A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP (EDC) COMPETENCES IN THE ICELANDIC AND ROMANIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

This comparative study has a two-fold aim. On the one hand, it provides a description of the national educational framework – legislative provisions, institutional strategies and policies – and the regional and local practices regarding the presence of Education for Democratic Citizenship (EDC) competences in the educational process. On the other hand, it brings together two educational systems that share a full commitment to European values and principles, but which are based on historically different and distant cultures. More specifically, this research starts from the presentation of EDC

in the two contexts, comparing the presence of the EDC competences in policy and strategy documents, academic curricula and syllabi of study programmes relevant for EDC, focusing on the role and importance of education as a site of learning for democratic citizenship. Overall, it capitalizes the results obtained in the joint research work carried out within the international joint project "*A Comparative and Transferable Approach to Education for Democratic Citizenship (ACTA)*", funded under the EEA Grants - Financial Mechanism 2014-2021 and implemented during September 2018-April 2020 by the University of Craiova, in partnership with the University of Iceland and Bifröst University.

Introduction

Although being a topic in the earliest discussions on forms of government and citizenship in Ancient Greece, due to the fact that democracy as we know it is a relatively recent phenomenon in human history, democracy in education has been a salient topic for just about a century. One of the initial modern texts on the subject was written by that seminal figure in Western education, John Dewey (Democracy and Education, published in 1916), arguing that in order for society to be preserved, the young have to be initiated into its workings through education (Dewey, 1916).

With the rise of populist parties and politicians on both sides of the Atlantic it is a perception in today's world that democracy, after having triumphed throughout Central and Eastern Europe at the end of the Cold War, is under threat. Surprisingly there are signs that democratic participation is on the rise (Democracy Index 2018). However, in some cases, the votes go to

parties that feed conspiracy theories, misinformation and uphold both an anti-democratic and anti-liberal rhetoric (Bergmann, 2018).

So it is in no way strange that there is a feeling in society and the media that democracy is in some way under threat. For the sake of the importance of the subject, it is prudent to look at education in order to understand how its ideas and functions are communicated to the young generation through the educational systems. A report published in 2017 on citizenship education in Europe by the European Commission mentions that in fact the relationship between citizenship education and democracy is bidirectional. So while a well-functioning democracy may depend on citizenship education to endow students and thus citizens with the necessary competences to think and act democratically, the relationship also goes the other way round. Citizenship education tends to flourish when it operates within the framework of a democracy (European Commission, 2017).

This paper discusses education for democratic citizenship in two European countries. One with an established democratic tradition, Iceland, a Nordic country with a small population, which has remained a democracy for over a century, and a country that has a more recent and, perhaps, a more fragile democracy, Romania, which during the Cold War was ruled by authoritarian communists and has been on the democratic trajectory since its revolution in 1989, joining the European Union in 2008, tackling significant challenges related to that history and political heritage.

1. The two democratic contexts

According to the above-mentioned EU Democracy Index 2018 (2019), which records how global democracy fared in 2018, Iceland ranks no 2 (falls between fellow Nordic Countries Norway in the first place and Sweden in the third) and is considered a "full democracy", while Romania falls in the category of "flawed democracies", together with all Eastern European EU

member states. The Democracy Index is based on five categories: electoral process and pluralism; civil liberties; the functioning of government; political participation; and political culture. Full democracies are those countries which in which not only basic political freedoms and civil liberties are respected, but which also tend to be underpinned by a political culture conducive to the flourishing of democracy, while flawed democracies have free and fair elections, but also significant weaknesses in other aspects of democracy. (Democracy Index 2018).

On the one hand, there is Iceland, arguably the world's oldest assembly democracy, with its oldest parliament extant, proving its stability with maximal scores in *electoral process and pluralism* and *political culture*. Its "full democracy" features include government based on majority rule and the consent of the governed; the existence of free and fair elections; the protection of minority rights; respect for basic human rights, and equality before the law, due process and political pluralism.

On the other hand, there is Romania, ranked closer to the bottom of the category of "flawed democracies", because of its weak foundation for democracy, caused by growing public frustration and political unrest, difficulties in safeguarding the rule of law, corruption, and a preference for "strongmen who bypass political institutions" (Democracy Index 2018). In fact, the moment Romania joined the European Union in 2007 represented the beginning of an important, yet hesitant and irreversible process of democratic consolidation. Romania was at that time an ex-Communist democratic country which saw its 'come back to Europe' dream come true. In this context, the recent (dramatic) political, social and economic changes (the economic crisis of 2009-2011, the Brexit and the political unrest in well-established democratic countries and the success of non-liberal political actors) led to quite worrying trends that affect the quality of democratic government. Thus, the lack of trust in the political institutions, the decreased voter turnout in the

last elections and the low join rate in political parties are all consequences of this situation. What is even worse is that these trends are more and more common within the young generation, and this happens not only in Romania, but also in Europe (if not globally).

The question we should ask ourselves now is whether or not there is a profound crisis in democracy, marked by social, economic and technological challenges, a crisis which could bring down even the most robust democratic regimes. On the one hand, experts in democracy (Ronald Inglehart, Pippa Norris, Russell J. Dalton) keep their optimism and claim that these negative aspects are a sign of civic health, of progressive improvement of the civic awareness in the sense that the citizens become more critical towards the traditional political elites and more active in expressing their discontent/dissatisfaction (Norris, 2008 among others). On the other hand, there are voices stating that this current democracy/democratic crisis is so profound, that a rapid degradation is not impossible.

As mentioned above, Romania is no exception from these negative trends. Based on recent studies and World Values Survey (WVS) reports (the 2012 report being the most recent), Romania ranked second (after Russia) among the 30 countries included in the survey where people think that their own country should be ruled by a powerful leader with disregard for elections and parliament involvement and in which the young generation consider in a lesser extent democracy as a legitimate political regime.

Therefore, a solution to amend this present situation could be found in how we educate the young generations, especially in "how ideas and functions are communicated to the young through the educational systems and whether civic and democratic values are communicated in such a way as to reinforce societies which value them and place an importance on upholding them" (Audigier, 2000: 7).

2. Democracy and education

Democracy has been defined in many ways and much has to be in place in order for it to be categorised as well functioning. In its most basic form it is – opposed to dictatorial or authoritarian regimes – a form of government, where some kind of a constitution guarantees basic civil rights, fair and free elections, and independent courts of law. To this can be added important aspects as freedom of speech, even a free press, low or no corruption and a thriving civil society. But how to educate for democracy? How can citizens be educated such that they find it in their interest to participate in elections, in public debates and discussions and in the meantime respect the right of others to express their opinions in a non-violent, non-threatening manner?

Among the causes cited in the specialised literature (i.e. economic factors, institutional organization/design, historical factors, and in a lesser extent the cultural factors, used in the mediation between the other three categories), school education represents a prerequisite for creating a political culture beneficial for democracy. It is generally considered that certain attitudes, values and competences foster the development of civic awareness and political participation, and that education in school could contribute to the development of such attitudes.

Moreover, teachers' attitudes and values towards the society and the political situation (as well as towards their own profession) have a substantial role in educating the students to embrace democracy. Methodological theories built around the development of such competences support the idea that teachers' role in the classroom should transcend the compulsory (more restricted) curriculum and make references and connections to much larger domains. The way teachers interact with students determines the social involvement and the civic behaviour of their students in the community or society they belong to (Blazar&Kraft, 2016).

In other words, the fundamental values of democracy, such as freedom of choice, equity and justice, and even democracy itself should not be referred to or interpreted merely as abstract concepts, but as processes based on practice. To ensure the participation of its citizens, a country needs to cultivate these values through education (Zulu, 2001). Thus, school is seen as an educational venue that models the fundamental values in practice.

Therefore, teachers, together with administrators, and other staff members of the educational institutions, are responsible agents to impart knowledge to the country's young citizens, to provide them with skills, tools, opportunities and safe spaces to implement what they have learned about the process of decision making, problem posing about the uneven power, inequality and injustice that exist in school systems and in a society (Dewey, 1998; Freire, 2009).

3. Education for Democratic Citizenship (EDC)

The importance that the education decision makers attached to the development of competences related to Education for Democratic Citizenship (EDC) is reflected in the place allocated to EDC within the school curriculum across the European countries. Throughout its formulation and development phases, the EDC curriculum has also been influenced by prevailing education policies and developments in teaching and learning. More specifically, a major influence has been the European Recommendation of 2006 (Council of Europe, 2006), which included social and civic competences as part of the key competences each citizen should have for building the European knowledge society.

In the above-mentioned report on citizenship education in Europe (European Commission, 2017b), it is stated that "the detailed objectives and content of citizenship education vary across Europe, but the main aim of the subject area is generally to ensure that young people become active citizens

capable of contributing to the development and well -being of the society in which they live" (European Commission, 2017b: 13). Moreover, citizenship education is commonly understood to involve "not only teaching and learning of relevant topics in the classroom, but also the practical experiences gained through activities in school and wider society that are designed to prepare students for their role as citizens" (European Commission, 2017b: 11).

Although EDC is part of national curricula in all countries and all educational systems emphasise the importance of citizenship education and the acquisition of social and civic competences, the ways in which these systems have chosen to implement the subject area at school level differs from one country to another. According to the European Commission's 2017 report, EDC is delivered in schools through three main approaches: as a stand-alone subject, as part of another subject or learning area, or as a cross-curricular dimension (European Commission, 2017b:13). Therefore, in the next two sections we will examine the status of EDC in official curricula in two European contexts, Icelandic and Romanian, with the aim to provide an overview of the different approaches used.

3.1 EDC in the Icelandic context

The main objective of education in Icelandic preschool, compulsory school and upper secondary school stated in the National Curriculum Guide is to provide their citizens with an education that encourages their active participation within the school walls, and outside in the society.

In the Icelandic National Curriculum (2014), democracy and human rights are included in one of the six fundamental pillars of competencies that are in practice in all three school levels (at all grades), starting at preschool, going on to compulsory school, then continuing in upper secondary school, as a cross-curricular theme (see Fig. 1 below).

Iceland

Cross-curricular theme	Six fundamental pillars: 'Democracy and human rights', 'equality', 'creativity', 'education for sustainable development', 'literacy in the broadest sense', and 'health and welfare'	4-7, 8-10
	Two fundamental pillars: Democracy and human rights are fundamental pillars	11-14 (general and IVET[29])
Integrated into other compulsory subjects	Social studies	4-7, 8-10
Curriculum approaches	**Themes/Subjects/Learning areas**	**Grades**

Fig. 1 *Approaches to citizenship education according to the Icelandic national curricula for primary, general secondary education and school-based IVET (grades), in 2016/17*

(Source: European Commission (2017). *Citizenship education at school in Europe – 2017. Annexes: National Information and websites.* <http://publications.europa.eu/resource/ cellar/2fbe0e26-c846-11e7-9b01-01aa75ed71a1.0001.01/DOC_1>)

The National Curriculum clearly defined and stated the process of implementation for these six competencies. They are to be evident in all school activities and in the content of school subjects and fields of study across all three school levels. The National Curriculum is based on the Preschool Act, No. 90, 12 June 2008, the Compulsory School Act, No. 91, 12 June 2008, and the Upper Secondary School Act, No. 92, 12 June 2008. The reference for these acts are, to name a few, the Act on Equal Status and Equal Rights of Women and Men, No. 10/2008, and other policies of international institutions of which Iceland is a member such as the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child, the Council of Europe policy on democracy and human rights, and UNESCO policy on general education of sustainability development. The pedagogical practices for democracy and human rights is based on critical thinking, reflection, scientific attitude and democratic values. Their learning process should be facilitated and modelled by the working methods of tolerance and equality, democratic cooperation and responsibility (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014).

The National Curriculum (2014) stipulates the role and responsibilities of teachers and also the criteria for teacher education. Therefore, institutions engaged in teacher education are responsible for providing teachers with competency in incorporating the six fundamental pillars in their teaching and developmental work (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014).

In the case of the University of Iceland, its website accounted for the four faculties in the School of Education that has the role of educating teachers, social educators, leisure professionals, sports and health scientists, and pedagogy and education studies. The courses offered in the faculties enrich students' knowledge and understanding subject related to human rights and democracy in education address issues such as multicultural education, student diversities, critical pedagogy, inclusive education, critical thinking, parent-teacher cooperation, children language proficiency and as language user, etc.

For instance, the focus of the course *Inclusive education and the irregular school and society* is on learners with disabilities. It introduces future educators to the history of (special) education, theories and perspectives from disability studies, stigma and othering, democracy and social justice. The aim of the course is to give its students a basic understanding of student diversity in classrooms and to provide them with tools to work with learners with special needs and their families in mainstream schools and society. However, disabled students represent only one of many different groups of student diversity in everyday classrooms.

Multicultural society and schools: Ideology and research, on the other hand, focuses on theories, ideology and research on issues related to refugees, immigrants and their children. The students acquire understanding about the development of multicultural societies from a historical and international perspectives, migration, the position of minority groups and refugees. It addresses attitudes, prejudice and governmental actions that infringes on

issues of human rights, equality, democracy and social justice in connection to this population.

The third course of equal importance that is available to the students is *Critical thinking and philosophical dialogue.* The course provides the students with the basic understanding of engaging in philosophical dialogue with children and adults. Its objective is to draw connections between the national curriculum of Iceland and the discussion about independent, critical thinking along with the purpose, creativity, tolerance, self-knowledge and preparation for life in a democratic society.

In conclusion, all the courses above are only to showcase course contents and objectives with the concepts of human rights and democracy explicitly in focus. However, implicitly teacher education is underpinned with the philosophical concepts of equality, human rights and democracy since it is in the law that the higher education institutions have the responsibility to prepare students for responsible participation in Iceland as a democratic society (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2015)

3.2 EDC in the Romanian context: the national curriculum and beyond

In Romania, Education for Democratic Citizenship was seen as a means of addressing the unstable political situation and the apparent lack of civic responsibility, especially considering that the transition to democracy has been strongly influenced by the nature and characteristics of the political regime existing before 1989. The literature on democracy and citizenship related to the Romanian educational system point out that its inclusion in the curriculum represented a crucial step in tackling the reminiscent social and political unrest by instilling virtues in children for the purpose of ensuring civic cohesion and a healthy national political culture in the future.

In 1997, the Council of Europe set up the Education for Democratic Citizenship (EDC) project with the aim to find out which values and skills individuals require in order to become participating citizens, how they can acquire these skills and how they can learn to pass them on to others (Audigier, 2000). Accordingly, in the same year, Romania has changed the curriculum and introduced Civic education at secondary level and adjusted all the curricula for social sciences taught at pre-university level.

Moreover, in February 1999, the Romanian Ministry of Education issued a policy and development programme on Education for Personal Values and Democratic Citizenship. This document emphasized key themes regarding the individual responsibility and understanding the political processes, as well as the need for an effective programme of in-service training in order to achieve implementation (Ministry of National Education, 1999). One year later, in 2010, the Romanian Ministry of National Education updated the curriculum again and introduced Education for Democracy at high-school level, as an optional discipline, with a 1h time slot allocated per week.

However, despite all these initiatives related to EDC, the rather fragile educational system was faced at first with various obstacles left by a long period of communist control (i.e. a lack of classroom teaching materials; teachers with little or no understanding of democracy; teachers with little or no training in appropriate pedagogical techniques; teachers ill-equipped to teach about self-government; educational administrators with no professional training and little understanding of the implications of democracy for the operation of schools a.o.). Another drawback was also the substantial and lengthy task of training the teachers in Education for Democratic Citizenship.

At present, EDC is part of the Romanian subject-based formal curriculum, either as a compulsory separate subject at primary and lower secondary levels (Civic education), or as integrated in various separate optional subjects at each level of formal training (European education and

Education for society at primary level, Intercultural education at lower secondary level) as illustrated in Fig 2 below. For example, at the upper secondary level, it is integrated in other compulsory subjects at social sciences specializations (sociology, philosophy, history), and available as a separate optional subject (citizenship education, media competence, human rights, intercultural education, education for democracy, EU Institutions, international humanitarian law), based on curricula elaborated by the Ministry of Education (Curriculum for sociology, approved by Order of the Education and Research Minister 3252/16.02.2006; Curriculum for philosophy, approved by Order of the Education and Research Minister 5959/22.12.2006; Curriculum for social studies approved by Order of the Education and Research Minister 5959/22.12.2006; Curriculum for citizenship education, (Grade 3: 2004; Grade 4: 2005; grades 7-8: 2009) [Online] Available at: <http://www.ise.ro/Departamente/Curriculum/ Programescolare.aspx>; Curricula for social and humanistic subjects at high-school level, [Online] Available at: http://www.ise.ro/Departamente/Curriculum/ Programescolare.aspx> Invăţământ Liceal>Ariacurriculară:Om şi societate> Cultura civica_clasele a VII-a - a VIII-a.pdf.).

Curriculum approaches	Themes/Subjects/Learning areas	Grades
Romania ([21])		
Cross-curricular theme	Embedded in the general objectives	10-12 (IVET)
Integrated into other compulsory subjects	Personal development	1-3
	Philosophy	13 (general)
Integrated into other optional subjects	Philosophy for children	4-5
	Humanitarian international law, education for intellectual property rights, education for development	10-13 (general)
	Sociology	12 (general)
Compulsory separate subject ([22])	Civic education	4-5
	Civic culture	8-9
Optional separate subject	Education for society	1-3
	European education	4-5
	Civic culture, moral-civic education	6
	Civic culture, education for children's rights	7
	Intercultural education	6-9
	Civic education, competence in mass media, education for democracy, human rights, intercultural education, European Union institutions	10-13 (general)
	Social studies, children's rights/child protection services	13 (general)

Fig. 2 *Approaches to citizenship education according to the Romanian national curricula for primary, general secondary education and school-based IVET, in 2016/17*

(Source: European Commission (2017b). *Citizenship education at school in Europe – 2017. Annexes: National Information and websites.* <http://publications.europa.eu/resource/ cellar/2fbe0e26-c846-11e7-9b01-01aa75ed71a1.0001.01/DOC_1>)

As mentioned in the previous section, teachers play a substantial role in educating the young to embrace democracy. On the one hand, they facilitate the development of EDC competences, and, on the other hand, they assess students in EDC. Thus, many initiatives related to an effective implementation of citizenship education in Romania have been aimed at providing adequate training and support to teachers in the form of seminaries, workshops, specialization short-term courses, informative meetings a.o.

Furthermore, recent research on EDC in the Romanian context point out to the stringent need for motivated, well trained and fully competent teachers. For example, in order to find out what teachers understand by education for democracy, a study was conducted in 2018 to evaluate how democratic values and attitudes are cultivated and understood in Romanian schools (Bădescu et al. 2018). The data presented in the study came from two sources: a survey conducted in the form of a 35-minute interview of 1427 teachers from secondary school and high-school, randomly chosen from 140 schools. The data were collected by CC SAS during 10-24 November 2017. The other set of data was obtained from a qualitative research conducted on four focus groups of teachers, two groups from the rural areas (underdeveloped village and developed village) and urban areas (underdeveloped town and developed town). The interviews were conducted in March 2018 by CC SAS (cf. Bădescu et al. 2018:3). The teachers identified several essential attributes of a good and active citizen: respect, discipline, responsibility, seriousness, honesty, tolerance, compliance with rules and laws, loyalty and perseverance. Regarding the values that can be cultivated in school: good manners, teamwork and cooperation, responsibility, tolerance and respect, perseverance, hardwork, imagination, competitiveness, independence, altruism, be economical, religion, obedience (cf. Bădescu et al. 2018:12-13).

The conclusion of this study indicated that the teachers acknowledge the contribution of the school in educating students to be good citizens, but only if there is already a strong foundation provided by the family. In this sense, family has the duty to transmit important values that prepare the children to become better citizens (Bădescu et al. 2018). Regarding teachers' self-evaluation studies on how well they consider themselves prepared to develop education for democracy and active citizenship in their subjects, more than 80% of the teachers of foreign languages, for instance, declared that they

are prepared to incorporate democratic competences in their courses or in tutoring classes (Bădescu et al. 2018).

In other words, the Romanian teachers are prepared for EDC to be incorporated in other subjects as well, and thus to become a cross-curricular objective to be delivered by all teachers (this approach is already in use in many European countries, Iceland being one of best examples). In fact, the most recent proposal for the revision of the Romanian educational system entitled *România educată. Viziune şi strategie 2018-2030 [Educated Romania. Vision and strategy 2018-2030]* (2018) is based on three pillars and twelve desiderata, the first of which is education for active citizenship (the educational system should train active citizens). This project also discusses the necessity to develop EDC competences at both pre-university and university levels. So far, at university level, EDC competences were only mentioned in institutional strategic documents (university charts), or in the syllabi of specialized courses, but not as a cross-curricular objective.

However, many recent initiatives have explored the current situation of developing transversal skills and competences at the university level, and also studied the possibility of identifying new methodologies aimed at raising awareness and mobilizing students in favour of developing such competences. For instance, a group of researchers from the University of Craiova promoted and implemented during 2014-2020 a series of international joint projects, in partnership with universities from Iceland (University of Iceland and Bifröst University), Norway (University College), Italy and France with the main objective of developing joint research and educational activities, in order to equip students with transversal skills and competences related to education for sustainable development and education for democratic citizenship (Tilea, Duta, Johanssón, Murphy, 2015; Tilea, Duta, Reșceanu, 2017; Tilea, Morin, Duță, 2019).

In conclusion, education for democratic citizenship is effectively implemented in the Romanian educational system on the whole, but we have to conclude with a reaffirmation of the problematic and dynamic nature of *citizenship* and the need for continuous theoretical and practical reflection on this subject. There is no doubt that the issue of democratic citizenship will always be a topical one, especially in a context in which the relatively recent (re)emergence of the term 'citizen' attained a global, common understanding within 'the education of living together'.

Conclusions

Overall, the challenges and limitations faced in this study were to weld together experiences, viewpoints and reflections that are lived and expressed in two different cultural and social settings, Iceland and Romania. That is why the concepts under research were seen in relation firstly with the Council of Europe's reports and other publications, and secondly with the strategies, educational policies and study programmes related to Education for Democratic Citizenship in each country.

What Iceland and Romania also have in common, besides the common European guidelines and objectives included in the formal curriculum, is the need to complement it with informal learning. Students learn about democratic citizenship by taking part at informal activities related to citizenship education outside school and promoting projects between schools and the local community. In both countries, there are many national programmes and initiatives supporting citizenship education through extra-curricular activities and participation in school governance at all level of education. For example, in Romania, starting with the 2011/12 school year, all schools provide a week's after-school activities devoted to citizenship education in partnership with the local community. The programme is called 'Other Kind of School' (*Şcoala altfel*) and is coordinated by the Ministry of Education, Research and

Youth. Other examples are the national programme *Different School – know more, be better!,* which supports a specific programme of extracurricular activities for each school and includes citizenship activities, and the *National Strategy of Community Action*, which is an extra-curricular educational programme that promotes social cohesion by connecting high schools with link organisations that work with children who have specific needs, such as schools, supported housing programmes, day centres or hospitals. In Iceland, since the new Youth Act entered into force in 2007, municipal authorities are required to promote the establishment of youth councils, whose role is, among other things, to advise municipal authorities on the affairs of young people in the community concerned.

These programmes and initiatives aim to build young people's understanding of diverse social groups and their specific needs, "broadening the life experiences of young people whose life experience is significantly different" (European Commission, 2017b: 93-94). Thus, students are given the opportunity to experience values and principles of the democratic process in action. It is a stated fact that the concept of education for democratic citizenship is an integral part of the action: they both stand in a dependent relationship to one another.

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