



Special Report | June - July 2022

Citizens of tomorrow: education's role in strengthening EU democracy

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Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
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Citizens of tomorrow: education's role in strengthening EU democracy

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Teaching citizenship values can help promote active participation among Europeans, but it still often relies on the initiative and motivation of individual teachers. Meanwhile, education remains fragmented across the EU, with each member state implementing their own policies.

Changes to competence in this field remain unlikely for the time being, despite citizens and decision-makers increasingly calling for a more harmonised European approach and more EU support for citizenship educators.

Meanwhile, recent crises have pushed schools to quickly adapt to new learning environments. The influx of Ukrainian refugees in EU countries has shown the need for a cross-border approach to face educational challenges, while the COVID-19 pandemic has definitively pushed teachers and classrooms toward the digital sphere.

In this special report, we look at the role of teachers and educators in making young Europeans active citizens, the challenges they currently face in their work and the role the EU could play in supporting them.

Contents

Digital education key to develop responsible citizenship, experts say	4
Empathy, solidarity should guide Ukrainian refugees' education, experts say	6
Citizenship education needs 'democratic schools', stakeholders say	8
Education Commissioner: teaching citizenship values a 'common political responsibility'	10
Citizens, MEPs call for harmonised citizenship education across the bloc	12



Digital education key to develop responsible citizenship, experts say

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By Silvia Ellena | euractiv.com

Languages: [Deutsch](#)



Digital education plays a key role to develop active and responsible citizenship, according to experts. [Shutterstock/Tyler Olson]

Teaching students how to use digital tools and behave online is crucial to making them active, responsible citizens, according to experts who warned of the risks of the digital divide.

As digitalisation grows in the education sphere, teachers are increasingly facing the task to help

young people develop knowledge, skills and values as future citizens both offline and online.

“I think most people would agree that it’s important for children growing up in a digital society that we don’t only give them access, but we also equip them with critical thinking skills, and we make sure that they can

become active, responsible citizens,” said Hans Martens, head of digital citizenship at European Schoolnet.

“This digital transformation is creating a lot of opportunities, but there’s also some needs and risks associated and we need to make sure that everyone can benefit from the digital in a positive way,” he added.

While the digital transformation has amplified problems such as fake news, disinformation and hate speech, there are also positives, such as “creative opportunities for children and young people to become active, to share their views, to become even politically active.”

However, Martens said, “these topics are not being picked up in the curriculum” and teachers don't always feel “comfortable” teaching them or using digital tools in the classroom.

Digital divide

According to pre-pandemic [data](#), in many EU countries, the share of teachers who allowed students to use ICT tools for school projects was less than 50%. Meanwhile, only a minority of primary and secondary teachers used ICT tools for their classes, partly because of their lack of digital skills.

According to Luigi Piccini, a professor at Cusano University, it is essential that teachers remain at least “neutral” on the role

of digital tools while educating their students. “If I see a teacher reluctant to use technology, it is likely I will become the same,” he said.

At the same time, digital education has become essential in school curricula. “We need to consider digital as an integral part of our life, like water or electricity,” he said, adding that “people need to go out of their comfort zone.”

Educating the educators

Piccini and his colleague Anna Maria Mariani [studied](#) the attitudes of teachers towards digital learning and conducted training to try to “lower their resistance,” while also soliciting critical thinking and promoting experimentation.

Other organisations, like European Schoolnet, are also trying to provide [guidance](#) to teachers, parents and children on the use of online tools.

Meanwhile, the EU is working on improving teacher training and enlarging the educators' skill set through Erasmus+ Teacher

Academies, European partnerships of teacher education and training providers.

“Through the Teacher Academies, we are looking at a new generation of teachers in the making,” Commissioner for Education and Culture Mariya Gabriel told EURACTIV.

“We want them to have the confidence and competences to use technology effectively and creatively to engage and motivate their learners,” she added.

However, it is also important to include the perspective of children and young people, Martens said.

“Even if we are experts on the topic, we are not experts of their personal lives and their personal experiences,” he said, adding that “they know better than us” and it is important to listen to them.

“Then it's not just education which needs to come up with the answers, but education can definitely help to empower and to get the best out of people.”



Empathy, solidarity should guide Ukrainian refugees’ education, experts say

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By Silvia Ellena | euractiv.com



“Currently, they do outstanding work as they integrated refugee children from Ukraine in their classes,” said Commissioner for Education and Culture Mariya Gabriel, adding that these children “most of the time don’t speak the teaching language and are unfortunately often traumatised.” [Shutterstock/Michele Ursi]

While teachers welcome Ukrainian refugee students into schools across the bloc, many are faced with the challenge of language barriers. Academics have called for empathy and solidarity to guide their integration into EU society.

With more than [5 million](#)

[Ukrainian refugees](#) – mostly women and children – across Europe, many European schools and teachers have opened their doors and classrooms to Ukrainian children.

“Currently, they do outstanding work as they integrated refugee children from Ukraine in their classes,” said Commissioner for

Education and Culture Mariya Gabriel, adding that these children “most of the time don’t speak the teaching language and are unfortunately often traumatised.”

To overcome the language barrier, the EU has provided [online educational resources](#) in Ukrainian through the EU’s School Education

Gateway.

However, communication remains one of the biggest issues for teachers welcoming Ukrainian students.

According to a [study](#) on over 6,000 Slovak teachers by the Comenius Institute, 85% of respondents said the language barrier represents the biggest challenge and 67% said they would welcome language support in education.

Moreover, 30% of teachers also said they face a lack of interest on the part of Ukrainian students in learning Slovak.

In Germany, Ukrainian-language lessons are available in just 1% of schools that have welcomed Ukrainian refugees, according to the [German School Barometer Special](#), while only between 7 and 9% use Ukrainian-speaking staff as interpreters, translators or teachers.

Empathy

"I think language is also an issue to allow children to talk about their personal experiences and to tell

about what they have lived," said Sara Amadasi, a researcher at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, who worked on a Horizon 2020 project called [CHILD-UP](#) which focused on children with a migratory background.

Yet, she said it is also important to "create spaces for people to interact and to know each other."

"Empathy is something that we can show even beyond language. Especially between children, if they are given the time to find the way to communicate and to interact, I think they will manage to communicate, to play together, to share things," she said.

According to Christoph Wolf, researcher at the University of Hannover, many Ukrainian students are traumatised because of the conflict. "Social work should be available for these children and their families" to provide them with "safe spaces," Wolf said.

Solidarity

In Wolf's view, actions to support refugees fleeing Ukraine should also be guided by solidarity.

"A part of solidarity is to provide the children and the families with the different things they need, to treat them like they are part of the society, and not to treat them like strangers or guests who have to go back soon," he explained.

While they should be given the chance to go back if conditions allow, Wolf said Europeans need to make them feel at home as much as possible.

"They need to feel welcome and they should be able to develop a perspective in the country they are in right now," Wolf said.



Citizenship education needs ‘democratic schools’, stakeholders say



By Silvia Ellena | euractiv.com



Citizenship education needs democratically structured schools in order to make young people active citizens, according to experts. [Shutterstock/Anna Nahabed]

While a common curriculum could help harmonise citizenship education across the bloc, transforming young people into active citizens requires “democratically structured schools”, stakeholders said, warning not to put the responsibility solely on teachers.

“We have common values, and we share them, but there’s no

harmonisation on teaching them,” Patrick Tardy, high school teacher at Lycée des Métiers Roland Garros in Toulouse, told EURACTIV.

Tardy proposed a standard European curriculum on EU democratic values to solve the discrepancy in citizenship education across the bloc.

“Teaching a curriculum enlarged to the 27 member states would be a good idea because it would allow students across borders to work together on common projects, such as a twinning project.”

In his view, a standard curriculum across the bloc could also help boost civic education, which too often depends on the teacher’s

engagement and motivation.

To support teachers' work, Victor Negrescu, co-chair of the CULT committee, proposed developing "common resources that should be made available for teachers across Europe."

Sharing responsibility

However, teachers often face time constraints, with only a few salaried hours to dedicate to citizenship education.

To complement their work, Stefan Zotti from the Commission's Directorate-General for Education called for a "broader understanding of learning and teaching", pointing to other realities where learning takes place, such as youth organisations and EU programmes like the European Solidarity Corps.

"We think it would be overloading a bit the responsibility of teachers to say, in the one hour you have per week on civic education in an ideal world. You also need to make everybody a good, liberal, open, tolerant, democrat, etc.," Zotti said.

A life-learning approach to citizenship education also emerged from the final recommendations following the Conference on the Future of Europe, where citizens called for increased teaching on

EU values and European history in schools and at work.

Moreover, according to Jan Eichhorn, lecturer in social policy at Edinburgh University, it is crucial to deliver civic education in all settings, to avoid increasing inequality and boost political participation of all social classes.

"If we don't, it's more likely that civic education is delivered at schools in higher status areas in richer schools in wealthier contexts," Eichhorn said.

In his view, civic education can help overcome some of those inequalities, but only if it's delivered comprehensively across all contexts.

A democratic school

Meanwhile, experts are increasingly calling for a 'whole school' approach to education, "where the whole community is actually working together" to ensure "young people today become active citizens of tomorrow," explained Pascale Mompoin-Gaillard, CEO of Learn to Change.

In an April 2022 [resolution](#), MEPs also suggested using a "whole school" and participatory approach across the bloc.

"When approaching citizenship

education, participatory pedagogies should be taken into account in order to enable learners to experience citizenship in all its dimensions," the resolution reads.

However, for such an approach to work, the school needs to be "structured democratically" and allow students to effectively participate, according to experts.

"When school is not organised around democratic processes when participation of students in decision making in schools is not present, they're actually learning something about non-democracy," Mompoin-Gaillard said.

Eichhorn agreed that young people should be able to discuss issues and not simply be informed about them.

"The way civic education is structured and delivered really, really matters," he said, adding that "one of the most important things we see is for it to have positive civic payoffs is that it needs to be deliberative."



Education Commissioner: teaching citizenship values a ‘common political responsibility’

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By Silvia Ellena | euractiv.com



European Commissioner for Education and Culture Mariya Gabriel.
[European Commission]

Education around citizenship values across the EU is a “common political responsibility,” Commissioner for Education and Culture Mariya Gabriel told EURACTIV in an interview, adding that teachers can act as “real role models” for European students.

“School education is about more than just absorbing information. It is also about nurturing a particular

attitude and promoting certain values,” she said.

In her view, these values allow citizens to be more active and feel a sense of responsibility towards their communities, their country and the European Union.

“To transmit this feeling of community, I believe this is a common political responsibility we

have at all levels,” Gabriel said.

However, citizenship education is still a fragmented practice across the EU, with each member state adopting a different approach.

According to a [2020 study](#) by the French Ministry of Education, citizenship teaching is a compulsory subject in 16 of the 27 EU countries, but with different hours of instruction

dedicated to the subject.

At the end of secondary education, pupils benefit from 20 hours of citizenship education in Cyprus, 150 hours in French-speaking Belgium and 310 hours in France, the study reports.

Moreover, [only one in two students reported having the opportunity to learn about Europe](#) in school in a 2016 survey.

According to Gabriel, knowledge about “what actually happens in Brussels” can boost active citizen participation, increasing the share of people voting in elections.

Jan Eichhorn, lecturer in social policy at Edinburgh University, said research has clearly shown that civic education “really matters.”

“We see that civic education can have incredibly good positive outcomes both for young people’s electoral engagement and non-electoral engagement with politics as well,” Eichhorn said.

Teachers as role models

According to Gabriel, teachers play a key role as “real role models” in promoting active citizenship and European values.

“We have to ensure that this important attitude – and I may

even call it a virtue – is part of the comprehensive education European pupils receive, and that it starts with the very early stages of education,” Gabriel said.

Meanwhile, experts underline the importance of separating European values from pro-European stances.

“There’s a difference between pro-European as in pro-EU and sharing some of those fundamental values like democracy, democracy, tolerance,” Eichhorn said, adding that it would be counterproductive to have civic education trying to encourage students to “say they love the European Union.”

“No, you don’t necessarily need to have a teacher who, you know, has a glorious view of certain institutions or processes, but they should share certain types of values that are probably also values that are enshrined in the constitutions of their countries,” he said.

Support for teachers

To boost new ways of teaching about the EU in the classroom, the EU has recently launched the “[Learning EU Initiatives](#)” which is set to provide funding to schools and other training institutions.

However, Commissioner Gabriel

acknowledged that teachers still need more support, especially in multilingual and multicultural environments.

Teachers’ mobility could partially address this, through Erasmus+ programmes and other tools promoting cross-border cooperation, such as the [eTwinning](#) platform, she said.

“We want all teachers and trainers to be able to benefit from learning mobility,” she said, adding that being exposed to different pedagogies would benefit students as well.

However, teachers often face time restraints, sometimes going on exchanges during their free time, according to Patrick Tardy, a high school teacher at Lycée des Métiers Roland Garros in Toulouse.

Teachers’ mobility across the bloc remains low, with less than half of teachers in Europe having experienced transnational mobility, according to pre-COVID [data](#).

As mobility begins slowly to return to pre-pandemic levels, Gabriel said the aim of the Commission is to “see even more done to make it an integral part of teacher education and teaching careers.”

Citizens, MEPs call for harmonised citizenship

By Silvia Ellena | euractiv.com

Languages: [Deutsch](#)



Citizens called for more harmonisation of civic education during the Conference on the Future of Europe.
[Shutterstock/Monkey Business Images]

While the debate on EU treaty changes continues, citizens and MEPs call for “shared competences” on education between the EU and member states and more harmonisation of citizenship teaching at the EU level.

“We fail to have a European dimension in education,” MEP Victor Negrescu, co-chair of the culture and education CULT Committee at the European Parliament, said at a recent [event](#) on education and democracy.

In his view, there are high

expectations among EU citizens to have a European approach when it comes to education.

However, the EU does not currently have competences in this field.

The question of the EU's role in education policy was recently raised by EU citizens during the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE), the EU's year-long deliberative democracy experiment, which came to an end in May.

Among the final [49 recommendations](#), citizens called for shared competences “at a minimum in the field of citizenship education.”

Moreover, they asked the EU to guarantee “a minimum level of education on the EU and especially its democratic processes, including the history of European integration and European citizenship.”

Citizens' calls for harmonised education on citizenship and EU values echo those of the European Parliament's April [resolution](#)

which pointed to the “lack of policy coherence in the area of citizenship education at EU level.”

During the event, Negrescu called on the EU to “take a leading position” on education, better coordinate and eventually develop “a competence framework.”

Changing the treaties

However, giving competences to the EU institutions would require changing the treaties of the European Union, as reported by a [preliminary technical assessment](#) of the CoFoE proposals by the General Secretariat of the Council.

“Including education in the list of shared competences would require Treaty change. Enabling the EU to make an issue a mandatory part of education throughout the EU would also require Treaty change,” the assessment reads.

[One third of EU countries immediately opposed changing the treaties](#) when it was first proposed back in May. Although some countries are gradually shifting their position, an agreement on this remains out of sight.

“I don't see many member states willing to give these competences to the European

level,” Johannes Greubel from the European Policy Centre told EURACTIV.

Moreover, transferring competences in education policies might be difficult because they belong to different government levels in each country, he added.

An example is Germany, where education is managed at the regional level.

“In Germany we have 16 states and they all have their own policy. So that's very complicated,” Christoph Wolf, researcher at the University of Hannover, told EURACTIV.

“But at the same time, I think that the national policies probably will shift to more European ideas,” he said, adding that the EU can have a key role in providing students with European values like democracy and freedom of speech.

“A more active role”

The Commission agreed that although competence remains within national borders, the EU can support member states through policy proposals.

“The design and implementation of good quality

and inclusive education policy is less a question of formal competences than of actual cooperation,” Commissioner for Education and Culture Mariya Gabriel told EURACTIV.

“I can assure you that we're working very closely and trustfully together with all the Member States who keep the full competence for how they set up and run their education systems,” she added.

In the meantime, however, the EU could still play “a more active role” when it comes to education, the European Policy Centre's Greubel said.

“Citizens want the EU to play a more prominent role in funding initiatives, in coordinating approaches among member states or in terms of facilitating mutual recognition,” he added.



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