A ROMANIAN AND ICELANDIC LANGUAGE STUDENT'S PROFILE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP

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1.   Introduction

In a global context marked by the need to uphold democracy and human rights, education for democratic citizenship (EDC) has increasingly emerged as a prerequisite for shaping active and responsible citizens for the decades to come. The importance of EDC is strongly acknowledged by the Romanian and Icelandic educational systems and it is integrated in school syllabi at all levels of education. However, despite the wide recognition and support for EDC, challenges in its putting into practice are still persistent. Against this background and capitalizing on complementary expertise, the University of Craiova, alongside with Bifrost University and the University of Iceland, has proposed a project that aims at moving beyond the traditional approach to EDC by addressing the transversal competences that lead to it, in order to

show how they can be developed in classes which are not specifically oriented towards topics related to democratic citizenship.

The project *A Comparative and Transferable Approach to Education for Democratic Citizenship (ACTA)*, developed from September 2018 to April 2020 and financed by the Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway Grants, is underpinned by a comparative approach of EDC in two countries that are fundamentally different in terms of state of democracy and educational policies. Moreover, it holds a transdisciplinary focus, reinforcing the EDC role of all school teachers and integrating information and communication technologies (ICT) in problem-based teaching/learning for EDC. The utmost objective of the project is to design transferable educational resources for the development and assessment of transversal competences related to education for democratic citizenship (with a focus on future language teachers). Thus, this project complements previous research endeavours undertaken at the University of Craiova within international projects aiming at developing transversal skills.

A prerequisite for the transferability of educational resources is their adaptability to heterogeneous audiences and various national, identity and educational contexts. Furthermore, in the context of student-centred education, educational research is nowadays increasingly focused on how teaching practice can be tuned to the needs and expectations of students. Teaching outcomes should be effectively achieved only by duly taking into account the students' own motivations, aspirations and attitudes. Starting from this premise, the project team has designed a questionnaire to compare and analyse the standpoints of Romanian and Icelandic students in terms of education for democratic citizenship (EDC) and the competences that lead to it. The current research presents the answers provided by Romanian and Icelandic language students when asked to list up to 3 strong points and up to 3 weak points of the educational system in their country.

2. Research background

Successful and effective teaching activities take into account the students' own motivations, aspirations and attitudes, placing the student, as a key actor, at the core of the educational process. Hence, in the context of student-centred education (Weimer 2002; Machemer, Crawford 2007: 9), the educational process implies a thorough knowledge of the learner's profile (Glowa, Goodell 2016), and the educational act is nothing but an act of communication where the teacher delivers a message that should be efficiently and effectively received by the learner. Indeed, creating a learner's profile, understanding students better and getting to know their strengths and challenges help teachers and educational institutions shape a long-term vision of education.

While a significant amount of information on the Romanian and Icelandic education systems has been available historically (e.g. data provided by OECD 2010, Gallup Organization 2009), only a small number of studies have focused on comparisons between them (Brancu, Guðmundsdóttir, Gligor, Munteanu 2015; Tilea, Duţă, Reşceanu 2017). To our best knowledge, to this date there are no available results of a previous research focused on a comparative approach of Romanian and Icelandic learner profiles. Furthermore, few studies are available on the views of Romanian students regarding the educational system. Hence, our approach aims at bringing together two countries that are fundamentally different in terms of state of democracy and educational policies and practices.

Additionally, it is worth emphasizing that language education bears major relevance to EDC, as language teaching functions as a mirror of its time, reflecting the multiple facets of the world we live in. Indeed, language learning is a favourable environment for education for democratic citizenship (Starkey 2002, Kramsch 2004). Against this background, today's language students at

the university level, who will be tomorrow's language teachers, must be fully aware of their importance in shaping citizens for the decades to come.

3. Research methodology

As previously mentioned, the data used for the analysis consists of the answers provided by Romanian and Icelandic language students when asked to list up to 3 strong points and up to 3 weak points of the educational system in their country. Statistically, it includes 864 units of content provided by 144 respondents, of which 120 Romanian respondents for a total of 3400 words and 24 Icelandic respondents for a total of 977 words. The Romanian respondents were enrolled in the study programmes of the Faculty of Letters of the University of Craiova aimed at training language teachers (83 in native language teaching and 37 in foreign language teaching) and the Icelandic respondents were enrolled in distance learning master programmes at the School of Education of the University of Iceland (the questionnaire was sent out to 24 students in bilingualism and literacy, 50 students in language development and 25 students in language development and literacy). At the University of Craiova, the questionnaire was administered in class, together with a facilitator (a teacher), and the answers were subsequently digitalized and translated from Romanian into English, while at the University of Iceland it was administered by e-mail, and the answers were collected in an online platform and then translated from Icelandic into English.

The raw data obtained from the students' answers was subjected to content analysis, so as to be able to identify recurring themes and coding categories, which would subsequently be interpreted accordingly. Content analysis is generally defined as "a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005: 1278) and basically refers to "any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a

volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings" (Patton, 2002: 453). Additionally, our research will also inform on the frequency of forms by means of a quantitative approach.

In order to obtain the coding terms for content analysis, a word frequency list was used, generated with the corpus analysis tool AntConc (http://www.laurenceanthony.net/software/ antconc/), "a freeware corpus analysis toolkit for concordancing and text analysis", included in a wider suite of "educational software for use by researchers, teachers, and learners in corpus linguistics" (Laurence Anthony, 2016). The original frequency list provided by the software was subsequently refined – irrelevant words were discarded – which resulted in a final word list (Figure 1 below). The three relevant terms ranking highest in the final word list – *teaching, education, students* – were identified as the main elements of the educational process and used as coding categories for the research; the other coding terms clearly subsumed to them (Figure 2 below).

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#Word Types: 686
#Word Tokens: 4047
#Search Hits: 0

9         77        teaching
13        55        lack
14        54        education
15        51        students
18        46        teachers
20        42        pupils
21        36        charge
24        32        schools
28        29        information
29        28        school
31        25        activities
33        22        system
36        19        educational
38        17        resources
40        16        curriculum
50        13        subjects
52        12        financing
53        12        children
55        12        learning
57        12        practice
58        12        schedule
59        11        computers
62        11        knowledge
63        11        methods
67        10        technology
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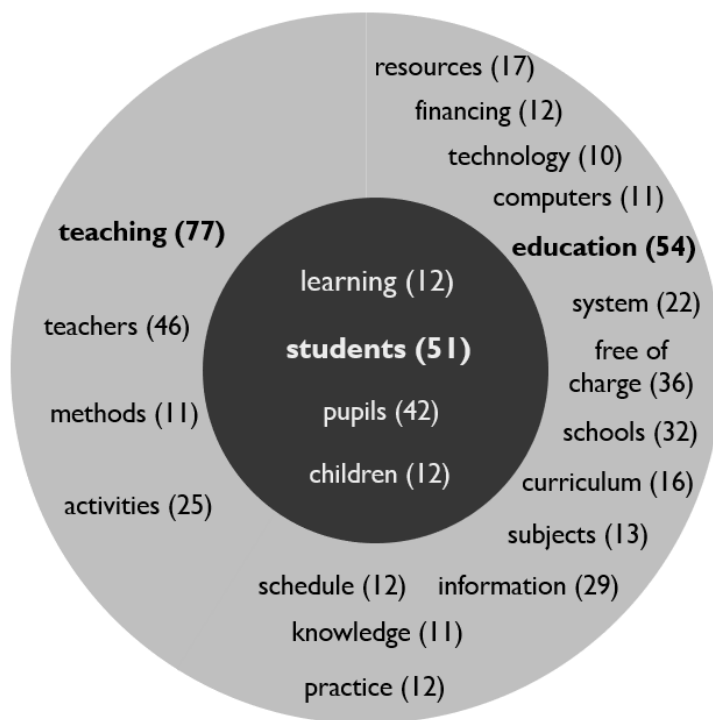
Figure 1. The final word list

Figure 2. The coding terms grouped around the coding categories

4. Analysis

The students' perception regarding teachers is heterogeneous and subjective, as shown by the wide variety of suggestions synthesized in figures 3 and 4 below. The characteristic indicated by the highest number of students (25% Icelandic students, 31% Romanian students) is the good quality of the teachers' training, which emphasizes the relevance of the teachers' proper training for students from both countries. Also, both Icelandic and Romanian students outline the importance of the teachers' communication skills. The Romanian students place emotional skills at the core of both the strengths and weaknesses of teachers, suggesting that motivation and commitment are essential in order to achieve high quality teaching in an underfinanced educational environment. The Icelandic students point out that teachers need continuous training and indicate inclusive education, that is a general aspect of education, which suggests that they are more aware of general issues and

have a proactive approach to education. On balance, the Romanian students refer mostly to issues resulting from their own contact with the educational system, whereas the Icelandic students prove to be more objective towards their teachers. This different student-teacher relationship can be explained by the survey administration settings and the structure of the target group (face-to-face vs distance learning).
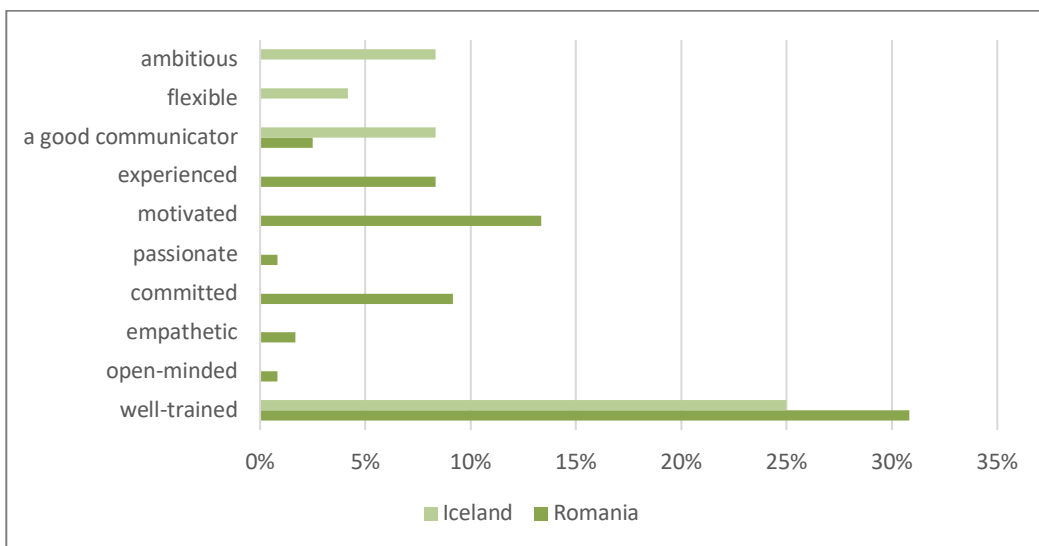

Figure 3. Positive characteristics of teachers in the opinion of the Icelandic and Romanian students
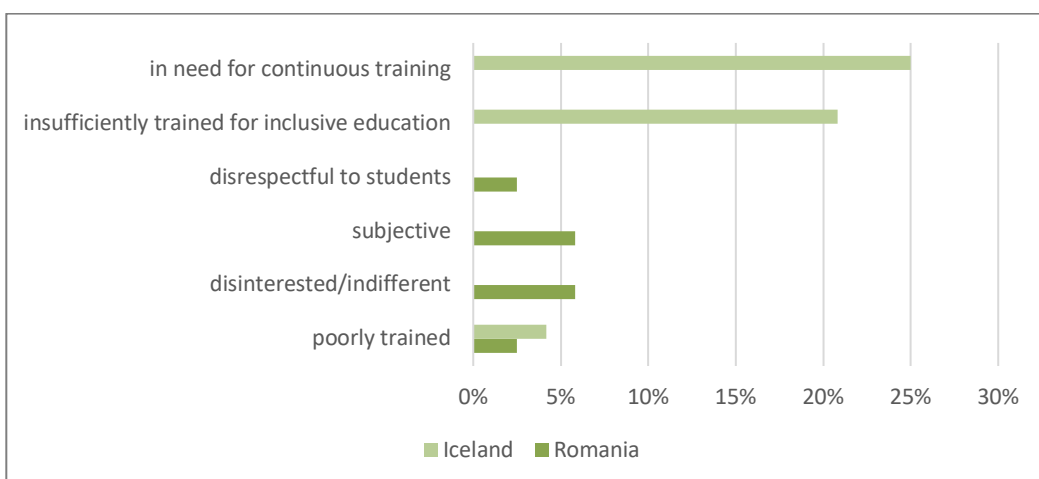
Figure 4. Negative characteristics of teachers in the opinion of the Icelandic and Romanian students

The fact that the teachers' characteristics are more important to students than the methods they use is seen in the low number of students (both Romanian and Icelandic) referring to teaching methods. The Romanian students emphasize the teachers' reluctance to change, which could be due to the insufficiency of continuous training or slow mindset change, and they qualify teaching methods as "obsolete", "rigid and non-interactive". On the other hand, the Icelandic students refer to teaching methods as "diverse" and point out the good quality teaching in vocational studies, but they still suggest more outdoor learning activities.

Neither the Romanian, nor the Icelandic respondents generally refer to students as actors in the educational process. They focus more on how they experience the educational activities and resources created by teachers and supported by the educational system. However, 10% of the Romanian respondents have listed strengths and weaknesses that directly refer to students: motivated students, good results in national and international competitions, but also low results in national assessments, lack of discipline and a low level of education.

In terms of education, four major factors stand out from the respondents' answers: curriculum and study schedule, resources, educational institutions and national policies.

Regarding the curriculum, both Romanian and Icelandic students emphasize the importance of foreign language instruction and sports, which is a relevant reflection of the mindset of today's society, focused on plurilingualism and health. Both Romanian and Icelandic students appreciate the diversity of subjects and quality of information, which suggests their awareness of the need to develop, to widen their horizons and opportunities.

Additionally, the Romanian students mention extra-curricular activities as a strong point, particularly relevant in the context of Romanian education, that focuses on knowledge rather than on practice. In terms of content, the Icelandic students are more interested in learning how to collaborate with their peers and in acquiring the level of financial literacy required by the society they live in. The Romanian students, on the other hand, complain that education is focused on hard skills (20%), it does not stimulate creativity and originality or digital skills, it does not encourage personal development, and evaluation only focuses on reproduction of knowledge, which fosters "learning by heart" (8%). Furthermore, the Romanian students consider that the study schedule lacks practical activities (15%) and that the curriculum is "bulky" (5%) and even "useless" (9%), as it focuses too much on theory to the detriment of practice. As for their schedule, the Romanian students complain about the overload of school work and 17% claim they have a "stressful", "tight" schedule. The Icelandic students make no explicit comments on the schedule, but they refer to it when suggesting "shorter school days" or "to make the school system more family-friendly, e.g. final assignments not straight after Easter holidays".

A significant number of Romanian students make direct reference to the resources allocated to the educational process, connecting the drawbacks of the system to the issue of underfinancing. Even though they point out some good aspects from this point of view, weaknesses clearly prevail, as shown in Figure 5 below. On the other hand, only 2 Icelandic students refer to resources, mentioning "good infrastructure" and the need for "more financial resources", which is, in our opinion, a sign that they take educational resources for granted and that they are satisfied with them.

The Icelandic students do not refer to educational institutions in their answers. This may be due to the administration setting and the target audience of the questionnaire – since the respondents are enrolled in distance learning

programmes, they are less likely to refer to an institution that they do not perceive in all its concrete aspects. As for the Romanian students, 10% consider that a strong point of educational institutions is their involvement in international projects (Erasmus+ or others). A low number of students mention the cooperation of schools with the families and the community as a positive aspect. Additionally, the family-school relationship is evaluated heterogeneously, some qualifying it as a strength, and others as a weakness, which may be due to the respondents' personal experiences and may not reflect their opinion on educational institutions in general.
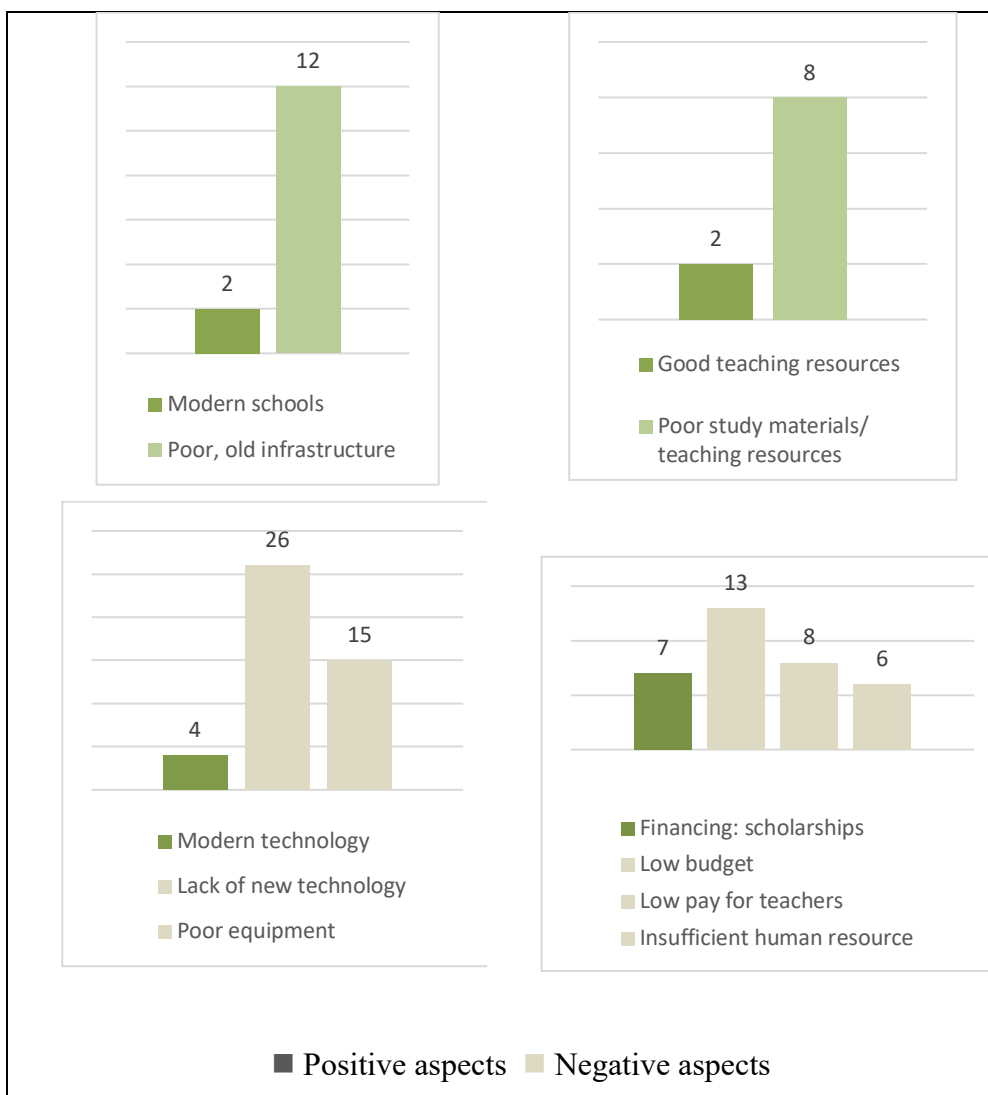
Figure 5. Opinions of the Romanian students regarding the resources allocated to education

Regarding national policies, the strengths and weaknesses pointed out by the Romanian and Icelandic students are summarized in Figure 6 below. As it can be seen, the Romanian students only reach partial consensus on two topics: free of charge education and bad management (for instance, one student provides the following comment: "Ministry of Education: educational policies not adapted to the national context"), and there is a significant divergence of opinions regarding the other strengths stemming from national policies. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that both Romanian and Icelandic students acknowledge the importance of student-centred education, despite their diverging views on the implementation of this principle in their national context: 4 Romanian students and 3 Icelandic students see it as a strength, while 5 Romanian students refer to it as a weakness and complain about the "failure to adapt to the students' needs".
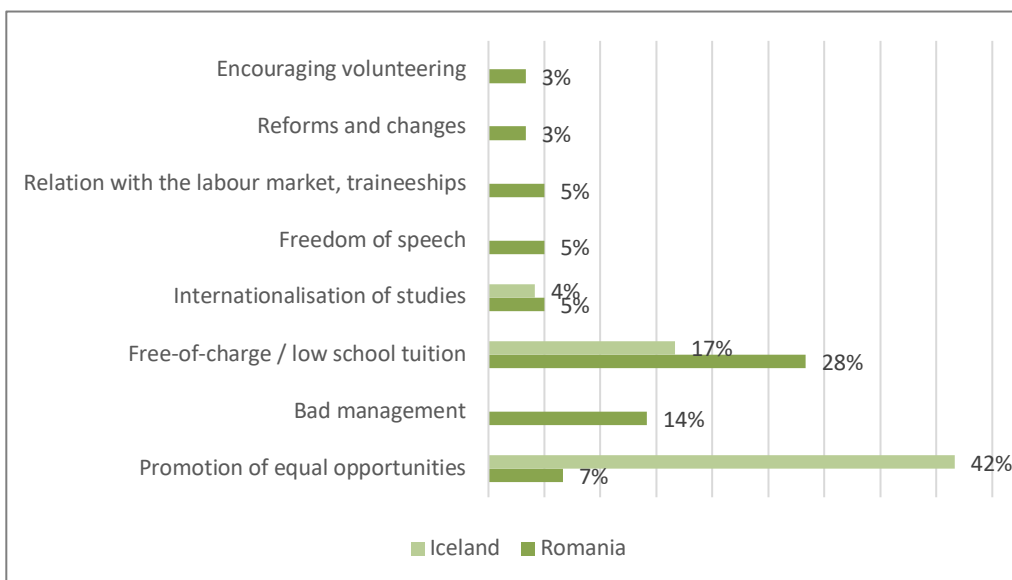

Figure 6. Aspects mentioned by the Romanian and Icelandic students regarding national policies on education

5. Conclusions

One of the aspects shown by this research is that, while the Romanian students express their discontent regarding evaluation from the point of view of both educational policies and teaching practices – they even indicate that some teachers *label* the students according to their marks, which is a prejudicial attitude in education, the Icelandic students formulate weak points of the educational system in their country as suggestions for improvement, which is a proactive, solution-oriented attitude. Moreover, the Romanian students and, to a lesser extent, also the Icelandic students emphasize the importance of the financing of education, a stringent issue that conditions the outcomes of the educational process in both countries.

Based on the answers analysed in this research, the Romanian and Icelandic learners emerge as a aware observers, able to identify decisive factors of the educational process and aware of the contemporary issues faced by the society they live in. Furthermore, they are critical and complex thinkers, able to pinpoint the weaknesses of the educational system they are enrolled in, to question an existing order and to reflect on complex situations/processes. The learners are actively engaged in their learning activities, being aware of the importance of the teachers' role in the educational process and having well defined and clear opinions about various actors and elements of the educational process. They place a major focus on the diversity of school subjects, are mostly focused on personal experiences and are aware of the importance of foreign languages or sports and of the link between education and the national context, between schools and the economic and social environment, which proves that they are aware of their own needs and interested in the world they live in.

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