



## Journal of Catholic Education

Volume 24 | Issue 1

Article 13

7-2021

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### Recommended Citation

Cattaro, G., Richard, P., & Wodon, Q. (2021). Challenges and Opportunities for Catholic Schools Globally: Insights from OIEC's World Congress. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 24 (1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.2401132021>

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*Journal of Catholic Education*

Spring 2021, Volume 24, Issue 1, 239-251

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<https://doi.org/10.15365/joce.2401132021>



## Challenges and Opportunities for Catholic Schools Globally: Insights from OIEC's World Congress

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**Abstract:** Every four years, the International Office of Catholic Education (OIEC in French) organizes its World Congress as an opportunity for participants – including school teachers and principals, to share their experiences and achievements, as well as the challenges they face. In June 2019, the *Educatio Si* Congress took place in New York in partnership with Fordham University. The theme of the Congress was “Educating to fraternal humanism to build a civilization of love.” The closing plenary was held at the United Nations to highlight the contribution of Catholic schools to the fourth Sustainable Education Goal (SDG4), namely ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. This symposium comprises of selected contributions made at the congress, with a focus on the opening plenary at the Church of St Paul the Apostle and the closing plenary at the United Nations.

**M**ore than 570 delegates from 80 countries attended the World Congress of the International Office of Catholic Education (OIEC or *Office Internationale de l'Education Catholique* in French) in New York in June 2019. OIEC is the international organization that represents Catholic education at the pre-primary, primary, and secondary levels with international agencies. It also provides a forum for exchange and learning between national Catholic education associations. The event takes place every four years and is a great opportunity to share insights on the challenges and opportunities faced by Catholic schools globally. The aim of this symposium in the Focus section of the *Journal of Catholic Education* is to share some of the

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insights gained at the Congress through a selection of contributions from various speakers. Catholic and other faith-based schools are effectively delivering education to tens of millions children and youth globally, yet ways of sharing how this is done, what is working well, and what may need to be improved are lacking. In a small way, we hope that the contributions in this symposium will help fill the gap. Some of these contributions and other articles based on the Congress are also available in the *Educatio Si* Bulletin on OIEC's website.

This introduction to the symposium consists of three main sections. The first section focuses on messages from the Magisterium, and especially the video message from Pope Francis at the closing plenary for the Congress held at the United Nations. In addition, this symposium also includes the address from Archbishop Zani, the Secretary of the Congregation for Catholic Education, also at the closing plenary at the United Nations, which echoes many of the themes of Pope Francis's message.

The second section of this introduction discusses some of the challenges and opportunities faced by Catholic schools globally. Four articles are included in this symposium on these challenges and opportunities. The first article is the opening keynote by Augusta Muthigani, the President of OIEC at the time of the Congress. The next two articles are by Quentin Wodon, on some of the challenges faced by Catholic schools in, respectively, the global south and developing countries, and their implications. The last article is by Agbonkhanmeghe Orobator on the prophetic message of *Laudato Si* which served as a source of inspiration for the Congress. A wide range of other contributions were made at the Congress by school teachers, principals, and administrators from all corners of the world. While these contributions cannot be included here for lack of space, some of the innovations implemented in Catholic schools mentioned at the closing plenary at the United Nations are briefly mentioned.

The last section may be the most important in terms of providing guidance for Catholic schools as well as OIEC itself for the next four years. The Congress took place within the framework of Agenda 2030 and SDG4 (ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all) and the vision articulated by in *Laudato Si* (Francis, 2015) to develop a new paradigm of Catholic education that is inclusive, open to dialogue, aware of climate change, and committed to integral human development as a source of hope for the world today. The issue of preventing abuse of minors was also considered. Other topics such as the Christian identity of Catholic schools, the ability to serve the poor, the safeguarding of the "Common House," the constructive presence within international organizations, the definition of new pedagogical resources, and the synergy between formal and non-formal education were all discussed through Labs. Based on these exchanges, eight commitments were made by participants. These commitments are spelled out in the last section of this introduction.

### **Messages from the Magisterium**

Providing a diverse blend of culture, faith, and pedagogy, Catholic schools are at the service of the global community. The World Congress was a true mirroring of the words of St. Pope John Paul II (1979) who wished to “sow courage, hope, and enthusiasm abundantly in the hearts of all those many diverse people who are in charge of religious instruction and training for life in keeping with the Gospel” (para 2). The diversity of attendees was magnified by presenters on the panel at the United Nations who paralleled the scope and influence of the Catholic Schools in their respect for culture, diversity, and dignity.

In his video message, Pope Francis thanked all those present for their work in Catholic education. He highlighted some of the challenges currently facing the schools, as well as ways to attend these challenges by encouraging the possibilities of encounter. His message reflected his pedagogical signature fostering a hermeneutics of dialogue, as he posed a particular challenge for continued dialogue and outreach to go out to those on the periphery. The Pope referenced *Gravissimum Educationis* (Paul VI, 1965) stating that men and women of every race, condition, and age, given their dignity as a person, have the inalienable right to an education. He also stressed that youth need to be equipped with the necessary means to contribute to the common good and participate in society.

He spoke at length of the need to revive an authentic humanism in education and counseled that one of the greatest difficulties facing education is the current deconstructed version of humanism. This he stated is in part due to consumerism that overwhelms common values and treats human beings as mere machines or economic instruments. Such consumerism also leads to the “dictatorship of results.”

Echoing the Holy Father, Archbishop Vincenzo Zani stated that The Church, through education, has a responsibility and opportunity to promote a new paradigm regarding the human being and society, opening hearts where there is despair, and fostering community. Msgr. Zani considered in his address at the closing plenary for the Congress three fundamental perspectives for Catholic education, all mentioned in the encyclical letter *Populorum Progressio* of Paul VI and which have been present in the teachings of successive pontiffs. The first perspective is the need to build a new civilization and the idea that “the world suffers due to lack of thought.” The second perspective is the idea that “there is no true humanism but in the opening to the Absolute.” The third perspective is the idea that at the origin of injustice there is a lack of fraternity. The second Vatican Council stated that “true education should promote the formation of the human person both in view of its ultimate purpose and for the good of different societies.” This invitation of the Council Fathers is still very current, Msgr. Zani argued, and is directed especially to those who have positions of responsibility in the world of education.

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o This section is adapted from a contribution by Gerald Cattaro to the Winter 2020 issue of *Educatio Si Bulletin*.

Msgr. Paolo Rudelli, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the Council of Europe, who also spoke at the closing plenary at the United Nations at that time and currently Apostolic Nuncio to Burkina Faso, underlined the notion of fraternity. Authentic human development, he stated, is fraternal and no one should be left behind. He went on to say that Catholic education is open to the universality of knowledge, the full development of each person, and open to dialogue with different religions and traditions. He asserted that a turn to Catholic education would embrace one's full humanity and lead one to defend the rights of all (Permanent Observer Missions of the Holy See to the United Nations, 2019).

Pope Francis called in September 2019 for a Global Pact to create a global change of mentality through education. In that message, he reveals that the educational process is in need of repair. Thus a global educational pact is needed to educate towards a new humanism in universal solidarity. Educating young people in fraternity and learning to overcome divisions and conflicts and promote hospitality, justice and peace is what the Pope calls us to do, citing the African proverb that it takes a village to educate a child.

Only through a dramatic change in the educational pact, that is a global initiative, will the village be established. The Pope calls for a global pact to create such a village and foster a new humanism that is to heal the "horizontal fracture" between men of different cultures, religions, and backgrounds. A Global pact could also heal the fracture between man, society, nature, and the environment in the face of an "urgent need" to create an ecological citizenship which is based on sustainability and an austere responsibility. Impassioned with this mantle of hope for the future, Pope Francis has invited everyone who cares about the education of the young generation to be part of such a Global Pact, to create a global change of mentality through education (Permanent Observer Mission, 2019). Due to the coronavirus crisis, the Global Pact meeting was postponed from May 2020 to a subsequent date, but the aims remain the same. The Pope states:

For this reason, I look forward to meeting in Rome all of you who, in various ways and on every level, work in the field of education and of research. I encourage you to work together to promote, through a global compact on education, those forward-looking initiatives that can give direction to history and change it for the better. I join you in appealing to authoritative public figures in our world who are concerned for the future of our young people, and I trust that they will respond to my invitation. I also call upon you, dear young people, to take part in the meeting and to sense your real responsibility for the building of a better world. (Francis, 2019, para. 9)

Reinventing the Global Compact on Education provides a *kairos* moment for Catholic schools so that together with the Holy Father we can say that Catholic schools will rekindle our dedication for and with young people, renewing our passion for a more open and inclusive education, including

patient listening, constructive dialogue and better mutual understanding. In an address to the Congregation of Catholic Education at their last plenary session on February 13, 2017 Pope Francis states in reference to the global village the position of Catholic schools:

Catholic educational institutes are called, in the front line, to practice the grammar of dialogue that forms to encounter an appreciation of the cultural and religious diversities. Dialogue, in fact, educates when a person relates with respect, esteem, sincerity in listening and expresses himself with authenticity, without obfuscating or mitigating his identity nourished by evangelical inspiration. We are encouraged by the conviction that the new generations, educated in a Christian way to dialogue, will come out of the school and university classrooms motivated to build bridges and, hence, to find new answers to the many challenges of our time. Francis (2017)

Catholic schools contribute substantially to the global community. In addition to the fact that Catholic schools are uniquely capable of passing on belief to the next generations, they have been, and are purposeful centers of mercy for immigrants and refugees, sanctuaries of promise and hope, especially in marginal urban neighborhoods. The Church has in a special way the duty and the right of educating, for it has a divine mission of helping all to arrive at the fullness of Christian life [Canon 794 §1].

In a special way these schools form a community with parents who are the primary educators of their children. There must be the closest cooperation between parents and the teachers to whom they entrust their children to be educated. In fulfilling their task, teachers are to collaborate closely with the parents and willingly listen to them; associations and meetings of parents are to be set up and held in high esteem [Canon 796 §2]. They also create a spirit of community that engenders in students an ethos of caring, commitment, and safety, as well as civic knowledge and engagement.

Education must pay regard to the formation of the whole person, so that all may attain their eternal destiny and at the same time promote the common good of society. Children and young persons are therefore to be cared for in such a way that their physical, moral and intellectual talents may develop in a harmonious manner, so that they may attain a greater sense of responsibility and a right use of freedom, and be formed to take an active part in social life. [Canon 795] Consequently, Catholic schools can become a radical foundation for a renewed humanism promoted by the Holy Father. Many of these schools can serve as best practice, setting the pace for the advancement of the Global Pact.

### **Challenges and Opportunities for Catholic Schools**

The World Congress was an opportunity for participants to share their experiences and achievements, as well as the challenges they face. In her address at the opening plenary included in this symposium, Augusta Muthigani, then President of OIEC, considered eight such challenges:

(1) the decline in the depth of faith and values; (2) an inadequate number of clergy and religious serving in schools; (3) a changing scenario for teaching personnel; (4) a changing face of families; (5) ethical and religious pluralism; (6) inadequate child safety mechanism; (7) lack of research, data and documentation; and finally (8) the need for catholic Schools to reach the socio-economically marginalized. Based on an analysis of these challenges, she called on educators and leaders to tell their story of provision of holistic quality education without apology. Catholic schools need to be clear on what they have achieved worldwide, the values they have inculcated in millions of citizens, and their beneficial socio-economic impact on societies. But there is also a need among others to build capacity for teachers and principals, equip them to engage in the public space on issues that affect Catholic education and expand collaborations with Catholic universities to improve the quality of the education being provided.

The realities of Catholic schools differ depending on local and country context. To set the stage for the closing plenary at the United Nations, one of us was asked to provide a profile of Catholic schools globally. Two articles in this symposium build on that presentation. The first article focuses on the global south while the second considers developing countries. Two broad trends have been affecting Catholic education globally, with potential implications for university research and programs in support of K12 schools. The first trend is a shift of enrollment in K12 Catholic education towards the global south and especially Africa in terms of the sheer number of students enrolled in schools. The second trend relates to the deepening learning crisis in K12 education affecting much of the developing world, and again especially Africa. These two trends have implications for university research and programs in support of K12 Catholic schools on the continent. Because of these trends, it could be argued that apart from discussions related to Catholic identity, which are of course important, more attention should be placed by Catholic schools and the universities that support them, including in the West, on the related but distinct issue of how to improve basic learning for students enrolled in K12 Catholic schools.

In developed countries, or at least in some of them, the issues are somewhat different. Providing a quality and holistic education experience is needed as well and remains a challenge, especially for disadvantaged groups. But in addition, in several countries, Catholic schools face challenges in terms of enrollment. In the United States in particular, enrollment has been declining for 50 years. In a few other countries, including in Great Britain and Ireland, enrollment has remained steady, but the market share of Catholic schools has been declining, suggesting challenges in attracting students. Different factors are at work here. The issue of affordability is one of the main reasons for the more severe drop in enrollment in the United States in comparison to Great Britain and Ireland, given that in the United States, lack of state support and rising tuition costs have led Catholic schools to be too costly for many parents. Still, despite differences between countries, some of the deeper challenges faced by Catholic schools and some of the responses that could be suggested to

meet these challenges may not be that different across the three countries. In order to illustrate these challenges, after a discussion of trends in all three countries, an analysis of perceptions of Catholic schools in the United States is provided.

The last article included in this symposium by Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator considers the prophetic message of *Laudato Si*, which served as a source of inspiration for the Congress. There is clear evidence that our generation and our civilization teeter on the brink of a man-made disaster of global scale. Climate change stands as the defining question of our century. Calls to global action are as strident and passionate as the enormity of the situation is grave and consequential. Of particular significance is Pope Francis' encyclical letter *Laudato Si'* on the care for our Common Home. Orobator discusses some of the main messages from *Laudato Si'* and their implications for Catholic schools, calling for pedagogical models of "ecological education" or "environmental education". The article is adapted with minor modifications from his keynote address on the first day of OIEC's World Congress.

How can Catholic schools respond to the challenges they face? Many examples of best practice were shared at the World Congress, including to promote outreach to the periphery and a change in pedagogical models. While these examples cannot be shared in details in this symposium due to limited space, speakers at the closing plenary session gave forceful testimonies of innovations in the making.

Raoul Sika representing the Episcopal Commission for Catholic Education in the Republic of Congo shared a video from his school tree planting ceremony, where each tree carries the name of a child. All students at this school are trained in essential skills so that they will have a responsible attitude to protecting the earth. The students are in turn encouraged to be ecological missionaries to their families and their villages so that together they can protect and preserve the environment.

Brother Habib Zraibi, FSC, described the initiative of his order, in conjunction with the Marist Brothers, to educate child refugees in Lebanon. Named the Fratelli Project, this initiative seeks to help the refugees in Lebanon. These religious orders operate two centers in Lebanon, one in Rmeileh and one in Bourj Hammoud. They serve roughly 1,000 children from Syria, Iraq, Palestine, and Lebanon. Br. Zraibi related that, initially, Lebanese people expressed resistance towards welcoming Syrian refugees, as Lebanon had suffered from the Syrian occupation of its country. They were tempted to ignore these refugees, saying "they deserve to suffer," but their Christian belief in charity and forgiveness enabled them to view children as victims needing assistance.

Danielle Radenen from Marseilles, France, spoke about the role of schools in promoting a culture of dialogue. Teachers, she said, had to adapt to the individual needs of students, often because students at her school come from varied backgrounds. Despite the differences between students and the difficulties they face, Radenen shared how all students are united in the respect



they show towards staff, facilities, and each other. She mentioned that 80 percent of the population at her school was Muslim, which afforded many opportunities for interreligious dialogue.

Jaime Palacio, a lay missionary in Yurimaguas, Peru, addressed the work of Catholic education in the Amazon, and stressed the importance of making the people of the region feel included by listening to their needs. He said it is important to reread the Gospels with the perspective of Amazon culture and spirituality. He echoed Pope Francis' remarks on the deconstruction of humanism and summed up the mission of the Synod as the defense of life, the earth, and cultures.

Jose Arellano spoke about the situation of education on the island of Mindanao in the Philippines. His organization, the Madaris Volunteer Program, tries to assist the Muslim population in the newly autonomous region of Bangsamoro and to prevent its youth from developing violent extremist views. He explained that the region suffers from a low quality of basic education, as well as interreligious misunderstandings and conflicts that contribute to the possibility of extremism. The Madaris Volunteer Program sends volunteers to teach and assist with interreligious and intercultural dialogue.

Kiran Bir Sethi, Founder of Design for Change in India, spoke about her hopes for Catholic education. Bir Sethi quoted Mahatma Gandhi, who said, "The law of Love could be best understood and learned through little children." She described the commitment of children to take care of a disabled child, underlining that love and respect makes a difference in someone's life.

Finally, Br. Ojeda, FSC, presented a book on humanity and sustainable education, stressing the importance of responding both to the cry of the poor and the earth, and giving solutions to the problems that have been spelled out by the UN through the Sustainable Development Goals.

### **Commitments Made at the Congress**

Participants at the Congress benefited from these exchanges of ideas and experiences. They also considered a number of commitments that were shared at the closing plenary to express their personal commitment to ensuring greater access for all to quality education on an equal footing, promoting opportunities of lifelong learning and promoting a "new dialogue on how we build the future of the planet" as called for by *Laudato Si*. Based on detailed work in labs on key topics during the Congress, the following commitments were made by participants for the next four years.

1. For a new format of education, adapted to change, and grounded in a culture of dialogue. The contemporary realities of the world force educators to constantly adapt and formulate innovative educational proposals. Among the realities that Catholic schools are committed to consider, we can note the need for a culture of dialogue between students from different religions; a solidary education in relation to the situations of extreme poverty; a Sustainable

Development education; a peace and human rights education. These innovations should help every student and every member of the educational community to become an actor of change.

2. For a Christian identity of the school, based in an evangelical root. The Catholic school is a school participating in the public service of education in each country. Its purpose is not to earn money, but to render the service of education for all, in the tradition of the great Christian educators who founded congregations engaged in the service of education. Because it is Catholic, it is a body of hope, founded by its attachment to living and witnessing the Gospel, and in connection with the local Church. Therefore, it must demonstrate this hope and commit to educating each student about the meaning of his life and transcendence. Beyond this, it is a question of recognizing the necessity and the pursuit of the spiritual development of adults. The Catholic school must train the teachers relentlessly so that they can promote the human fulfillment of all those entrusted to them. The Catholic school must train the teachers relentlessly so that they can promote the human fulfillment of all those entrusted to them.
3. For an inclusive school, open to all and especially to the outskirts. The Catholic schools, strongly inspired by the message of the Gospel, have the vocation to offer the educational service for all, and especially for the poorest. They commit themselves to develop a particular attention to every person, and to go to meet, sometimes against the flow, those who come from the most vulnerable groups. They are also committed to practicing inclusion and developing, adapting their own educational structures to the needs of the most forgotten young people living in their periphery. Inclusive education is fundamentally about the Catholic school's mission to provide a quality, comprehensive educational service and equal opportunities for all children and young people around the world. It is therefore necessary to promote an inclusive model that is committed to the territory, interculturality, acceptance of differences and attention to diversity. Families must also be reached through educational itineraries that accompany parents from preschool to secondary education.
4. For a training of leaders and teachers adapted to contemporary educational realities. Throughout the world, Catholic schools must seek a commitment to teachers and leaders training, which takes into account education in contemporary reality, and produces control strategies: against school failure; against early de-schooling; against school dropout; against teenagers' desocialization; against illiteracy; against violence in schools, and against the communitarianism within the establishment. Training centers and Catholic Universities must work tirelessly to train leaders so that they are better educated and above all better equipped to face this educational responsibility. It is proposed that the sharing of experiences between training institutes and universities and teachers from different countries be strengthened, and that the professionalization of teachers and leaders of Catholic schools be promoted.

5. For a quality education, inspired by the Gospel and oriented towards the safeguarding of the Common House (*Laudato Si*). The world, our world, the Common House, is in danger, threatened by serious climatic and ecological dysfunctions produced by an economic development based on hyperbolic growth and little respect for nature and by associated human activities. The United Nations have made commitments, the SDGs. Pope Francis, in his encyclical *Laudato Si* invites us to become aware of this reality and to act responsibly for the safeguarding of the common house. Catholic schools must make a firm commitment to support the commitments of the international community by developing within each school, large or small, structuring educational projects for quality education (SDG4) and, above all, an awareness of each student that he can become an actor in the safeguarding of the common house. The development of the programs I can, or Planet OIEC within the OIEC corresponds to the beginning of the answer. They make it possible to better develop an "ethos" of Catholic education, through all disciplinary knowledge, in order to build a transdisciplinary ethic. The OIEC could also commit to a "green tree" program for all the countries of the world. Catholic schools must [...] support the commitments of the international community by developing within each school, large or small, structuring educational projects for quality education (SDG4) and, above all, an awareness of each student that he can become an actor in the safeguarding of the common house.
6. For a positive and constructive presence in international organizations. The right to education is a human right (article 26 of the Universal Declaration of human rights). Catholic schools are represented, through the OIEC, within the United Nations system: ECOSOC (Geneva and New York) and UNESCO (Paris). They are also represented in the Council of Europe. Within these bodies, OIEC representatives act in connection with the OIDEL, to support the freedom of education on the one hand, and to defend, together with other NGOs, the right to education, on the other hand. Today, the international community is committed to a 2030 Education program, supported by the OIEC. It is therefore up to the Catholic schools of the world to become better acquainted with this program and to contribute more to the debate on the formulation of indicators of quality education on the one hand (SDG4), and educational policies of the States on the other. The OIEC is committed to do everything in their power to assist the Rome Forum in this work of structuring the representation of Catholic organizations in international organizations.
7. For the design of tools and resources adapted to the objective of preservation of the Common House inspired by *Laudato Si*. Education is not just a matter of principle. It is also based on the production of methods, tools, and edition, serving the innovative goals of education. Catholic schools, given their prophetic responsibility regarding education for the preservation

of the Common House, must contribute to the experimentation and the spreading of new teaching methods. They can do this with the help of universities, congregations, educational research centers, textbooks or software publishers.

8. For a work in network, formal education around child protection. Catholic education must be thought beyond school. As requested by Pope Francis, it must join the young people in their environment. Indeed, more than 265 million children are currently out of school and 22% of them (60 million students) are of primary school age. They come from the most vulnerable groups and remain excluded every year from the school system. While it is unfortunately not possible to imagine being able to offer an immediate solution to all these children, it is nevertheless essential to support the efforts of the organizations and congregations that engage on the ground for children's protection. When children are in great danger (unaccompanied minors, child soldiers, refugees, child labor, slavery, prostitution, etc.), the Catholic school must remain preoccupied and mobilized to propose solutions. It connects more with organizations and congregations working in the non-formal education sphere. Catholic schools are therefore called upon to work in processes of inclusion beyond school, in a context of mobility and high exclusion in non-formal extracurricular projects. It is essential to integrate the formal and the non-formal. To connect the formal and the non-formal, it is necessary to work in network and change our vision in our proposals for social action for the centers in order to make our schools more inclusive. Each school can generate local, national and international projects in which formal and non-formal education are linked, in order to widen the vision of an education to the service of the social transformation of our students, our teachers and therefore our families. The Church is now going through a difficult time due to the scandals related to pedophilia. Catholic schools must be particularly careful about the protection of children against any form of attack or abuse, which they cannot tolerate or conceal under any circumstances if they wish to remain exemplary. Beyond that, it is a question of fostering a culture of encounter and dialogue, but also of conversion, through travel, technology, mutual understanding and attention to the experience of poverty. Students and their families should continue to be sensitized to human rights violations around the world in an age-appropriate way so that they can understand how their actions can contribute to a better world.
9. The challenges of child protection and the fight against all forms of abuse. The Church is now going through a difficult time due to the scandals related to pedophilia. Catholic schools must be particularly careful about the protection of children against any form of attack or abuse, which they cannot tolerate or conceal under any circumstances if they wish to remain exemplary. Beyond sexual abuse alone, they must focus on promoting in each country and for

each school, tools for the prevention and protection of minors, such as guidelines, protection standards, adapted training tools for teachers and an efficient recruitment procedure for teachers. They must also educate young people about a human sexuality.

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