



Education for the Union: an old problem, a young solution

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1. The Main Problem

In February's Plenary, the Portuguese delegation presented the main concerns that had been discussed since the project started. These issues aimed not only at a national level, as well as a European one. Although, knowing the vast diversity and complexity of the problems presented and their difficult resolution, it was urgent to privilege those that could be most directly analyzed and whose solutions could be achieved.

The high levels of abstention in the elections, the lack of knowledge about the EU's social impact, history and functioning, and the evident gap in the Portuguese education system that addresses such lack of information emerges as the problem that most directly affects the young population and that approaches on the remaining problems that Portuguese and European democratic societies are experiencing in the 21st century.

Such impasses are visible in civil society as well, particularly in the young generation, which reveals great difficulties in understanding the European dynamics, despite being interested in it.

A democracy with a deficit in education tends to be fragile, and it is even more worrying when this disinformation persists in the younger layers of society. We went on discovering a disconcerting reality, whose solutions may be more easily realized than they appear.

2. Solutions

2.1. Survey to the Portuguese student community¹

In order to define the solution that we propose to present, we have considered essential listening to the target audience of our proposal: the young population (school age). We created an online survey, closed and with direct questions/answers, addressed to the classes of elementary and high school education in schools geographically dispersed in mainland Portugal. During 3 weeks, we received more than 350 responses that allowed us to draw some important conclusions:

- 91% of responders consider the European Union important or very important;
- 80% of responders feel themselves European citizens;

¹ Full results can be consulted [here](#).



- 63% of responders preferred learning about the UE in non-formal education system activities;
- 82% prefer that such activities are developed by juveniles between 18 to 30 years old.

With the main inquired population concerned about the (lack of) education on the EU, doubts were raised as to whether anything had already been done to resolve it.

2.2. Existing European projects and their weaknesses

Starting with the search for projects that have already dealt with the problem of lack of democratic and political training on the EU, we highlighted two projects in particular: [European Parliament Ambassador School Programme](#) and [Europe at School](#). It allowed the team to focus, for a briefing moment, on its objectives and structures, so that we can move on to our solution with a streak of innovation and distinction from the current ones.

2.2.1. European Parliament Ambassador School Programme

It presents itself with the goal of “*raise awareness about European parliamentary democracy, the role of the European Parliament and European values among secondary and vocational school students with diverse educational, social and geographical backgrounds*”², using ambassador teachers and students appointed by the schools selected by the project, who are in charge of implementing the program, and also the pedagogical materials made available by the European Parliament. Such materials “*includes general information and facts about the EU, training on democratic skills and participation, class role-play games and quizzes.*”³

Together, teachers and students “*are asked to carry out activities such as the creation of an EU Info Point, the organisation of Europe Day events or the creation of social media content. They liaise with Members of the European Parliament, other Ambassadors and partners, and engage with their communities.*”⁴. In Portugal, there are 65 ambassador schools to date, which compose only 7% of the universe of high schools.

² European Parliament. 2021. *European Parliament Ambassador School Programme - EPAS*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/ambassador-school/en/>> [Accessed 13 April 2021].

³ European Parliament. 2021. *The European Parliament Ambassador School Programme (EPAS)*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/ambassador-school/en/about.html>> [Accessed 13 April 2021].

⁴ Ibidem



2.2.2. *Europe at School*

“Sensitizing young people to European citizenship and encouraging young people to exercise active European citizenship”⁵ is the motto of this project that emerged in 2000 and is present in 6 EU Member States. They choose non-formal methods of education and learning, although they develop their activities in the formal school system and in non-formal learning contexts.

Using interactive activities promoted by volunteers, “the history and geography of Europe, the values and symbols of the Union, mobility of young people or the functioning of the institutions”⁶ are the main themes addressed by this initiative.

2.2.3. Weaknesses of the previous projects under analysis

The projects that we highlighted appear to be very valuable in the objectives they are proposing, however, several failures are pointed out that may justify part of their premature failure.

With regard to the *European Parliament Ambassador School Programme*, the use of teachers as trainers of these activities often leads to a lack of empathic connection coupled with the inadequacy of the speech to the target audience. The focus on high school and vocational school education leaves out a considerable range of age groups, which represent a population with a lot of interest in these themes and with great receptivity for these projects, as shown in our survey, which also includes students in elementary school (54 % of respondents).

In *Europe at School*, the lack of institutional support from the EU is pointed out as the main weakness for the expansion and success of the project, which appears as a strong obstacle to large-scale dissemination of the program and the collaboration of more volunteers and schools, weaknesses that the organization itself even pointed out in a 2020’s report⁷.

2.3. The Portuguese delegation's solution

Taking into account the projects presented and the ineffectiveness in the intended response, we propose an alternative: **the implementation of a non-formal education project among the younger Portuguese population, with the cooperation of people between 18 and 30 years old to promote and educate for the following.**

⁵ Europe at School. 2021. *Aprenda conosco - Europe at School*. [online] Available at: <<http://europe-at-school.eu/pt/aprenda-conosco-2/>> [Accessed 13 April 2021].

⁶ Europe at School. 2021. *Europe at School - European civic education*. [online] Available at: <<http://europe-at-school.eu/en/>> [Accessed 13 April 2021].

⁷ Jef.eu. 2021. *2020 | Europe at School: New directions – JEF Europe*. [online] Available at: <<https://jef.eu/workplan/2020-europe-at-school-new-directions/>> [Accessed 13 April 2021].



The volunteers would be offered specialized qualifications and courses concerning thematic on the European Union, using teaching materials from the Publications Office of the European Union.

In a first phase, in collaboration with the [Europe Direct Contact Centers](#) – which are the ideal partners for a close contact with school communities, due to their geographic dispersion throughout the national territory –, we would disseminate the initiative and create teams of volunteers, so that they received their training in the topics to be addressed.

Having formed the teams, non-formal education activities – covering, *inter alia*, the functioning and organization of the European Union, the rights of European citizens, the policies on the environment, health and the digital society – would develop through the use of interactive teaching resources, such as games, applications, puzzles, peddy-papers, debates and conversations.

With a focus on activities in the school context, these would target the children and young people of Portuguese elementary and high school education, creating specific programs and objectives adapted to different age groups.

Another concern is related to the renewal of the teams of young volunteers: initiatives such as the *ClubUE*⁸, developed by the Europe Direct Contact Center from A Coruña, Spain, would be a pole of attraction for young people who could join this educational challenge, through an innovative, disruptive and attractive project.

As the Portuguese Team noted with the survey responses, the majority of the inquiries responded affirmatively when confronted with the idea of having an approximated age group of people talking with them about problems that act directly or indirectly with the EU system (such as migration issues, human rights, specific disciplines, climate change, amongst others – these topics were the most answered in our online survey when questioning “*in which type of EU programs would you like to be involved in the future?*”

2.3.1. Genesis of the solution

As was already pointed out, this solution is part of the need for training young Portuguese people in matters of the European Union. The use of the online survey of the school community underlies our choice. We believe that, by providing additional education support with the implementation of extracurricular dynamic activities that promote a generalized debate among youngsters, the future of democracy in the EU and in Portugal can be improved.

⁸ Dacoruna.gal. 2021. *EuropeDirect - Deputación de A Coruña :: ClubUE*. [online] Available at: <https://www.dacoruna.gal/europedirect/clubue> [Accessed 13 April 2021].



2.3.2. Relevance, innovativeness and feasibility analysis

Being the educational deficits those who the Portuguese Team valued the most, we've also noticed that such problematic impacts, in the long run, the absence of a democratic participation of the Portuguese population in the European Parliament elections. To counter the lack of interest in such an important matter, it becomes relevant to teach the younger generations about different impacts that the EU has in their daily lives. As we have learned through experience, younger people tend to promote values that they learn in school at their respective homes. By talking to their relatives about thematics that they are interested in, it can enhance older generations interest in the same topics and, thus, increase the democratic participation of such social stratum. Due to this consequence, it can also have a great regional impact in the society since one of our objectives with the referred solution is to also adapt the topics in discussion with the problems that a certain area faces the most.

As for the innovative aspect, the comparative study of existing projects allows us to conclude that the idea presented is distinguished by the target audience (all levels of education, from elementary to high school education) and by the mobilization of EU bodies, namely, Europe Direct Contact Centers, which provide a more consolidated base for the dynamization of this project with their already well-established existence.

Finally, the feasibility of the idea is guaranteed by the fact that the intervention of state agencies (namely, the Ministry of Education) is not needed for such educational activities to be developed in schools, since they are extracurricular activities, which they do not constitute a change to the current study plan – which would involve a bureaucratic, time-consuming and prone to failure process – and which depend only on the organization of groups of young volunteers for the development of the project.

