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## Education for Children's Rights - Prolegomena to a Modern School Curriculum

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### Abstract

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The present paper displays the results of a psycho-pedagogical study carried out in the Arges County focused on the child's rights in school. The purpose of this research was to make a survey among the teaching staff, mainly those teaching civic education, regarding the opportunity of introducing the subject *Education for children's rights* in the secondary school, the identification of some methodological aspects with a view to teaching this subject in the schools, as well as the teaching staff need to train/ develop competences for the approach of teaching the child's rights in school. The methodology of research encompasses the analysis of the curriculum documents and the questionnaire-based inquiry. The conclusions of the paper highlight important psycho-pedagogical aspects regarding the modernization of the curriculum in secondary school, the training/developing of the students' social-civic competences through means of settling the study of civic education since the primary school throughout the secondary school, the adoption of modern didactic strategies in order to assume the child's principles and rights in the school and setting of a school environment based on respect and on promoting the human rights, the participation of children in the democratic governance of the school, the involvement of children in supervising and reporting on the child's rights observance, as well as some practical aspects of the teachers' training/developing of competences for the teaching-evaluating process of the child's rights in school.

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**Keywords:** Child's rights; school curriculum; social-civic competences.



## 1. Paper rationale

The education and the democratic processes in the European schools are reinforced by regulations of the European education policy where the civic education implies political literacy, critical thinking and analytical skills, civic attitudes and values, active participation and involvement in school life and in the community in which they live. Acquiring critical thinking and analytical skills is essential for the development of the skills the citizens need to govern the society. The training / development of certain civic values, attitudes and behaviours that young people should acquire through civic education in school are clearly expressed in all European documents of educational policy. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990), the Treaty of Lisbon (2009) The Action Plan of the Commission for the implementation of Stockholm Programme (2010), The ‘Europe 2020’ Strategy (European Commission, 2010) are key documents which pay particular attention to children’s rights, so that they can benefit from better education, from the access to the services and the resources they need to grow, as well as from a solid protection of their rights. The EU Agenda for the Rights of the Child (2011) calls on the Member States to renew their commitment in order to intensify their efforts to protect and promote the children’s rights. The EU Agenda objectives for children’s rights (\*\*\*, 2011) also aim at:

- *A child friendly justice*, taking into account the children’s specific needs and vulnerability;
- *Protecting children in situations of vulnerability*, for the children who run the risk of poverty and social exclusion, children with disabilities, asylum seekers and Roma or missing children;
- *Promotion and protection of children’s rights in the context of EU external action with third countries* through bilateral and multilateral cooperation, trade instruments and humanitarian aid in particular, to combat violence against children, child labour, involvement of children in armed groups and sex tourism;
- *Raising children’s awareness through better information on their rights* so that they can participate in the decisions which affect them.

In support of the last objective, a single entry point *Europa* was created to provide children with information they can understand on EU and on their rights as well as other educational resources for teachers and parents. *The Strategy of the Council of Europe on the Child’s Rights* (2016-2021) is the newest European document (Council of Europe, 2016-2021) outlining five important priorities on children’s rights, including the education in schools on citizenship and the human rights in the agenda of the member states. In an *Eurydice* study entitled “Teaching Civic Education in Europe” (2012: 15) the need for the member states to submit “*more efforts to enhance teachers’ skills in teaching civic education*, stating that only ... *a few states reported the review of the content of the teachers’ initial education due to a reform of civic education curricula. Given the increasing level of growing awareness of the importance of implementing an approach for the whole school to support civic education, some states have recently issued specific recommendations on the role of the school principals in this process.*”

In our country, after a recent extensive public consultation attended by 10,000 teachers, 8,000 students, parents, but also representatives of the civil society (April 2016) a framework plan for secondary education has recently been approved (workable since 2017- 2018 school year), focusing on

clear objectives and on forming the 8 key- competences for a solid profile of the secondary-school graduate. An important principle underlying the current master plan is to provide the teacher with time for innovation and creativity in the classroom, accompanied by open educational resources. Thus, 75% of class time will be dedicated to the teaching-learning-assessment process and 25% remain available for remedial activities - retrieval or consolidation, according to the classroom needs. Learning and practising democratic behaviours in school, formation of civic attitudes and behaviours make children act in accordance with the social norms and values and later adopt corresponding behaviours in society (Dimitriu, 2005). Civic behaviours based on democratic values and principles are learnt and practised both in the classroom and in school and outside school. The participation in decision-making within the school board, the students' opportunity to express their views in various representative school structures are teaching ways through which children get the direct contact with various forms of the democratic practices, in order to understand the democratic mechanism. Birzea C. (2000: 50) emphasizes the mission of the educational systems "to ensure students' civic literacy by providing opportunities to acquire the knowledge, the skills and the values necessary to live in a democratic society, the socio-professional integration and the preparation for learning throughout the entire life".

It is necessary to form civic competences as part of the children's permanent social learning in order to teach them to become citizens in a democratic society. Acquiring civic skills begins in kindergarten (the experiential *Man and Society* domain) and has a fragmented evolution through the study of Civic Education only in the 3rd and the 4th grades in primary school and then in secondary school, over another two years, in the 7th and the 8th grades, respectively. Therefore, it is easy to see that there is not a continuum in the study of civic education between primary and secondary schools, therefore the principle of systematization and continuity in learning is also affected. Likewise, the theme "Children's Universal Rights" is studied only in the 4th grade. According to these findings after studying the curricula of civic education / culture in force and analysing the document of educational policy entitled "Guidelines for Designing and Updating the National Curriculum" developed by the Institute of Education Sciences (2015), publicly debated (in August-September 2015), which formed the basis of the design proposals for secondary curriculum frameworks reached the following conclusions:

- The need for training / development of pupils' civic skills by ensuring the continuity of studying civic education / culture throughout the gymnasium;
- The systematic study of the "new education" during all the years of secondary school within the new subject of *Social Education: Critical Thinking and the Child's Rights, Intercultural Tolerance and Education, Legal education and Democratic Citizenship, Economic and Financial Education and Entrepreneurship*;
- The need to increase the share of the curriculum in school decisions (CDS);
- Facilitating the integrated development of the key skills through the introduction in the framework plan of integrated optional subjects across multiple subject areas to familiarize students with inter- and cross-curricular approaches;
- Placing optionals in each curricular area and encouraging a diversified offer responding to a greater extent to the students' needs and interests. The theoretical marks served as foundation in

the initiation and implementation of a needs analysis on the appropriateness of teacher training (locally) in children's rights.

## 2. Methodology

The purpose of the research was probing perceptions of teachers who teach civic education (28) in urban areas (17) and rural areas (11) in Arges County on the appropriateness of introducing *Education for children's rights* in the gymnasium, identifying methodological issues concerning the teaching of this school subject, but also on the need for training / skills development of the staff in teaching children's rights in school. The research instruments: the analysis of the curricular documents and of the educational policies documents and the questionnaire-based inquiry. The survey was conducted from December 2015 to February 2016 and it started from the analysis of the three working versions, the online debate framework on the modernization of the secondary school curriculum by introducing the new educational subjects among which the *Education for children's rights*.

## 3. Results

When they were asked *Q1- Do you consider it is necessary to study "Education for children's rights" in secondary school?*, most respondents (26) confirmed the need to study this subject in secondary school on the following grounds:

- because children need to know and fight for their rights;
- because children should be trained as citizens from an early age knowing their rights and obligations;
- to be better informed about their rights and duties;
- to no longer produce discrimination in order not to violate the children's rights;
- to solve problems that concern them by taking attitude and having the final word.

Only 7.14% of the respondents believe that this subject studied separately is not necessary in middle school because:

- there is already a subject that deals with children's rights (Civic Education in the 7th and the 8th grades)
- a revision of Civic Education: updating the curriculum (imbuing it with the children's rights issues in the 7th and the 8th grades) and the teacher training in this area would be sufficient.

When they were asked *Q2-Which would be the appropriate status of that subject in school?*, most respondents (10) considered it should be a new optional subject, while six respondents believed that it could even be a compulsory subject in the core curriculum, and 2 respondents mentioned extra class activity of the civic circle type to debate issues related to children's rights as a work variant.

When they were asked *Q3-Who could teach this new school subject?*, the respondents (28) showed more categories of specialists who could teach *Education for children's rights*: teachers of history / civic culture, form teachers, master graduates in psychology / sociology / law / education sciences / social work, counsellors, school psychologists, any teacher who has completed training in this area.

*Q4-What number of hours would be suitable for the study of this subject in secondary school?* (89.29% respondents considered 1 hour / week for the study of this subject was sufficient, while 10.71% think that it would require a budget for 2 hours / week). Although the question *Q5- Are children's rights respected in your school?* was answered affirmatively by all the respondents, yet when they were asked *Q6 -To what extent does the children's opinion matter in your school?*, three respondents said "to a small extent" and most respondents (25) estimated that largely children's opinion is important in their school. Hence we infer that although declaratively, the surveyed teachers believe that children's rights are respected in school, however, a small percentage (7.14%) recognize that student opinion matters slightly in their school, therefore children's right to free opinion is violated.

When they were asked *Q7- How are the rights of children promoted in your school?*, the respondents mentioned the following pedagogical ways: children are involved in various cultural, social activities, in "Școala altfel" program, by means of the representatives chosen by the advisory board of the school / class in decisions that concern them, by means of the form classes, civic culture in the context of extracurricular activities, by means of interactive communication workshops, competitions, by means of inclusive education, by ensuring the right to free opinion, by choosing the optionals. As far as the examples given by the respondents to the question *Q8 – Which are the occasions / activities in which children express their opinions freely? Give some examples!* are concerned, they indicated the following times / occasions:

- Choosing the optional subjects;
- Developing classroom rules;
- Debate on the Internal Regulations of the School;
- Deciding upon the school uniform;
- Establishing and developing "Școala altfel" activities, generally within extracurricular activities;
- Setting evaluation forms in some activities / subjects;
- Self-assessment and peer assessment;
- During daily activities, any proposed action is discussed with the students in class;
- Within the form classes;
- Within the class council and student council of the school.

When asked *Do you consider the students in your school know their rights and to what extent? (Q9)*, 71.43% of the respondents believed that students were aware of their rights to a small extent, while 28.57% of the respondents felt that students were informed and know their rights greatly. When they were asked *Q10- What are the rights of children that are frequently violated by teachers in school?*, the respondents mentioned the following:

- The right to freedom of expression (including listening to the student's opinion);
- The right to leisure and recreation (including breaks);
- The right to creativity;
- The right to be represented in the Board of Directors of the school;
- The right to integrity;

- The right to be treated with respect and dignity;
- The right not to be discriminated;
- The right to be informed;
- The right to education (the study of certain school subjects).

When they were asked *Q11 - In your opinion, how should this new subject be taught?*, the respondents noted several methodological suggestions on teaching this subject in the near future: using the modern facilitating technology of educational films / case studies, to teach this subject without grading students, through open debates with the students based on theatre plays written by the students, role playing, essays, poems, using active and interactive methods, through educational projects, involving parents at times, making a specific manual created even by the students, through volunteering, based on concrete examples.

*Q14 -What suggestions do you have for better enforcement of children's rights in the school where you work?*, the respondents mentioned the following teaching ways:

- A better understanding of the children and their rights by the teachers, parents, community members;
- Organizing more complex extra-class/ extra-school activities, such as round tables, debates between students, teachers, parents;
- Determination of homework;
- Great attention to freely expressed opinions, listening to children, to their needs;
- Placing the students in as many life situations that would empower them since childhood;
- Information campaigns for all the actors involved in children's education;
- Adapting the curricula to the needs of each child according to age, residence environment etc.;
- By involving parents in the act of teaching *Education for children's rights*.

Regarding the necessity of undergoing a continuous training program focused on children's rights (*Q12*), 82.15% of the respondents considered *it is heavily necessary* for teachers to train on this level and a percentage of 17.85 mentioned they *largely* need training in this domain. At the same time, the respondents were asked to consider a proposal for a curriculum centred on the issue of children's rights education (*Q13*) and to rank (1-7) the order of importance given to the training subjects / modules. The statistical processing of the data revealed the following hierarchy of subjects in order of the importance assigned by the respondents (Table no.1):

**Table no. 1.** Training curriculum project focused on children's rights

Training subject/module	Average	Rank
1. The new educational subjects in the knowledge society	1,7500	1
2. Children's rights in specific legislation	5,2143	6
3. Europe and the children's rights	4,8214	5
4. Modern didactic strategies in the education for children's rights	2,2500	2
5. Institutions and organizations to promote and protect children's rights	3,1429	3
6. Children-promoters of their rights	4,0714	4
7. Another subject:... <i>The phenomenon of children's discrimination in school</i> <i>How to use my rights?</i>	6,7083	7

#### 4. Discussion

The continuing education curricular project model focused on children's rights and generated from carrying out an analysis of the needs is an important dimension of this research and it is up-to-date from a scientific point of view. This original curricular project underpins the launching and implementation of a new continuing education program for teachers in Arges County that are interested in children's rights education in the Romanian schools. The research has led to the identification of certain methodological issues concerning the future teaching of the subject *Education for children's rights* in secondary school and the training of the teachers' specific skills for teaching children's rights in schools. The participants in the study emphasize that the education for children's rights proves its effectiveness if supported by a school environment in which students are given the opportunity to experience the values and the principles of the democratic process in action. The school culture and the young people's participation in decisions affecting them, the democratic atmosphere and practice in school support their training in the spirit of the democratic values and principles. Beyond civic knowledge, *Education for children's rights* aims at transmitting the societal values and the students' ability to critically relate to them. Knowledge is important in the formation of civic skills, but it is more important for the young people to take a stand, to fight for their goals, to know and to respect the laws, to get involved in the community life they belong to. *Education for children's rights* is more effective if supported by an educational environment in which the students are given the opportunity to experience the values and principles of the democratic process in action.

#### 5. Conclusions

This study highlights the practical aspects of the training / development of students' social and civic skills by ensuring the continuity of the study of civic education from primary school during the gymnasium and it also stresses the need for the training / development of teachers' skills in the teaching-learning-assessing process of teaching children's rights in schools. Life school in relation to the community life should become an environment of democracy and of full participation. The teacher-student-parent dialogue still needs to be strengthened. The student council as an important forum in the democratization of the school and of the teacher-student relationships represents that system through which children can learn how to actively participate in the society, to think and implement the actions, projects they consider necessary to improve the environment in which they live and learn. *Education for children's rights* aims at the following long-term finalities:

- To educate students to know their rights and the responsibilities related to them;
- To develop students' critical thinking and training social and civic skills by encouraging and practising democratic, participative behaviour;
- To build skills of communication, cooperation and collaboration, teamwork, initiative and assuming responsibility, decision-making group;
- To respect the others' rights and to develop the competence to live with others in a multicultural democratic society;

- To learn and practise democratic behaviour based on educational situations and social-civic projects, practicing them in the classroom, school and community as a prosocial workout, to exercise democratic practices in the future;
- To develop the ability to influence change through problem, conflict solving, achieving common objectives, influencing public decisions;
- To create in schools a favourable context for the exercise by the students of their right to freedom of opinion and expression;
- To establish effective knowledge to solve the cases of violation of students' rights in schools;
- To train and develop specific skills and attitudes for the future adult life of the students in a democratic society;
- Cooperation between teachers and students to improve the work environment in schools and the relationships between students - teachers and students - students;
- Development of students' democratic participation in decisions that affect them as a permanent principle in the school practice and the integration of this moral trait in the personality profile.

In the educational activities referring to children's rights, students must be involved in an active process of learning, i.e. they use their knowledge, they analyse situations, they approach and solve problems individually and in groups at school or in extra-school activities which include projects in the community. Based on civic knowledge and skills, students practise critical reporting to social values and norms, the entire teaching activity stimulating students to manifest civic attitudes. It is important for young people to take a stand, to speak, to fight for their goals, to know and respect the laws, to get involved in the community life they belong to in order to develop civic skills.

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