

European Union Citizen - an optional discipline in Romanian primary schools, two EACEA projects

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Abstract: Since 2007, Romania is member of European Union. In this context, themes addressing specific EU educational content have increased gradually in curriculum. Sometimes, actions of this type have succeeded to attract funds from Brussels through projects won in international competitions. This paper presents two such projects won by a research team from West University of Timisoara. The applications for funding was made to the grant competition opened by the *Education Audiovisual & Culture Executive Agency*, Brussels, Belgium through *Lifelong Learning Programme, Jean Monnet Programme, Key Activity 1 – Learning EU at School*. The two projects have aimed the development of a complete curriculum package in order to implement the *European Union Citizen* as an optional discipline in Romanian primary schools. The project proposals, the implementation process and, also, the results are presented and discussed. Some examples of good practice for educational research, projects implementation and collaboration between researchers and practitioners are highlighted.

Key words: European Union, optional school disciplines, Romanian primary education, curriculum development.

1. Introduction

Since 1989, in Romanian educational system had happened many moments of reform in education (1994, 1997, 2005 and 2011). Always, *curriculum reform* has had a central role. The first two moments (1994, 1997) created the framework for a dynamic curriculum design. Thus, for the first time in Romania were highlighted concepts such as: reference framework for the national curriculum for compulsory education, curriculum area, time slot, expanded core curriculum, electives, topic curriculum etc. (Crişan 1998). These concepts have also appeared in primary education and have allowed the diversification and the increasing adaptation of curricular practices by teachers. More recently (2011), National Educational Law No. 1/2011 has led to the promotion of an integrated approach to the subjects of the curriculum. According to LEN nr.1/2011, Romanian primary education includes five steps: preparatory class, 1st grade, 2nd grade, 3rd grade and 4th grade. Children aged between 6 and 11 are included in primary school. In this methodological context, the insertion that promotes the EU content could be made using some of the following means:

- insertion into the curriculum of a specific compulsory discipline;

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- using the part of the curriculum that is open to the decision of the school in order to introduce optional disciplines that address exclusively subjects with EU content;
- insertion of compulsory topics into different mandatory disciplines which are already part of the National Curriculum;
- insertion of some optional topics related to different compulsory disciplines presented in the National Curriculum;
- an integrated trans-disciplinary approach, with some specific topics which include EU content;
- an approach where some specific topics of EU content are introduced in non-formal activities.

In this context, a single solution would be hard to identify. In a relatively recent study, Ilie and his collaborators (Ilie et al, 2012) examined the solution adopted by decision makers at the macro-educational level, but also those promoted by practitioners. The study was conducted using two methods: documentary analysis and a questionnaire-based survey. The documentary analysis examined the framework of primary education, compulsory program disciplines, the list of optional disciplines approved by the County School Inspectorate of Caraş-Severin and Timiș county, and also programmes of optional topics. The questionnaire aims to identify the approach of teachers from primary schools in choosing specific optional topics. From the analysis of central documents the following methodological frameworks were identified:

- introduction of an optional topic called *European education*;
- teachers were able to develop and implement optional disciplines on any topics of interest to the children, including specific topics about the EU;
- compulsory topics were used to cover some EU content (e.g., EU symbols, the member countries, geographical aspects, Romania's place in the EU were included in the History curriculum for class IV);
- the compulsory Geography curriculum for 4th grade was used to cover specific EU content;
- the compulsory Civics Education curriculum for 4th grade was used to cover specific EU content;
- non-formal activities were used for promoting the EU (e.g., activities on EU Day (May 9) and/or the special week of events in Romanian schools called "School in a different way").

Observing and analysing the educational practices in classrooms show that practitioners in the classroom do not value all these methodological frameworks. When the issue of EU content is considered, the most commonly used methodological framework is: the use of the compulsory subjects of History, Geography and Civics Education and, also, the promotion of the EU through non-formal activities. The other methodological frameworks appear to be less used.

Due to their compulsory character the subjects of History, Geography and Civics Education, are presented in a systematic way for which reason the students master some basic information about the EU such as EU geography, Romania as a member state, the EU flag, the EU Day etc. Non-formal activities promote the symbols of the EU through school competitions involving artistic creation. The optional discipline called *European education* is relatively unknown and due to the fact that it doesn't have a complete, developed curriculum (containing all the necessary

things needed for implementation, starting with a methodological guide and teaching tools) it is rarely implemented. The hours of the learning curriculum framework that can be used for optional disciplines or to enhance and extend the compulsory disciplines are perceived as being useful. However, they are not commonly used for the introduction of optional subjects. Instead teachers prefer to use this time to improve the topics from the compulsory disciplines or for introducing other topics within these disciplines. Although a number of optional subjects are introduced at the request of parents, students, or because appropriate teaching resources are available, these optional subjects rarely specifically address content linked with the EU. In the situation where the documents and necessary teaching resources needed for introducing and implementing new optional disciplines are not available it is difficult to include the new disciplines in the curriculum. If the teacher has to plan and provide everything, it is not so easy. This is confirmed by previous research that exposes the difficulty teachers have working with pedagogical concepts (Fuller 1969; Haysom and Sutton 1974; Stenhouse 1975). This could also explain the low number of new optional disciplines introduced to the curriculum by primary school teachers in the Romanian Education system.

So, it can be seen that there is a need for primary school teachers to receive support in developing and implementing new optional disciplines. This should be included in the extremely complex range of teacher training (Wang et al, 2010). In light of this, three years ago, (2011) a complex programme of research was initiated to develop documents, teaching tools, and also teacher training dedicated to the inclusion of specific EU content in Romanian primary schools. This programme is generically called *The EU Citizen*. In the following pages the project proposals, the implementation process and, also, the results are presented and discussed. Some examples of good practice for educational research, projects implementation and collaboration between researchers and practitioners are highlighted.

2. The EU Citizen, the two EACEA projects

As previously shown, the National curriculum framework for primary schools in the Romanian Education System allows for the inclusion of optional disciplines through which specific topics about the EU can be covered. In addition, it was stated that this opportunity to teach about the EU is not sufficiently exploited due to the difficulties encountered by teachers in developing appropriate courses. In this context, in the summer of 2011, an interdisciplinary team from the West University of Timisoara in collaboration with primary education inspectors from the County Schools Inspectorates of the counties of Timiș and Caraș-Severin, put together a project named *Let's train the little EU citizen!*. This project was aimed to help teachers to be able to deliver EU content as part of the curriculum. An application for funding was made to the grant competition opened by the *Education Audiovisual & Culture Executive Agency*, Brussels, Belgium through *Lifelong Learning Programme – Call for Proposals EACEA/18/2011. Jean Monnet Programme, Key Activity 1 – Learning EU at School*. After evaluation, the application was included in the 47 applications from 8 countries which were given finance. So, in the period March 2012-January 2013, the project *Let's train the little EU citizen!* (cod 357417-LLP-2011-RO-AJM-ICS) was implemented.

The aim of this project was *to develop a complete curriculum package for implementing the discipline The EU Citizen in Romanian primary schools*. Objectives of the project were the following:

Objective I: to implement a educational research in order to develop a curricular package for the *EU Citizen* optional discipline.

Objective II: to develop a curricular package for EU Citizen optional discipline.

Objective III: to disseminate the results of the project in order to implement the *EU Citizen* optional discipline in Romanian primary school.

Activities of the project were the following:

1. The first training of primary school teachers
2. The second training session of primary school teachers
3. Demonstration lessons and their analysis
4. Focus group on the improvement regarding the curriculum system of discipline
5. Developing teaching materials for the curricular discipline system of the EU Citizen
6. National conference for dissemination of the results.

In the summer of 2013, following the results of the project *Let's train the little EU citizen!* and the conclusions drawn, an interdisciplinary team from the West University of Timisoara suggested applying for funding for a further project. The proposal was to develop a set of instructional strategies based on empirical evidence that would lead to the production of a complete curriculum package. This would then be offered to teachers for delivering the optional course *The EU citizen*. Once completed the application, was submitted to the grant competition opened by the *Education, Audiovisual & Culture Executive Agency*, Brussels, Belgium through *Lifelong Learning Programme – Call for Proposals EACEA/18/2011. Jean Monnet Programme, Key Activity 1 – Learning EU at School*. After the evaluation, the application was included in the 37 projects from 15 countries that received financing (only three from Romania). The success in obtaining this financing resulted in the implementation of the project *EU Citizen: instructional strategies for teaching in primary school, evidence based* (cod 542773-LLP-1-2013-1-RO-AJM-ICS) in the period September 2013 – August 2014.

The aim of the project was to *increase the visibility of the EU in Romanian primary schools by developing an instructional strategy package for teaching about the EU in primary schools and by offering a specific training programme to primary school teachers*. This aim was implemented by the following six objectives and six associated activities. Objectives of the project:

Objective I: to select 36 instructional objectives relevant for EU topics.

Objective II: to develop 72 instructional strategies considering classroom evidence based.

Objective III: to edit a set of 20 teaching materials, whose didactic effectiveness is sustained by evidence based provided by empirical research.

Objective IV: to edit a handbook including research findings, instructional strategies developed on evidence based and examples of lesson plans relevant for EU topics (in Romanian and English).

Objective V: to publish a scientific paper in a journal with high impact factor.

Objective VI: to train 600 primary school teachers for teaching EU topics by using instructional strategies elaborated on evidence based foundation.

Activities of the project:

1. Research for selecting instructional objectives.
2. Developing interactive strategies for selected instructional objectives.
3. Didactic experiment; test the instructional strategies in the classroom.
4. Developing teaching materials.
5. Training seminars for primary school teachers.
6. International conference for dissemination.

3. European Union Citizen - an optional discipline in Romanian primary schools

A complete curriculum package for *EU Citizen* optional discipline was developed through the implementation of the two projects. The discipline developed has an optional character and is proposed for grades III and IV, pursuing three framework objectives: first, knowledge and use of concepts and information in the field of EU; second, European values assimilation and pro-European attitude education and third, the sense of belonging to the EU. The optional proposed is developed in a complementary manner from the existing *Civic Education* programs for grades III and IV, as well as those of *History* and *Geography* in effect for grade IV. The curriculum content of the discipline includes the following units of learning.

- What's the EU?
- How does it work?
- Symbols of the EU
- EU countries
- Traveler through the EU
- European literature for children.

The curriculum program provides 34 hours/school year, with the following distribution, similar to the two-year study: 1 hour / week; 22 hours - teaching - learning; 3 hours - activities the teacher's decision; 9 hours - activities evaluation. The educational strategies and proposed assessment are focused on student work and teaching game. In order to facilitate the process of implementing the following aspects were developed: handbook for teacher support; package of teaching materials and training sessions for primary school teachers. In the paragraphs below these aspects are presented.

Four books were elaborated and disseminated to primary teachers and also to university teachers. University teachers that received these books were teachers interest in teacher education or, at least, in the educational field in

general. First book (Ilie et al. 2013a) is dedicated to primary teachers who teach to 3rd grade and 4th grade. The book is structured in the six learning units presented above. For each of these learning units, the following elements are developed: title page, themes and objectives, educational content, remember section, learn new words, check your knowledge. The second study is a handbook (Ilie et al. 2013b) dedicated to instructional and methodological aspects. The handbook has the following sections for each of the six learning units of the *EU Citizen* discipline: technical box, course syllabus, scheduled planning and instructional suggestions. The instructional suggestion sections present the following elements: motivation for the learning unit, goals and competences, instructional content, operational objectives, methodological suggestions and assessment aspects. The last handbook has two versions, one in Romanian with 243pp (Ilie et al. 2014a) and one in English with 189pp (Ilie et al. 2014b). Handbook includes instructional strategies regarding the teaching of EU issues at primary school level. This deliverable presents the research activity and the wider context of our programme entitled 'Citizens of the EU'. It was divided into several parts: presenting the instructional strategies hereby elaborated, presenting the most efficient teaching plans resulted from their implementation. It is a very important tool and outcome since its showing among others the strategy to be adopted for kids to reach an ownership level over the class, whose efficiency is supported by field (empirical) proof as well as the best-case-scenario class deriving from the practical testing of the approach.

At the same time with the handbook several packages of teaching materials were developed. The first curricular materials package includes the following materials.

- CD with educational support.
- EU map outline countries: edited color, magnetic, A0 format.
- EU map - accession stages with country name inserted: edited color, A0 format.
- Worksheets: non-color, B5 format, 99 pages;
- Magnetic Chips - 1 pack: EU chips - 27 chips, printed color, the size of each country as magnetic map; EU flag pack and the flags of the member countries: edited color, magnetic, size 9x 5 cm - 28 chips; Pack all euro symbols: edit color, size 9 x 5 cm, magnetic, 15 chips; Pack all abbreviations EU countries and the EU: - each package published non-color, magnetic, 28 chips; Chips sights: edit color, size card, magnetic, 18 chips; Chips with each EU country's capital: edit color, magnetic, 27 chips; Chips with EU Institutions picture: edit color, magnetic, 2 chips.

The second set of teaching materials was distributed to all the teachers and at the final conference. This package includes the following elements: teaching cube for interactive games (colour, 10 cm side); cardboard smiley figurines for 'hand up' technique (colour, 70cm x 50cm), EU puzzle (A3, colour, cardboard); EU countries info decoration (A4, colour); Learn about the EU' game of following pieces: i) EU map (colour, cardboard, 70 cm x 50 cm, 4 pieces), ii) cardboard chip with EU flag and member state flags (colour, 4x4.5 cm, 29 pieces), iii) cardboard chip with EU capitals (colour, 4x4.5 cm, 56 pieces), iv) cardboard chip with major EU towns (colour, 4x4.5 cm, 56 pieces), v) cardboard chip with greetings in all the EU official languages (colour, 4x4.5 cm, 28 pieces), vi) cardboard chip with

main EU tourist attractions (colour, 4x4.5 cm, 56 pieces), vii) cardboard chip with EU and EU member states name abbreviations (colour, 4x4.5 cm, 29 pieces), viii) cardboard chip with emblematic pictures from all over the EU (colour, 4x4.5 cm, 28 pieces).

Complementary to the materials presented above a DVD was developed and distributed to the participants. This DVD includes instructional materials and editable tools including: i) those tools previously elaborated during the projects *Let's train the little EU citizen!*, ii) those tools hereby created (mp3, pdf., ppt.) with working charts, evaluation tests, various instructions tools and content pps presentations, iii) folder with complete materials for a trial-lesson within the 'Citizen of the EU' school programme: lesson structure, pps presentation, synthesis fiche for the lesson, other pdf. tools and the evaluation test for the lesson; iv) evaluation test of the 'Citizen of the EU' school programme with 30 questions, lasting 50 min (in pdf.).

Between July and August 2014, we have organized 5 training sessions for primary school teachers in five counties (Timis, Caras-Severin, Mehedinți, Hunedoara and Gorj). The attendance was as if follows: Timis county (venue: Timisoara, 125 people), Caraș-Severin county (venue: Resita, 105 people), Mehedinți county (venue: Drobeta-Turnu Severin, 150 people), Hunedoara county (venue: Deva, 164 people) and Gorj county (venue: Târgu Jiu, 38 people). After, 10 months to the finalization of the projects, at the request of the Association of primary school teacher from Banat was developed a new session. At this session, 70 primary school teachers participated. The point of these trainings was to present the project, its objectives, the research and its results but mainly the material and the outcome of the research (the instructional strategies). We disseminated the material and tools prepared through this project and showed them how to use them in school.

As a follow up, in the academic year 2013/2014, the principal investigator of the research team discussed with some of the primary teaches that received the materials. Through these discussions is aimed to observe the utility of the teaching materials distributed. The results showed that the materials were used as follows. First, the complete usage of the curriculum package through the implementation of the European Union Citizen optional discipline, especially to the 4th grade. Second, a selective usage of different teaching materials in teaching to History, Geography and/or Civics Education. Among teaching materials developed, map and chips magnetic proved to be materials with a great impact on primary school children. These materials have used in both in formal activities and non-organized, but, also, by students in games spontaneous during school breaks.

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