Executive summary

This document consists of concise guidelines on how to develop a Code of Ethics for primary and secondary schools. After introducing the notion of a Code of Ethics, its goals and benefits, it goes on to present key steps in developing such a code. The approach is open in a way that it does not prescribe particular format of the code or the content that must be included, but leaves to the school community to develop this on its own. At the end some suggestion for implementation of a Code of Ethics are given together with links to some examples of codes of ethics from the field of education.

Keywords: ethics in schools, Code of Ethics, benefits of codes of ethics, how to develop and implement code of ethics.
In the project **ETHOS: Ethical education in primary and pre-primary schools for a sustainable and dialogic future** we focus on ethical dimension of education.

The project targets primary and preprimary schoolteachers and other educators to offer them an outline for lifelong learning opportunities in field of ethical education and dealing with ethical questions in their work. As society is going through profound changes these processes of transformation are bringing new challenges for the educational sector and education professionals: migration and integration, clashes of values, working schedule flexibility and mobility, New topics in curriculum, increasing number of children with adjustment disorders, poverty due to economic crisis in several European countries, etc. All this brings new strains into the school environment and put additional pressures on teachers and other educators.

An all encompassing nature of ethical reflection and awareness calls for an integrative approach, where ethical topics should be addressed in most if not all the subjects in school (e.g. the notion of fair play and prevention of violence or substance abuse in physical education, etc.) and in school life in general. In order to address this challenge one must first recognize that teachers and educators often lack the more specific knowledge and competencies to tackle them in the classroom in a coherent and integrative way.

As a part of educational materials tools envisaged to be developed within the project are Instructions for developing a Code of Ethics for a particular school community (this can be either a school as a whole or a particular class). A developed Code can serve and be used as a special tool for ethical reflection and relationships.
2. What is a code of ethics?

A **Code of ethics** can be defined as a collection of principles, values and expected practices that a group or a community aims to live by. It is a systematically collected, well defined and clearly formulated set of criteria, policies and norms that apply to the practical arrangements for the proper conduct of individuals, describing patterns of exemplary behaviour and performance in a particular community.

**Codes of ethics** usually describe universal values and rules to be followed by members of the group or a community and are intended to give those members clear guidance for their behaviour. They are the result of the wider established culture of a group or an organization and can be supplemented by further, more specific rules and regulations of conduct.

**Codes of ethics** are created in response to actual or anticipated ethical conflicts and ambiguities; one of its aspects is that it also governs friction-causing relations of a group of persons that on the other hand share common ideals, goals, and interests (Reeder 1931).

The **Code of Ethics** also helps to translate ideals, values and basic principles into everyday decisions, behaviours, and actions.

One of the oldest Codes of Ethics related to a particular professional group is Hippocratic Oath (5th Cent. BC). In other professional organizational fields such codes stated to appear more often in 19th century and the trend continued in 20th century. Despite there being considerable set of debates about the nature, scope, and effectiveness of codes of conduct (Rezaee), one must be aware that even when an organization or a group does not have a written or recognized code of ethics it usually follows the so-called living code, which is a “cognitive, affective, and behavioural manifestation of an ethical organizational identity” (Verbos 2007, 17).
Instructions for Developing a Code of Ethics

The aims and expected benefits of creating and implementing a code of ethics include the following:

1. **Clear definition of values**, responsibilities, and principles to be respected

2. Promotion of **ethical behaviour** and inspiration to raise the level of ethical behaviour

3. Elimination of **unethical** behaviour

4. Prevention and resolution of **conflicts**

5. Raising ethical **self-awareness and self-reflection**

6. Promoting a sense of a particular **identity** linked to a group or organization;

7. Presenting **core values and principles** of an organization on the outside and announcing what can be expected

8. Raising **trust** both within the group or organization as well as in relations with others

9. Encourage **humane and civic behaviour** among the participants of group or organisation

10. Stimulate **ethical dialogue** and build consensus

11. Foster a culture of **ethical excellence**

12. Identification of improper behaviour and definition of **possible sanctions**; providing guidance in “hard cases” or in cases of moral dilemmas and **elimination of grey areas**.
The structure and contents of Codes of Ethics varies as well as their length. Usually all these aspects reflect the size of the group or organization, complexity and nature of their work or profession. Despite the differences we can identify several possible parts of a Code of Ethics, namely:

- **Memorable title**: the title must communicate the contents and scope clearly, encourage identification with the Code and inspire ethical behaviour;

- **Preamble**: introduces the code, explains its rationale, aims and scope and list basic foundations (basic moral values) out of which it arises; it can also include a statement of commitment to the code, it answers questions like To whom does this code apply? What does it address?;

- **Guiding standards or basic principles**: guiding principles are usually the most general standards of conduct that are inherited in the code and are above level of concrete behaviour (e.g. fairness, dignity, responsibility, politeness, respect, etc.);

- **Description of expected conduct**: this is usually the core part and describes expected behaviour standards and unacceptable practices on a general level, it can be supplemented by examples;

- **Statements of rights, roles and/or responsibilities**: a code can encompass statement of rights that must be recognized and respected in a particular environment, roles that different agents (teachers, pupils, staff,...) must play and responsibilities that each has in order to provide more structure to expected conduct;

- **Statement of core values**: (e.g. excellence, safety, diversity, integrity, etc.): a statement of values is a list (a short description) of core values, inspirational ideals and core beliefs that the group or organization identifies with and wishes to embody in its functioning and can often serve as an inspiration; it is beneficial to links values with standards and responsibilities;

- **Foreseen sanctions and mandatory consequences**: a code might have a section where penalties and consequences for those who break standards of conduct must face, who decides upon them and how are they to be implemented;

- **Pledge**: a pledge is a first-person statement with which each member of a group or institution promises that he or she will be honouring the code and all provision in it (Ethics Resource Center 2001).
3. Characteristics of a good code of ethics

The characteristics of a good and effective code of Ethics are the following.

Clarity:

the Code must be clearly written so that it can be understood by everyone directly included. If needed some examples might be included.

Determinateness:

the Code must be determinate; it should avoid vague terms and indeterminate descriptions of either expected behaviour or consequences.

Coverage:

the code must cover as wide area of ethical behaviour as possible in order not to leave out some important class of unacceptable behaviour.

Sanctions:

if you decide to include sanctions these must be clearly defined, including with explanation whose responsibility is to determine and implement them. Studies have also shown that effectiveness of Codes of Ethics is dependent on several important factors, among them provision of examples, readability, tone of the Code; relevance for everyday activities, support from authorities, communication of violation and enforcement (Schwartz 2004). There are several things to avoid while preparing and implementing a Code of Ethics.

Try to avoid being too general, vague and unspecific, do not express values too generally in the sense that they do not reveal the specific nature of your organization, since that could undermine motivation. Also, be realistic in expectations, but do not set the ethical bar to low or make ethics in a sense voluntary or optional. It would be a mistake to adopt a “low road” approach to ethics (Rezaee at al. 2001). Once you agree on the Code and implement it, be consistent in its application and exercise its content, including consequences for those who breach the Code (Donaldson 1992). Also, try to avoid repeating what is already settled and regulated by other rules and regulations that are in force. A Code cannot be the sole document or tool for regulating behaviour, and it in fact is not in the case of school as pre-structured organization with a prescribed frame of functioning. A Code of Ethics is intended to complement relevant standards, policies and rules, not to substitute them or merely repeat them. Some claim that since Codes of Ethics are mainly followed or effective for two reasons, namely if an individual subjects himself to ethical standards above and beyond her previous personal beliefs or feel there are provisions for enforcement of such standards, it is important for the Code to be inspirational and to include sanctions. Codes also may be ineffective because they have too many limitations or impede the flow of information (Rezaee 2001).
4. How to develop a code of ethics?

In the school environment it is important that when developing a code of ethics we choose to follow inclusive approach and foster active participation of all involved (pupils, teachers, other staff, parents). In this way we secure the best possible outcome and provide all parties involved with a sense of community and joint decision-making. In this way part of an incentive to break the Code is reduced since that would mean a kind of selfdeception. In this way we can also convey the value of active participation on pupils. Next, Codes of Ethics can be e.g. rule-oriented or goal-oriented (value-oriented) (Kleiner and Maury 1997). The former are mostly focused on standards of conduct and include specific rules to be followed. Since there are many hierarchies and unequal power relation in school environment this approach can therefore be very complicated since we then need to specify which rules are valid or in power for which group and in which way. This breaks the aforementioned sense of community. Therefore it makes more sense in some cases to adopt a goal-oriented approach, where the code merely specifies school is a safe environment where the voice of everybody is heard and appreciated.”), since we can achieve more coherence with such goals that are goals for every single person involved in school life. The age and moral maturity of pupils is also very important factor, since the Code should be such that is understood by everybody. One option available is to prepare a simplified version of the code for pupils in minor grades.

In preparing a code it is useful to imagine different scenarios or possible situations and then apply developing codes to them in order to arrive at best considered judgments. Brown (2009) points out several more specific useful tips that are summarized in what follows.

Think in terms of values, beliefs and expectations rather than facts, since values are those that best define the school. Use plain language and avoid technical terms, a code will benefit from common language usually employed in your organization and understood readily by everybody at all levels. It is better to use active voice rather than passive, since that stimulates motivation to follow the Code. Also the code will benefit by being written in first person (if relevant). Give examples when it is appropriate to do so. If there is any doubt about the meaning of a code provision, an example may help provide clarity. If the Code needs some amendments or correction do that after careful consideration and make sure that the same inclusive process is followed as in original development of the code (Ethics Resource Center 2001). A good way to start is by setting priorities (what we want to achieve) and core values and only later turn to details if at all needed. A clearly identified need for a code is crucial since there is no rationale to develop and have a Code of Ethics just to have it. Everybody involved need to have a say in it but they also need to know why the code is important and why it ultimately contains the tenets that it does Spiro 2013). Try to make sure the Code is neither too vague, nor too specific, and especially avoid dealing with minute details or merely repeating what other existing regulations already prescribe as a standard. It is a good idea to consult colleagues or other schools that already developed their own Code of Ethics and get their experience and advice, but not merely copy their solutions since they might not work for you.
5. Things to bear in mind

As mentioned Codes of Ethics can vary in scope, length and focus, but here are several aspects of school life that should be contemplated for inclusion into the Code. The first aspect is socialization; a school is an ever-changing environment where people fluctuate often, so mechanism must be included that each and every one is acquainted with the Code after it becomes a member of the community. Next, a reward and punishment system is very useful and can contribute to the success of the Code. Decision-making and leadership is another important aspect: who can make important decisions and when, what responsibilities this carries with; who will decide on matters related to the Code. Next, imagine the Code also as a tool for learning. Even when something goes wrong and Code is not followed it is constructive to see that as learning and growing opportunity and not merely as something to sanction. Every member of staff and pupils should accept the Code as his/her own attitude towards values, ideals and principles of school community and not see it as a mere collection of prescriptions.

6. How to implement a code of ethics?

inform everybody about the code and also make sure that any newcomer is acquainted with the Code. Everybody should take sufficient time to know it and resolve any open questions that might arise regarding it. Offer training and consultation if needed. The mere introduction of the Code of Ethics without proper implementation can actually be counter-productive (Schwartz 2004).

Next, be consistent in implementation and application of the Code. It is worse to have agreed rules and decide to ignore them as not having rules in the first place. Be attentive of developments and if required after a while amend the Code given feedback from practice.

Someone must be put in charge for promoting, applying and updating the Code. This role can be put to the so-called ethical officer, which could be a position that rotates among various persons or even school classes. They need to be reliable, have a strong commitment to the excellence of the school, and have good people skills (Spiro 2013).
Instructions for Developing a Code of Ethics

References


ANNEX – some examples of Codes of Ethics

The following links lead to several examples of established Code of Ethics and are not selected with the purpose to in any way encourage to merely copy them when developing your own Code of Ethics but more with an intention to provide inspiration and show different solutions that might be used in the process of preparing the Code.

- City Terrace Elementary School, Los Angeles, CA, USA: http://cityterrace-laUSD-ca.schoolloop.com/cms/page_view?d=x&piid=&vpid=1285481893036
- Charlotte Avenue Elementary School, Hamburg, NY, USA: http://www.hamburgschools.org/domain/635
- West Town Primary School, Peterborough, UK: http://www.westtown.peterborough.sch.uk/page/default.asp?title=Home&pid=1
- Pravila obnajanja OŠ Dutovlje, Slovenija: http://www.os-dutovlje.si/o-soli/pravila-obnasanja/ (in Slovene)