

*Democratic Citizenship in the Formal Civic Education in Albania:
Assessment of Curriculum and Teaching of Democratic Citizenship in
Pre-University Education*

Suela Kusi Drita, Council of Europe Office in Tirana, Albania
Zyhrada Kongoli, Kongoli Legal Firm, Albania

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Abstract

The education system in Albania has undergone a series of reforms intended to modernize the curriculum, develop the wider system capacities, expand access to compulsory education, and align its education policies and practice with European and international standards, in particular the European Union's Education Benchmarks for 2020 and UN SDG4-Education 2030. In this context Albania is experiencing a renewed engagement in democratic citizenship education and promoting democratic school governance. The situation of civic education in the pre-university education system has improved. However, there is still work to be done, in particular, in terms of increasing the importance and space devoted to EDC/HRE, improving the quality of textbooks, teacher training, and strengthening the role and cooperation of all actors. The transition to competence-based curricula marked a positive change, but in order to duly implement it, teachers must become creative and teach interactively to enable students to contextualize information, knowledge and values as individuals and as part of the community. In the process of implementing this curriculum in school, teachers generally rely on books, without trying to use materials that make the teaching process as attractive as possible. Also, the importance given to EDC/HRE by schools, teachers and parents, as well as the space that the relevant subjects have in the education program are not enough. Most of the conclusions of this analysis can be addressed through continuous teacher training, which brings rapid results in filling gaps in learning objectives.

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Introduction

The future of our society is very much related to the education provided to children and to what they learn at school on human rights and the rule of law, their rights and responsibilities, participation and affiliation, respect for diversity, etc. Therefore, the continuous improvement of the educational content and in particular of democratic citizenship-related subjects contributes to equipping pupils and learners with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values of competent citizens.

This analysis attempts to identify how the set of practices and activities constituting education for democratic citizenship (EDC) have been reflected in the Albanian formal education system by reviewing the citizenship education-related curriculum and learning objectives of selected subjects dealing with citizenship education in grades 1 to 12 and their alignment with CoE standards and practices, including the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education (HRE), the Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec (2007) on gender mainstreaming in education and Reference Framework of Competences of Democratic Culture.

The alignment of democratic citizenship education in Albania with CoE standards contributes not only to the Albanian society as a whole but also to pursuing the goal of the CoE towards greater unity among its member through actions in the cultural and education field.

Methodology

The purpose of the research was to assess the level of democratic citizenship in formal civic education by reviewing the curriculum and learning objectives of subjects dealing with civic education in formal education in Albania.

The research methodology aimed to respond to the following research questions:

- Does the level of democratic citizenship education in Albania comply with CoE standards and practices?
Activities:
 - ✓ Review the curriculum, textbooks and learning objectives of the selected subjects dealing with citizenship education in grades 1 to 12. The curricula and learning objectives of the subjects of Citizenship, Philosophy and Sociology were assessed in terms of their alignment with CoE standards and practices.
 - ✓ Appraise textbooks' content, language and illustrations from a gender perspective due to the great importance of gender mainstreaming and non-stereotyped inclusive education.

- What are the gaps and how can they be addressed to ensure further alignment with CoE standards and practices? What are the opportunities and challenges?
Activities:
 - ✓ Identify the non-compliant aspects and the challenges in improving the situation.
 - ✓ Recommend the most feasible interventions to ensure further compliance with CoE standards and practices.

The research methodology used mixed methods involving desk-based research and interviews with key stakeholders. The desk research consisted of a review of previous studies, reference

documents and textbooks for the subjects of Citizenship taught in grades 1-10, Philosophy taught in the 11th grade and Sociology taught in the 12th grade. Studying the CoE documents served to draw the standards and practices towards which the curriculum review and learning objectives have been assessed. Content analysis methods were used for a deeper understanding of learning objectives, curricula structure, aims, content and epistemology.

The communication, consultation, and exchange with stakeholders involved different actors including officials at the Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth, the Agency for Quality Assurance for Pre-university Education, EDC-related subject teachers and authors of texts of “Citizenship” subjects as well as parents and pupils of primary and secondary education. 35 interviews were conducted with education experts, authors of textbooks and parents through mixed methods of communication. Parents were reached through questionnaires.

Results and discussion

Pursuant to the CoE Charter on EDC and HRE, the development of local policies, legislation but also their implementation to practice should be guided by the concepts and objectives provided in the Charter.

Overall, the situation of EDC/HRE has improved. However, there is a lot to be done especially as regards giving more importance and more space to EDC/HRE, improving the quality of textbooks of EDC/HRE-related subjects, training of teachers as well as increase of all involved stakeholders’ role and collaboration. The planned hours (35 hours per academic year) are not sufficient considering the load of the programme and learning objectives.

Switch to competence-based curriculum marked a positive change. However, this new curriculum requires creative teachers to organize the teaching and learning process in an interactive way and to integrate as many teaching topics of different subjects as possible, especially in primary education classes. Teachers should encourage more the teamwork or role play but also extracurricular activities to create opportunities for learners to contextualise the acquired information, knowledge, values and attitudes as individuals and as part of community.

The research finds that there are several issues concerning teachers’ performance and role in teaching EDC/HRE and conveying the right concepts to learners in an accurate way. In addition, the importance given to EDC/HRE by school, teachers and parents but also the space that related subjects have in the education programme are not sufficient. It is imperative for the education system and its actors to give more importance and space to EDC/HRE to ensure learners are better trained for life as well as better informed and competent adults.

The syllabuses and textbooks for the subject of “Citizenship” but also of subjects of “Albanian language”, “History” and “Sociology” aim to convey to learners the EDC/HRE concepts to equip them with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values of competent citizens. Yet, a slightly indifferent attitude of teachers in relation to the program of these subjects is noticeable. In the development and implementation process of this curriculum in school, teachers mostly rely on the textbooks without asking for more, either by integrating the teaching topics of other subjects or by using different teaching materials to make the learning process as attractive as possible.

The vast majority of findings of this research can be addressed through continuous teachers training. Teachers' training brings rapid results on filling the gaps in the learning objectives and addresses simultaneously the majority of the identified problems.

A need and training assessment of the teachers of subjects of "Citizenship" is a matter of high priority to identify interventions that address the improvement of teaching and learning practices but also that bring quick positive results in the situation of education for democratic citizenship at schools. The six CoE "Living Democracy" manuals, which are tested by educators and are flexible enough to train teachers to introduce citizenship and human rights education into their classes in interactive, fun but also challenging way, may serve as a very good basis for the development of training curricula and training of trainers.

Conclusions

The research which involved a wide range of actors, helped to draw the following conclusions:

- ✓ The changes to the curriculum mark progress and are in line with policy of the CoE.
- ✓ There are some factors that hinder the adequate curriculum implementation.
- ✓ Teachers require a lot of training to adopt adequate teaching and learning techniques and improving effective assessment methods.
- ✓ Textbooks contain concepts that are difficult for age and do not promote problem-solving ability and critical thinking among children, let alone the interactive and inclusive learning away from prejudices and discriminatory approaches.

Recommendations

Teachers need to be better supported to implement the new competence-based curriculum. This support should be given in terms of training, infrastructure and institutional support. Textbook tasks and questions should be given as homework or class-work and engage learners in independent research activities, gathering of facts, draw of conclusions based on facts and making interpretations based on drawn conclusions. It encourages analytical and critical thinking once learners discover causal links of social phenomena or other interesting facts and situations. It is recommended that the text should remain the main source of the learning process as the quality of teachers of different levels, which does not guarantee the same learning service for all learners. Therefore, the quality of the textbook remains paramount.

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Contact email: suela.kusi@coe.int
zyhrada@kongolifirm.al