosophy is taught in schools in three different subjects: *Philosophy* (which so far has mainly covered history of philosophy), *Logic* (which covers basic logical principles and approaches), and *Ethics* (dealing with various approaches in all ethical fields, classic as well as contemporary). The subjects *Philosophy* and *Logic* are taught only in so called Gymnasiums and some Art schools, while *Ethics* is present in all schools and it has been taught since 1996 as an alternative subject for students who do not attend *Religious classes*, in a country where the vast majority of citizens are Catholics. Until 2003, *Ethics* was taught mainly as history of ethical ideas, since 2003 the classes are more topic oriented, and aim at provoking critical thinking, active participation and dialogue. The main goal of *Ethics* classes in high schools is now to develop different abilities in moral judgement and ethical argumentation, as well as the recognition of the so called "life philosophy" or "life orientation". Some of the specific goals are divided in thematic groups according to the year of teaching. In Croatia, most of the high schools last for four years and the topics taught in this period are as follows: in the first year (usually at the age of 15 years) students learn about general orientation and meaning of ethics, basic human values, rights and identity with an emphasis on development of critical thought; in the second year students learn about their role in community, both nationally and internationally as well as some moral dilemmas, and their relationship with other humans. The third year is dedicated to a detailed study of bioethics, medicine ethics and ecology, while in their final year (at the age of 18) they learn about morality, history of ethics, anthropology and introductory topics in general philosophy.

So far, one of the main issues with *Ethics* classes is that it isn't taught in elementary schools, where students do not have any alternative subject to *Religious classes*. Many philosophers in Croatia during last 20 years have tried to fix this problem and propose some form of curriculum for alternative subject, which would be *Ethics* or a close approximation to Ethics, but without success. Now again, with the new curricular reform¹ announced for the year 2020, there is much public talk of sorting this issue out, but it seems that the problem will stay unsolved. Philosophers have proposed to make a subject which would teach children how to think critically, similar to some methods used by Philosophy for Children, but the government refuses to issue a green light for such ideas, mainly because of financial reasons. Children aged 7 do 14 are, therefore, left to have one free class for themselves, wandering the school hallways on their own, instead of learning and discovering new ideas, while the majority of their classmates take *Religious classes*. Other than that, as vast majority of school children

¹Curricular reform is the subject of public debate for some time in Croatia, with many issues of it's own. In this paper it is assumed that the reform will happen at one point, even it seems that many political institutions are still not ready for it.

attend Religious classes, the minority that doesn't is often stigmatized as atheistic, infidel, communist and the like, as if their choice, or their parents' choice, is wrong, unwanted in society and undesirable. This forces some children to attend *Religious classes* even though they aren't religious, in order to fit in and avoid being bullied by their classmates for their choice. Once they finish elementary school, the situation changes – and this could be a reason for the authorities to consider the alternative subject for elementary school. As soon as children are given the choice, they choose to attend *Ethics*, even though they mostly don't have any idea what *Ethics* is about. Mostly, they are told by their elementary school teachers that *Ethics* is an alternative to *Religious classes* and that they will learn about other religions and cultures, which isn't really the case.

This is another problem: even school teachers are unaware of what *Ethics* is about, but never the less children choose *Ethics* out of their own curiosity, desire for knowledge or because some of the *Religious classes* teachers often use the *ex cathedra* approach of preaching the religion, rather than contemporary teaching methods which are student oriented. Of course, this approach is boring for 21st century students and they hope to find something different in *Ethics*, they expect it to be different and innovative, which for most of the time it is. Speaking from personal experience, students usually name several reasons why they choose to attend *Ethics* classes, even though they attended *Religious classes* in elementary schools. Mostly it is because they are curious about the new subject, they wish to investigate possible new topics and new approaches to life, they find religious classes to be boring, or not challenging enough for their minds. Secondly, students, at age of 14 or 15, claim that they are not religious themselves and that they do not wish to listen to religious preaching any longer, or that their parents didn't want them to go to religious classes in elementary school, so they are continuing the alternative way also in high school. These reasons may vary from region to region, but the current situation is that, on average, around 80% of the students take *Religious classes*, while only the rest choose *Ethics* in high schools, when given a choice. Having this in mind, *Ethics* teachers are often put in front of a challenge in preparing the curriculum year by year or even in fear for their own job if nobody in the new class chooses *Ethics*.

With new general curriculum reform planned for 2020, some of these issues may be fixed. Future *Ethics* classes will focus more on the development of moral judgements and interdisciplinary content and will demand more learning based on personal experience. It will, if the reform is carried through, address two major topics – moral thinking and moral acting. The reform would offer more freedom to teachers and students, as opposed to the current curriculum, where the topics are all obligatory. Future topics would be either obligatory or elective, which would give the autonomy to teachers and even to students to choose different topics, regarding their educational profile or abilities. For example, students who attend the economics orientation in high schools would have the option to choose more topics related to business ethics. The classes would be arranged in a manner such that each topic is related to a certain problem, on which students usually can form their own judgements. This would open a space for discussions, so teachers would have the opportunity to develop new skills in teaching. The *ex cathedra* approach is planned to be abandoned, while the teaching of

dialogue skills are recommended and preferred, such as guided or Socratic dialogue, open discussions or other engaging approaches, which aim to provoke critical thinking and problem solving skills. It is planned that new teaching materials should be produced, but that teachers themselves should be creative and use modern technology when applicable, or other sources at their disposal. Classes should be more open to the public, if possible (e.g. to local government, local business) or arranged outside of classroom (e.g. in parks, the school yard, the local community). Teachers should according to the reform 2020 also avoid classical ways of examination, where written exams are to be completely abandoned, just as well as classical oral examinations. This may open different issues concerning teacher's subjectivity when it comes to grading, but in order to avoid also that, teachers are advised to grade their students by different criteria, taking into consideration their abilities and their activity during the class. Both thinking skills and acting skills (moral thinking and moral acting) should be graded, mostly during conversations or discussions which take place in class. Having in mind that usually *Ethics* classes have less than 10 students per class, rarely more than that, this can already be considered as an individualized classroom, and henceforth it shouldn't be a problem for teachers to grade their students by the aforementioned criteria. What the curricular reform thereby proposes is what is already happening in schools with the coming of younger generation of teachers, which have learned contemporary pedagogic and teaching methods at universities, where philosophers are prepared to be high school teachers after they finish their studies. Following these new methods, younger teachers have already introduced them to their classes and have found that also new generation of students, who have used PC's or smartphones and tablets since their early childhood, are well adopted to these methods and they respond to them really well.