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## Formal and Non-formal Education on European Issues. Examples from Romanian Educational System

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# Formal and Non-formal Education on European Issues. Examples from Romanian Educational System

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## Abstract

The paper distinguishes between formal and non-formal education and emphasizes the role of the non-formal education on European issues in building European identity and the sense of belonging to the European Union. It reviews several learning methods and best practices in school education and analyses the perception of students, as beneficiaries of the educational process on the European dimension of the Romanian educational system, in a framework of a survey conducted in high schools in Bihor County, Romania. The results of this survey leads in the direction of other research studies and suggests the need to rethink the school curricula, being that textbooks and programs are focused more on mechanical transmission of knowledge and learning and less on skills training, participatory learning, education of values and attitudes.

**Keywords:** formal education, non-formal education, curriculum, European dimension of education

## Conceptual Remarks

A foray into literature[1] allows us to distinguish between formal and non-formal education. Thus, *formal education* refers to the educational system, hierarchically and chronologically structured, starting from primary school until the completion of university, including, in addition to general academic studies, various specialized training programs (lectures, training activities organized by educational institutions). Formal education is linked to schools or institutions dealing with training and ends with the granting of diplomas and qualifications officially recognized. It has an official character (Latin "formalis" mean "organized", "official") and it is provided in a learning process conducted strictly in time and space: plans, manuals, courses, learning materials.

*Non-formal education* is defined as "any educational activity, intentional and systematic, held usually outside the traditional school, whose content is adapted to the individual and specific situations in order to maximize learning and knowledge and to minimize the problems it faces in the formal education (stress grading in the catalog, the discipline imposed, homework).[2]" This type of education pursues clear learning objectives and it is conducted in an institutionalized framework, including extra-didactic and/or extracurricular activities (interdisciplinary and/or thematic meetings, debates organized between schools, arts and sport competitions etc.). It can be achieved in seminars, training sessions, face-to-face trainings, workshops, webinars, e-learning modules, in groups/communities or other organizations, different from the formal educational system. Non-formal education allows students to develop different values, skills and knowledge than those acquired in the formal educational system. These skills, called *soft skills*, include a wide range of interpersonal or team skills, of organizational management and conflicts, leadership, planning and organizational abilities for solving practical problems, developing the pupils' self-confidence, discipline and responsibility. In non-formal education, participants are actors actively involved in the education/learning process. The advantages of non-formal education include participatory and student-centered teaching; it is flexible, offering them various attractive activities, depending on their interests, skills and aspirations; it contributes to improving the general and specialized knowledge and it exploits the opportunities offered by the Internet and new ICT, achieving a multi and interdisciplinary approach, answering to lifelong learning education needs and requirements.

Although each type of education has its own way of action and its functionality, the boundaries between the two forms are not always clearly

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[1] Coombs, P. (1985) *The World Crisis in Education,* New York: Oxford University Press. Fordham, P. E. (1993) 'Informal, non-formal and formal education programmes' in YMCA George Williams College *ICE301 Lifelong Learning Unit 2*, London: YMCA George Williams College

[2] Kleis, Russel J. (1973), *Non-formal Education: The Definitional Problem*, volume 2, Michigan State University, pp. 15

delineated, having overlapping and complementary relationships. An educational system that tries to respond appropriately to changes in the social, economic and cultural world in which we live requires an integration of formal and informal influences in formal education. The dynamics of the contemporary society requires an educational space in which these forms of education are supporting each other.

## European Union's Approach and Priorities on Education

Education is, at least at the declarative level, a priority of governments of the European Union. Although the organization and content of the education system differ, sometimes considerably, from one country to another, the European Union has proposed a system of cooperation between Member States on education. A number of documents and Community action programs in recent decades are designed to stimulate collaboration between educational institutions, to harmonize policies, structures and educational institutions and ultimately to contribute to the development of a European dimension of education.[3] In order to develop this dimension, to increase the competitiveness of European systems of education and their transformation into "benchmarks world quality", they were given priority to measures such as mobility of students, teachers and researchers, access to lifelong learning, language learning and integrating new information and communication technologies in education.

At the same time, at the EU's level there is a concern for non-formal education and training of young generation outside educational institutions, in particular through internships and volunteering. In the North-West European countries there is already a tradition for decades on non-formal education, whose advantages in the personal development of young people, compared to traditional formal education, cannot be overlooked. While formal education focuses on the transmission and acquisition of knowledge to the detriment of exercising practical skills, non-formal education provides the framework for practice and cultivation of different inclinations, skills and abilities and talent show.

Since the birth of the European Community, the popular support for this entity was considered essential. For the proper functioning of the European Union it needs to have the support of its citizens, but for this to happen it is necessary that decisions and procedures taken as a whole to be understood by the average citizen. Especially in the old Member States, non-formal education of citizens on the functioning of the EU played an important role. And because people are more receptive at an earlier age than in adulthood, students in primary, secondary and even children in kindergarten are first targeting of non-formal education programs about the European Union. Because data from Eurobarometer surveys attest that the European Union is perceived as a

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[3] See European Commission, 2014, *Education and Training- the key to your future*, available at http://europa.eu/pol/pdf/flipbook/en/education_training_youth_and_sport_en.pdf

technocratic, complex and often misunderstood entity, a wider education on the European Union of students in the pre-university system can help increase positive perceptions and their interest in this entity. This would translate later, once they become adults, into a more active participation in community affairs and into a greater presence in the democratic life of the European Union.

There are many examples of non-formal educational activities taken and implemented in the EU Member States at the undergraduate education with a view to better understand the European Union, its institutions and values and to build a European identity among young people. These best practices include:

- *The celebration of Europe's Day*, activity organized both for students in primary and secondary school, in which teachers can initiate contacts with other European schools and offer a range of extra-curricular activities and inter-school competitions;
- *Visit to the European institutions*, for a better understanding of the European construction, of decision-making institutions. Students will become familiar with the idea of European unity, with the preparation of Community legislation which has an impact on the daily lives of citizens; they will learn important dates in the history of the European Union, the EU institutions, they will develop social and civic competences and the capacity to use the previously acquired information from different disciplines. Such actions can develop the spirit of observation and creative imagination by investigating reality, understanding the causality of phenomena, the changes and transformations in the economic, political and cultural Europe, building a responsible attitude regarding the rights and responsibilities of citizens in the European Union.
- *Flags' design competition*, of the member states of the EU, organized for pupils in primary schools, explaining the main meanings of the flags;
- *Various exhibitions* on European themes and music performances and traditional dances from different European countries;
- *Roundtables:* bringing high school students in a weekly round table where they could discuss current events on the EU agenda;
- *Schools summer camps* on the European topics, in which students could gain useful information and knowledge about the European Union in a flexible way, without the pressure of formal traditional education environment;
- *Volunteer/internships* during the summer to a European company or to a non-governmental organization of European interest for high school students.

Such activities can be found in the educational systems of the Member States, including Romania. Also, due to the spectacular evolution of *digital technologies* and their use spread in all areas and by most social groups, new tools and methods incorporating these technologies are applied including in

education. Learning methods include digital simulations and online gaming platforms, the use of digital platforms in interaction between teachers and peers, the use of social networks, mobile applications, etc. Non-formal learning through digital technologies takes place not only online or in the classroom, but also in museums, libraries or at home.

Regarding the activities of non-formal education on European Union through the use of digital technologies, there are many options and opportunities offered by the European institutions. The EU's countries have made great steps in the infrastructure' development that allows the use of digital technologies and their introduction into the teaching approach and the development of projects in this area.

Firstly, the main European institutions provide information materials on their websites, both at central (as europa.eu), as well as at their information offices in the Member States. For students who want to discover how the EU works, and other concrete issues at the macro or micro levels in diverse areas as geography, history, politics, economics, energy or agriculture, there are digital platform specially built to provide information for them and their teachers. In addition, much of the materials are divided by age and are available in the official languages of the European Union. Examples of such platforms are:

- *Learn Europe*[4] - an online educational platform that provides text, images, videos and an augmented reality section (technology that allows the display of digital information overlapped to images of the real world). Currently it is available in English and Spanish.
- The *Teachers' corner*[5] and *Kids' corner*[6] provide information about the European Union in a colorful, fun and interactive manner. They are built around games and contests based on information about the European Union, which gives young people an attractive alternative to traditional learning.

Such platforms can be used as a non-traditional lecture support, but also for various activities and larger projects that involve directly or indirectly the development of knowledge about the European Union. The materials can be accessed and used in presentations live or be given for study outside the classroom. Also online games and competitions are an attractive way to stimulate students' interest in various European Union issues, but also to test their knowledge in a non constraint and rigid way.

Secondly, based on these materials and platforms provided by the European institutions, teachers, schools and the Ministry of Education can develop new activities to address some needs, interests and specific realities to students. Such activities would include new digital platforms, debates, competitions or games online at class level, school level, state, country or

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[4]http://www.learneurope.eu/index.php/en/
[5] http://europa.eu/teachers-corner/0_9/index_ro.htm
[6] http://europa.eu/kids-corner/index_ro.htm

within multinational cooperation projects between schools. Projects of international cooperation can be achieved also through e-twinning platform and the new Erasmus +.

Thirdly, the *social networks* can be very useful tools in training students, just because most of them are already present on these channels. Examples of social networking with potential for non-formal education, on which European institutions are present and very active, are Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, YouTube and various blogs. Social media challenges traditional models of education, allow a much more direct and free communication of students and cooperation between them, between them and teachers or between them and institutions.

*Twitter* allows them to use data in real time by tracking the discussions taking place on the accounts of European institutions, but also to create content or to participate in discussions or to initiate new ones. Students have the opportunity to interact with these institutions and to learn about them through competitions, projects, live question and answer sessions etc.

Platforms like *Google Docs* or *Google Plus* can be tools which drive greater collaboration and supports learning because they offer the possibility of more than 50 people to work simultaneously on a document online or to organize Hangouts and mini video conferences.

*YouTube* is a visual tool and a great way to play the important events that would otherwise require a long time for exemplification. In this respect, the European institutions frequently upload videos from events and educational materials.

*Facebook* can also be very useful for creating discussion groups and to collect data, for example by conducting surveys among students.

Thus, social networks could be useful tools for non-formal education on the European Union because they are a well-known and an attractive environment for students. The online activities are associated with enjoyable activities, learning being achieved much easier. Also, the assessment through social networks can take place in both the quantity level (the degree of involvement - number of posts, replies, comments, likes) and the quality level (by analyzing creativity, retention capacity and output connections between information).

All these online activities can be applied ad-hoc by teachers or as part of projects on non-formal education about the European Union. Whether included in the curriculum, whether realized beyond, these projects can mark, for example, the celebration of European or national events or personalities. The online activities are particularly effective the more so as young generations are familiar with digital technologies from ages increasingly earliest and students turn more their attention to online information resources than traditional ones for various topics.

**Some Evidence from Romanian Educational System**

Romania has taken steps to adapt its educational system to EU requirements, adopting a series of laws designed to implement national policies and European programs and establishing institutions involved in the reform process and the quality of education. This paper does not propose an assessment of the measures of legislative harmonization with European standards, nor of the implementation status of various European collaborative programs in education. We bordered to analyze the perception of students, as recipients of the educational process, on the European Union and the European dimension of the Romanian education. In our view, the term "European dimension of the Romanian education" is operationalized by introducing into school curricula information about the European culture and institutions, by learning the foreign languages, by promoting intercultural education, the values of tolerance, respect and human dignity, by promoting human rights and freedom.

In statistical analyzes we used some data from the survey entitled European Dimension of the Romanian Education (EDRE), conducted at the Department of Political Science and Communication Sciences, University of Oradea. The sample included 572 students in the last year of study (17-18 years old) from 15 high schools in Bihor County. The questionnaire was self-administered by students in each class; after that, data were collected, processed and analyzed using SPSS statistical program.

A first question was referring to language skills (see Table 1). Promoting the teaching and learning of languages is a major goal of European education policy, given the multilingual character of the European Union.

**Table 1. The Knowledge of Foreign Languages**

|  | **English** | **French** | **German** | **Spanish** | **Italian** | **Other** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Do not know/ Do not mention | 1.3 | 15.5 | 77.7 | 88.2 | 92.5 | 91.7 |
| Beginner level | 19.9 | 28.0 | 15.9 | 6.2 | 5.9 | 4.0 |
| Medium level | 55.0 | 49.5 | 5.1 | 4.3 | 1.3 | 1.1 |
| Advanced level | 23.7 | 7.1 | 1.3 | 1.3 | .3 | 3.2 |
| Total | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

*Source*: EDRE Survey.

In a top of languages known by high school students, the first two positions are occupied by English (98.7%) and French (84.5%), and the knowledge is generally at a medium level (according to students' self-estimation). Far fewer respondents declared knowledge of German (about 22% mention this language), Spanish (12%) and Italian (7.5%) and knowledge is often at a basic level. Over three quarters of respondents (75.8%) report that they have acquired the current level of knowledge of foreign languages within

school hours. Given the significant role that students assign to school in language learning, it's very likely that discrepancies between proficiency in English and French on the one hand, and other languages, on the other hand, to be a consequence of the fact that curriculum includes, in most of the schools in Bihor country, only English and French courses. While regarding the language learning students assigns to school a prominent role, as concerns the computer skills, two thirds of the respondents say they have acquired the skills of computer use (text editing, browsing, etc.) rather than outside school (65.9%).

In the opinion of the young respondents, European education is done mainly within school hours 52.4% (see Figure 1). Among the European institutions who have heard most frequently during lessons, high school students mentioned the European Parliament (87.9%), the Council of Europe (54%), European Commission (51.1%). Socio-political and humanities disciplines are those which were mentioned most frequently in these institutions: Civic Culture, History, Economics, Geography and Sociology.

However, only 42.5% of those surveyed believe that in the school curriculum there are subjects that have been really helpful as concern the European education. These respondents usually have a tendency to believe that European education is done mainly in schools. On the other hand, those who believe that in the school curriculum there are no study subjects relevant for European education, are themselves moving towards other sources of information. Thus, for 23.1% of respondents the Internet is the main source of European education, along with extra-curricular activities (15.9%) and trips abroad (10.2%).

The majority of those polled say they have traveled to other European countries (53%), some of them only for tourism (26%), and others in a context related to school (trips organized by the school- 13.7% and participation in school competitions- 5%).

Whatever the reason for traveling, those who visited other European countries are more inclined to assess Romania's EU membership as positive, compared to those who have not traveled in Europe (see Table 2): 61.7% versus just 36.6%. The biggest part of the respondents who have not traveled abroad evaluate neutral Romania's membership to the EU (51.2%) compared to only a quarter of those who have traveled to other European countries. On the whole sample, almost half of the respondents (49.9%) believe that Romania's membership to the EU is a good thing, 37%- neither good nor bad, 5.2% consider it a bad thing and 7.4% said they did not know or did not answer to this question.

**Figure 1.** *Where Is Achieved Primarily the European Education?*
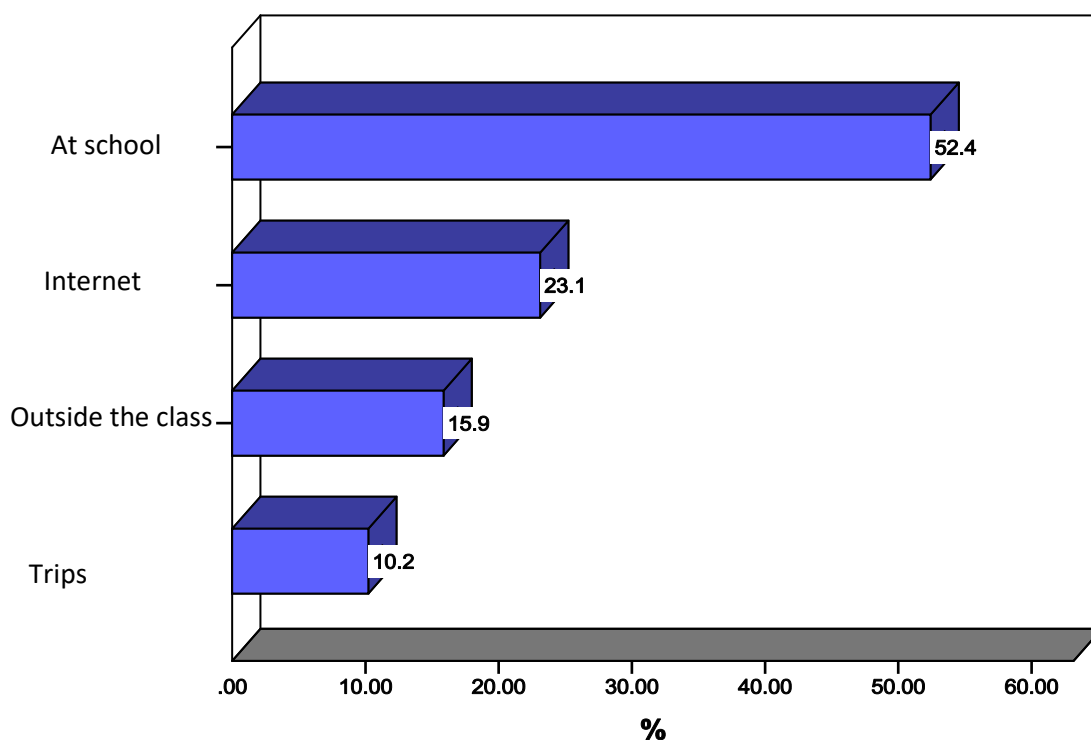


*Source*: EDRE Survey.

**Table 2.** *European Mobility and Evaluation of Romania's EU Membership*

| | | Have you traveled to other European countries? | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | *No* | *Yes* | |
| **The fact that Romania is an EU Member State is in your opinion ...** | *A good thing* | 36.6% | 61.7% | 49.9% |
| | *Neither good nor bad* | 51.2% | 25.4% | 37.5% |
| | *A bad thing* | 7.6% | 3.1% | 5.2% |
| | *Don't know* | 4.7% | 9.8% | 7.4% |
| **Total** | | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% |

*Source*: EDRE Survey.

Generally, the young people have a positive perception of the European Union. For three quarters of respondents (76%) the EU means freedom to travel, study and work in other Member States (see Figure 2). In descending order of frequency, other meanings attached to the European Union are:

prosperity (36%), democracy (33.6%), social protection (28.8%), waste of money (22.3%), criminality (16.9%), unemployment (16.7%), loss of identity (14%), bureaucracy (9.4%).

Our data do not reveal significant differences in the attributes attached to the European Union by those who have traveled and those who have not traveled to Europe or between those who believe that the subjects studied so far at school are useful for European education and those who do not consider this thing.

**Figure 2.** *Meanings of the EU for High Schools Students from Bihor County*
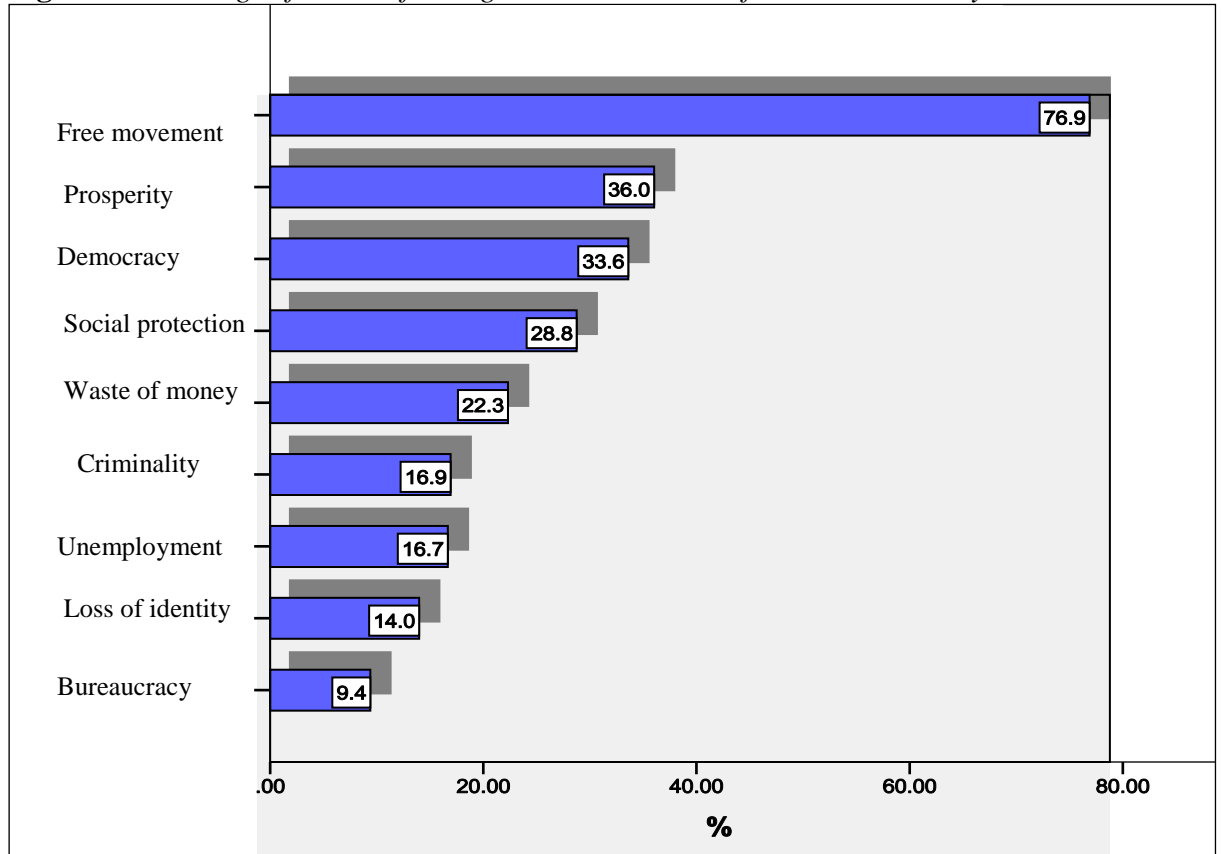


*Source*: EDRE Survey.

## Conclusions

Our research results indicate that for half of the students European education is done rather in a non-formal context (internet, trips, extra-curricular activities) and the subjects studied at class are not perceived as very helpful for the European education. Moreover, the overwhelming majority of students (89%) said that school curricula contain unnecessary topics for their professional training in general. This results lead in the direction of other research studies and suggest the need to rethink the school curricula, being that textbooks and programs are focused more on the mechanical transmission of

knowledge and learning and less on skills training, participatory learning, education of values and attitudes.

Therefore, the students assign an important role in learning about the European Union to non-formal education. As we tried to emphasize in the paper, all the activities and non-formal educational programs could enrich the knowledge of the European Union, of its regions, the role and the functioning mechanisms of the European institutions; they develop the personality of young people in line with the values that underpin European integration. These programs reinforce geographic, economic, political and cultural knowledge and facilitate the understanding of the concept of European citizenship; they create the sense of responsibility for Europe's future, for the environment, democracy, peace and human rights. Both non-formal classic education and that based on the use of digital technologies contributes to forming European awareness, leaving children to see that the group to which they belong is a link in the historical chain, giving them better understanding of this by finding past. All these activities contribute to empowering students to develop a participatory attitude, thus there are all prerequisites to translate this type of attitude into greater involvement in community issues once they become adults.

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