



Gordijski čvor hrvatske demokracije:
kako ga otpetljati?

This presentation gathers first-year findings from the Croatian research project “Gordian Knot of Croatian Democracy: How to Untangle It?” (DEMOhub).

Democracy, Education, and Centralization in a Post-Socialist Context: Theoretical Triangulation and First Findings from Croatia

Monika Pažur, Faculty for Teacher Education University of Zagreb

Nikola Tomašegović, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences University of Zagreb

Basic assumptions

Democracy is a living practice.

Democracy is continuously created and reshaped through everyday relationships, decisions, and citizen participation (Dewey, 1916).



Democracy is learned and lived through education.

Democracy depends on education, while quality education can only flourish within a democratic environment (Dewey, 1916; Dundar, 2013).

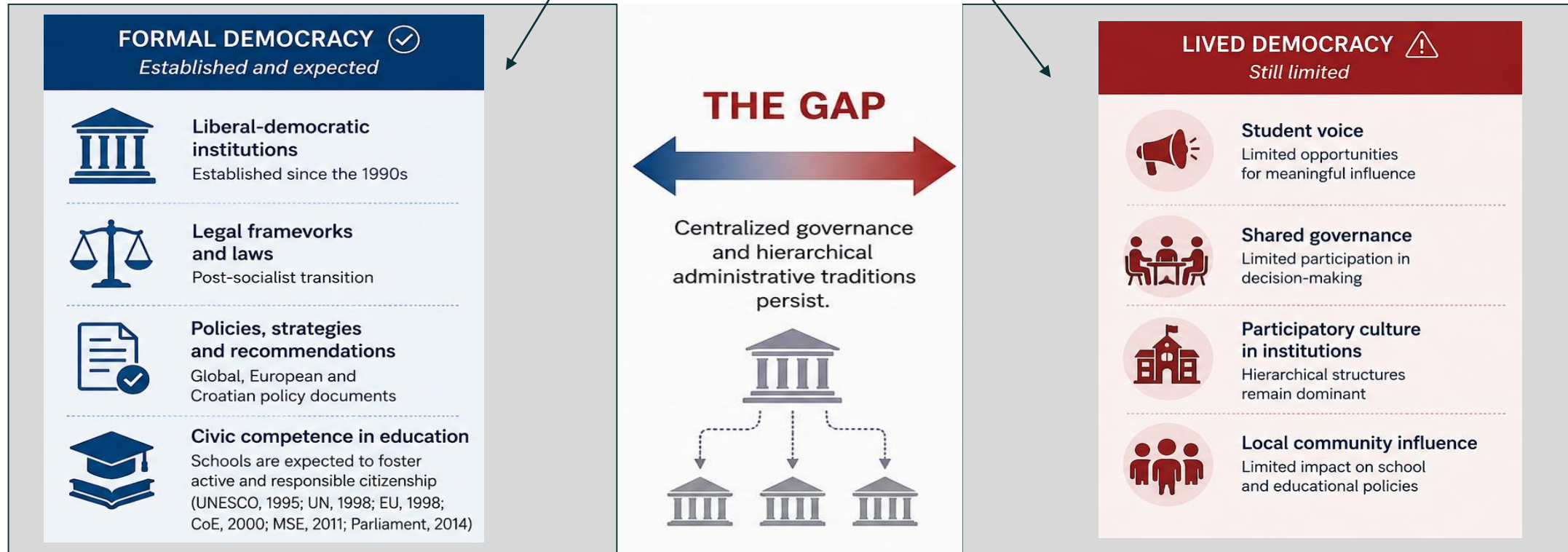


Active citizenship means having rights – and learning to live with others.

It involves finding a balance between individual freedom and belonging to a community, and developing the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to exercise one's rights both individually and collectively with others (Perotti, 1994; Spajić-Vrkaš & Horvat, 2016).

The context

Democracy on paper vs. democracy in practice



Democratic policies are in place, but democratic culture and practice lag behind. (Pažur, 2019)

Research Question

At every level, there is an actor in a formal position of power who holds the legal authority to make final decisions, limiting the distribution of power and shared decision-making.

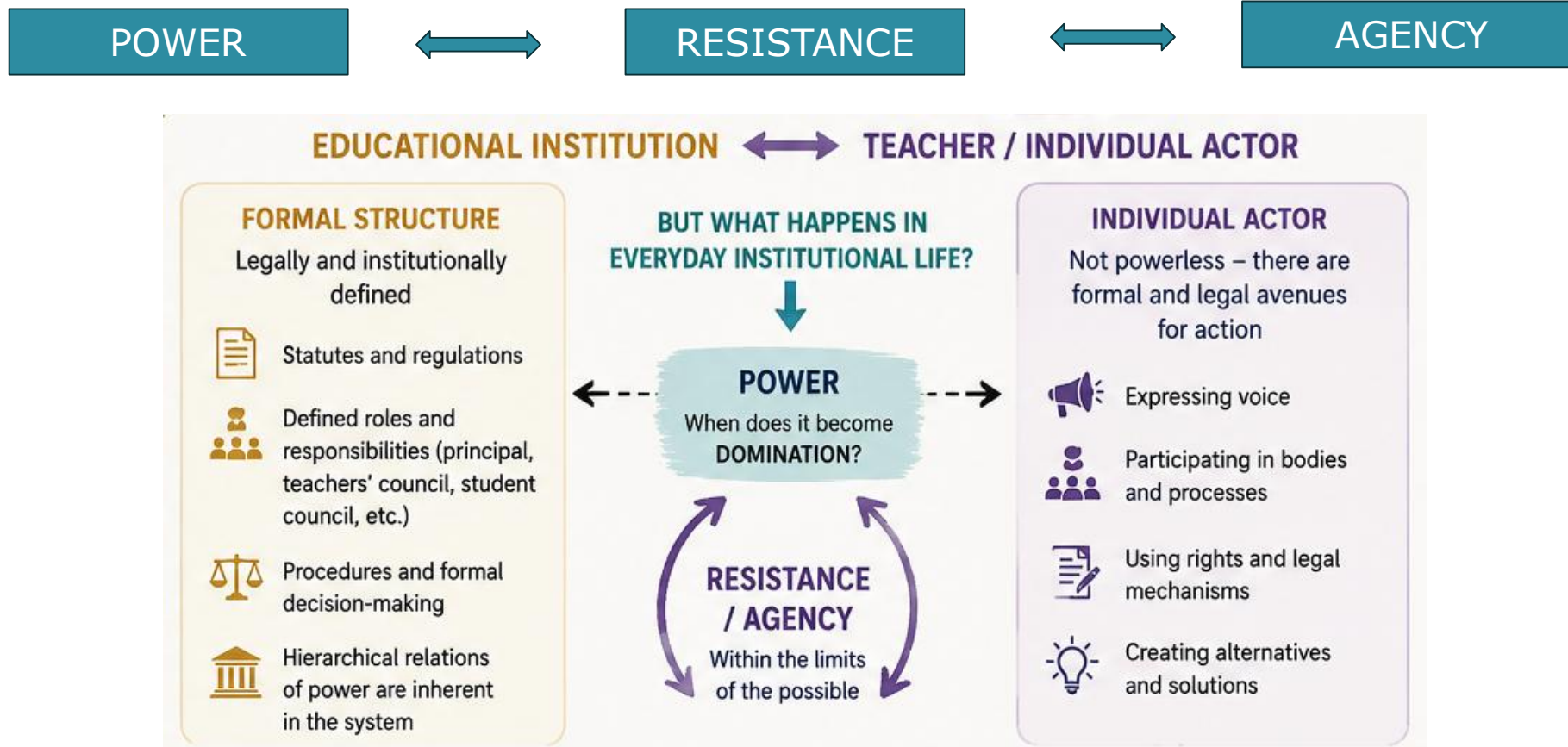
The content and direction of education at all levels are largely defined by national documents and regulations.

How do local communities, educational institutions, and individuals implement democratic policies and practices in a highly centralized state, and what obstacles do they encounter in doing so?

Croatian system is highly centrally administrated. Centralization may constrain local autonomy, participation, shared decision-making, and the development of democratic culture and practices.

Democracy requires a balance of power among individuals, institutions, and decision-makers, and the participation of relevant stakeholders in decision-making processes.

Theoretical framework



Hierarchy does not mean powerlessness.

We want to know: *How teachers use their agency and resist power when it shifts towards forms of domination?*

What does democracy in Croatian education feel like?

Insights from the Croatian
AECED participatory action
research (www.aeced.org)



“It’s not that you can’t express an opinion, but that doesn’t mean it will be respected.”

VOICE

Fear of speaking up

When talking about decision-making, practitioners repeatedly use words such as fear, insecurity, hesitation, powerlessness, self-doubt, withdrawal, and giving up.

EQUALITY

Same ≠ equitable

When talking about equality, practitioners often describe it as treating everyone the same, revealing a tension between sameness and responding to different needs, circumstances and starting positions.

EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY

Distant ≠ lived

Democracy is often perceived as formal and distant — something connected to decision-makers rather than to practitioners’ everyday relationships and actions.

POWER & EMOTION

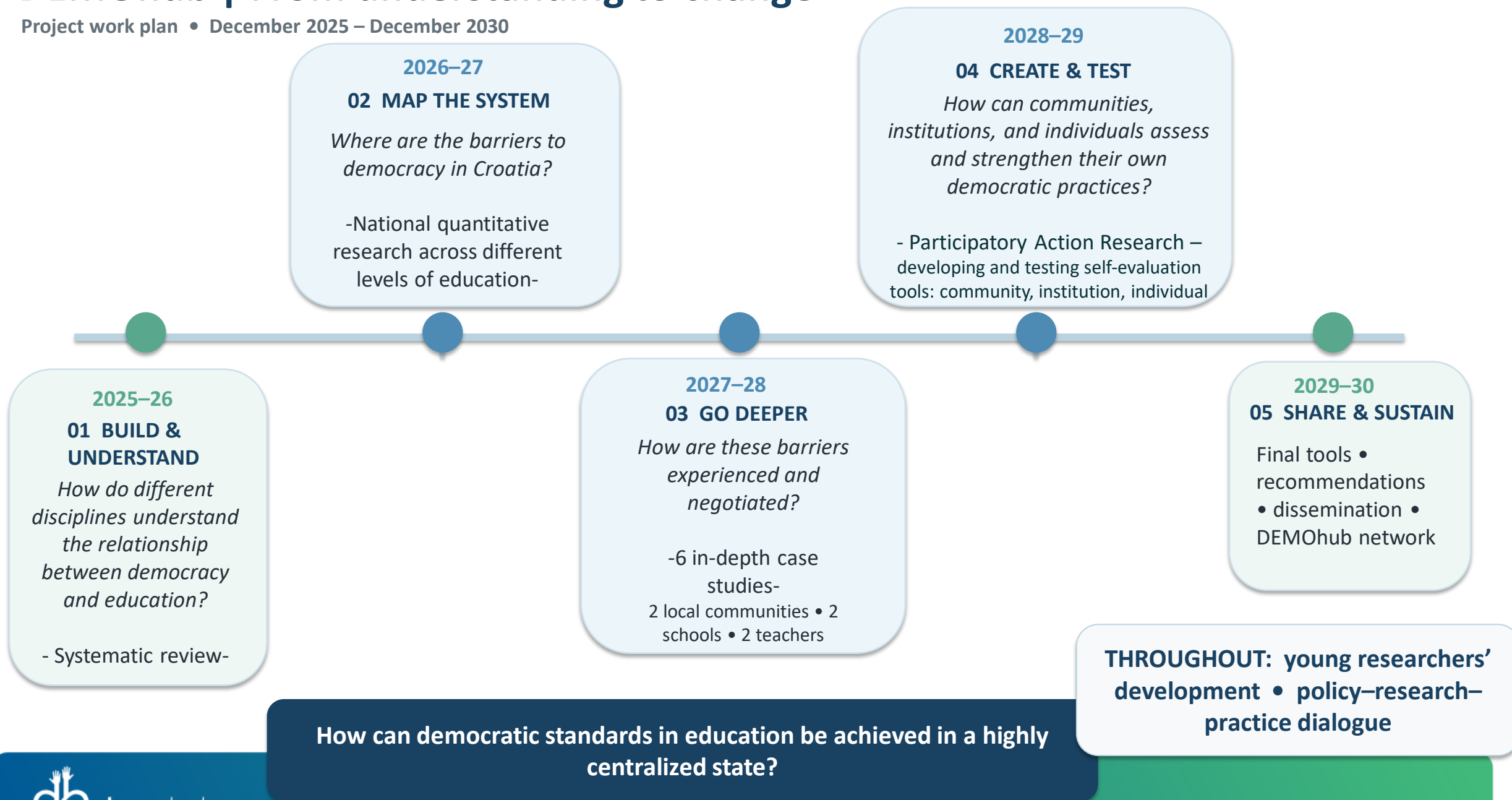
Power is also felt

Participants’ accounts point to feelings of being constrained, silenced or dependent on those in formal positions of power. Belonging, safety and emotional risk shape whether people speak, show disagreement or withdraw.

AECED points to a Croatian paradox: democratic education is expected from educators who do not always experience their own institutions as democratic spaces.

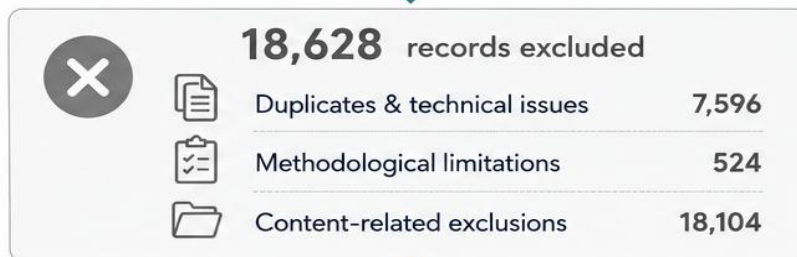
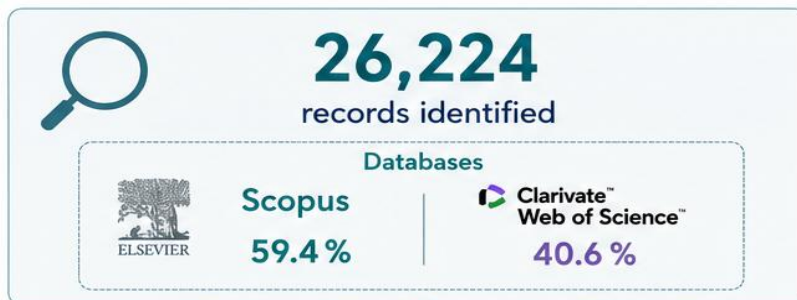
DEMOhub | From understanding to change

Project work plan • December 2025 – December 2030



SYSTEMATIC REVIEW | From search to final sample

N = 196 papers



Reasons for content-related exclusions (18,104 records)



37.6 %

Not related to the research question

Limited or no connection between democracy and education



35.8 %

Context-specific (national / religious / historical)

Geographical, cultural or historical specificity limits generalisability to the Croatian context



13.9 %

Irrelevant educational level

Higher education, adult & lifelong education, non-formal education, or early childhood and pre-primary education



12.7 %

Specific educational content / target groups

Narrow interventions or focus on specific inclusion aspects or target groups



The review prioritised research that **directly connects democracy and education** and offers findings **transferable to the Croatian educational context**.

Central to the analysis is the relationship of power – individuals and institutions: how institutions shape opportunities for agency, and how individuals can act within and transform them.



Syntax

("democra*" OR "civi*" OR "citizen*" OR "political") W/2 ("educat*" OR "school*" OR "curricul*" OR "learn*" OR "teach*") AND ("governance" OR "policy-mak*" OR "policy mak*" OR "democratic school culture" OR "participation" OR "decision mak*" OR "includi*" OR "belonging" OR "becoming" OR "empathy" OR "relational pedagogy" OR "trust*" OR "power" OR "ideology" OR "hierarchy" OR "agency" OR "activism" OR "transformative learning" OR "critical autoreflexivity" OR "express*" OR "voice*")

Systematic Review – preliminary results

