

Europe as Learning Environment at School

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Abstract:

The author in her article introduces an international project ELOS focused on highly effective teaching and education of pupils and students at basic and secondary schools with the aim to prepare them effectively for the role of active European citizens. The project anticipates the reality of European integration and international relations when applying all rights and duties of EU citizens, predominantly directed to the world of work. The tools used in the project to achieve its goals are observing and evaluating the implementation of European and international school orientation (EIO European and International Orientation) and their specialization. After having fulfilled a complex of conditions, school can try to apply for being granted the status of ELOS schools and participate in an international ELOS network. ELOS schools should present Europe in broader European context as a multicultural community and foster Europe as “educational environment”.

Keywords: European integration, European and International Orientation in Education, European dimension, European competencies, Project ELOS

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“Creation of the European unity is based on the will of its citizens. Only then can this brilliant idea have sensible future. It is critically important for your people who will as the responsible citizens of Europe soon be determining its future, to create a firm sense of European fellowship and embrace the idea of united Europe.”

Dr. Egon A. Klepsch

The first President of the European Parliament
Former President of the European Council of
the internal project Europe at School

1. Instead of Introduction

The inspirations to submit this paper were for me two facts: information resources and personal experience that have influenced my recent past. One of them was a personal meeting with a group of international experts from 26 European countries who systematically and purposefully work on the joint project to facilitate a real and practical implementation of the European dimension at school and in the after-school training of the young generation. This project is also known as ELOS – it’s acronym derived from “Europe and Learning at School”.- Extensive project preparation and gradual implementation is taking place under the auspices of the coordinating committee Europees Platform based in Haarlem the Netherlands since 2006. Current phase (2011-2014) is known as ELOS - Education Stretching Borders.

This is the project that targets effective education of pupils and students at the elementary and high schools which objective is their practical preparation for the role of future active European citizens. The project reflects the reality of the European integration and international relations with an aim on the widest-possible realisation of rights and obligations of citizens, especially those related to the labour market. Education and training play a key role

in this process.

For me as an activist with a 19-year experience in this field this project brings a lot of pleasure. I have taken as a great honour to work with such a prestigious team of experts and become one of the project’s creators. I do belong to that part of a teaching universe that optimistically believes in the idea of a united Europe, not limited the by political boundaries of the current European Union. I closely follow the developments of this phenomenon on the world scene as well as at the European level and, much as possible in individual countries. I do actively support its spreading in Slovakia – by organising international events, which are classified as tools to implement of the European dimension in the process of education.

The second inspirational resource for this article was Konrad Paul Leissmann’s book “The theory of illiteracy” with the subtitle “Errors of knowledge”. (In original: Theorie der Unbildung) (Academia, Prague 2008). As the very name suggests - it brings turmoil into our souls, it questions what we believe in and breaks the concepts we use and make them dysfunctional – turning them into stale clichés. Ironically, reading the book I have inadvertently admitted that everything written there is actually true and that the author is somehow right and what he expresses is more than just his personal opinion. After reading the book, I felt as if someone had turned down my castle. Maybe it was made of sand, but still a castle is a castle ... It was built by experts from many countries.

Leissmann through his optics reviews into the smallest details the concepts and contents of the educational system in the second half of the 20th century. By doing this, he neglects many years of effort from a generation of

educational experts who tried to grasp the reality at the time, and to create a mechanism leading to a decisive step towards the future of an educated Europe. By reading it, I understood the message. This book does not contain any constructive part – e.g. instructions for a change. At least not the superficial or the simple ones. Nevertheless, it brings a rare controversy and we should pay tribute to the author. He helped destroying a castle in order to build a new one. However, when constructing it, we should be more careful: we must try avoiding mistakes and taking into consideration recommendations of project engineers, craftsmen and designers of the European education. We cannot stop time: education and training are evolving continuously and constantly creating a base for the future development of a society.

2. The role of education and training

Europe takes education and training seriously. We refer to them in the process of creating a civic and open society. We all want a society consisting of educated, active and matured citizens interested in public matters. We rely on them in our effort to introduce a model of well-functioned society where productive economy will be a result of clever political decisions from educated political leaders. At the same time the transparency of economic and political relations in a society will guarantee a fair distribution of goods enabling certain level of wealth for the majority of citizens. We refer to education and training when defending human values – preserving peace, human rights, peaceful coexistence, tolerance of the other and acceptance of minority rights. Knowledge economy and active citizenship, as well as the ways to reach them through education, are all mentioned in the documents of the

European Commission. The education for a democratic citizenship is also mentioned in the projects of the Council of Europe. Education is one of the pillars of supranational institutions such as the UN, UNESCO and others that try to draw a young generation's attention to the problems of poverty and inequality, they appeal for the conscience in young people together with their responsibility towards the world's future and the human population.

The “Europe of knowledge” and the knowledge economy were concepts associated to the Lisbon's strategy. Since its publication in 2000, the strategy sets an ambitious target: to turn Europe by 2010 into the “most competitive and most dynamic knowledge economy in the world capable of sustainable growth, economy with larger labour market and greater social cohesion”. In that case, a big emphasis was put on education and training. In 2005 the Lisbon strategy was revised. Named as “Strategy for growth and education”, the document, apart from its priorities in research, development, innovation, education, employment and business environment, also referred to the climatic changes and energy generation, whilst stressing the need of a lasting sustainable growth.

Finally, in 2008 the EU member states agreed that the Lisbon strategy that supports growth and employment in particular will continue to evolve after 2010 as strategy Europe 2020. Slovak Republic defines its priorities Europe 2020 in education and as follows:

1. In education the stress is on the development of key competencies, on the inter-connection among educational system, professional training labour market and environment research. Life-long education should become a basic standard for the development of necessary skills – in that respect we will need to accept the results of informal education, together with the creation of

a national system of qualifications and professions as essential elements of effective monitoring and forecasting of the labour market needs.

2. In research, development and innovations the key emphasis is on top-level international research, strengthening cooperation with higher education and business environment, on the development of “green” technologies and gradual transition to the eco-effective economy [1]

The philosophy of education that plays such an important role in the Lisbon strategy is based on three major pillars:

- a) Transformation of traditional school into a modern one
- b) Quality of university education – the major force behind the regional development
- c) Life-long education

In the following part I will focus on the themes related to the needs of pan-European education in the process of transforming traditional school into a modern one. I will touch upon other two EU document educational priorities only marginally.

3. Education and training in the history of European civilisation

The knowledge level offered more-or-less satisfactory orientation about a human being at each historical period and enabled the understanding (or rather acceptable explanation) of how things worked.

Within the scope of the European tradition, education was always considered valuable and a way to achieve wisdom as the highest human virtue through which we could recognise good and act accordingly. Education was always considered a path to achieving own satisfaction, delivering a sense of excellence, and ultimately the way to achieve happiness - the goal of our

efforts. What was true for individuals was automatically transferred to society: intelligent and educated people would form a wise and just society. Since then education is not considered an objective, but a precondition to achieve such objective. Education is a value that remains a valid proposition in Europe even today.

In the history of the European civilisation the human desire for knowledge has evolved from syncretic knowledge (in antiquity focused on philosophy), to the gradual systemisation of knowledge and establishment of science and scientific branches, specialised disciplines able to detect and confirm what cannot be captured by human senses - all unexplored areas of micro and macro world. Along with the desire to understand the surrounding society, a human being was always questioning: who we are, where we are going, to what the sense and meaning of our lives is, what to live well means... Our predecessors understood that knowledge developed on two interrelated levels: one revealing materially causal relations reflecting the determinism of the outside world and the second one telling us about senses, values, intents and meaning of things and events of the surrounding world.

Secularisation of knowledge accompanied by the scientific differentiation process had its beginning in the Renaissance. To understand a deeper nature of things and phenomena, and to detect causes and patterns of their occurrence, sciences gradually specialised. Requirements to start using science in practice logically followed. As the volume of acquired knowledge about the world, nature, society, humanity and human minds increased, intellectuals realised that not every detailed information acquired through the partial scientific methods always explained the complexity of the nature operation of an individual object or

phenomenon – in different words ignoring connections with the outside world. In the research area a different and quite opposite phenomenon started to appear in early 20th century - the process of integration of science and the requirement for the interdisciplinary research. This had the potential to comprehend the phenomenon in its entire complexity, which was unachievable by means and methods of specialised disciplines. The interdisciplinary research has not only got the ability to analyse, specify and describe the differences, but it can also synthesise them, embed them into a broader context and fill the white spaces in the jigsaw picture of the world. One can say that such a picture of the world is an ultimate objective for efficient education strategists at the beginning of the third millennium.

4. Education and training at school and outside – borders breaking

The use of knowledge acquired by a collective human mind from early 20th century has increasingly and sophisticatedly translated into the institutionalised education sector. In European countries, we do not lean towards the uniform education system and this is not even an objective of the on-going integration within the EU. Each European country relies on own premises and historically created principles that i.e. differ in a way of assigning pupils into groups according to age, in the definition of primary and secondary education, in the extent of compulsory schooling, in the system of state testing or certification. Given every the current educational system is has weaknesses, the cooperating countries are looking from time to time for ways to improve or change their systems as a direct response to new circumstances in the development of economy, politics, science and society.

As the amount of new knowledge increases, it is more and more difficult in education to determine what is pedagogically important and which the priorities of education are. When Herodotus spoke about the education of ancient Persians, he mentioned that boys aged 5-20 years were trained only in three disciplines: horse riding, archery and truth-telling. Almost 2 500 years later education in Europe must accommodate the entire width of general education from antiquity to the present times, from theoretical knowledge to practical skills. The educational systems of states are therefore reviewed periodically and school reforms are being launched. States try to build the school education system so as the next generations gets the truest picture of the world, patterns of its operation, including our ability of its discovery and use. These attempts in the last decades have paradoxically generated two opposing trends in the European educational policy. Countries such as Czech Republic and Slovakia are trying to "dissolve" traditional school subjects into the newer "areas" of learning and hope that this is the orientation of the "segment" that will help comprehending the complex mechanisms of the objective world and the role of humans in it, understanding the meaning of things in different contexts. Other countries, such as France and Austria, have already passed the "de-subjectation" of education and currently, on the contrary, are calling for, strictly subject-oriented curriculum. They argue that the anchoring of individual subjects will help highlighting differences in their nature and the ways they operate. It is too early to assess which reforms is the right one. In any case, such doubts will most likely cause permanent attempts to redefine the concept of school or move to rediscover the school as a cultural institution.

It is true that what makes a school,

education and training "good" is deeply rooted on the principle of internal "flexibility" and agents of change. The 21st century school, more than a century ago, pragmatically reacts to the changes in the new technologies and scientific knowledge that bring subsequent changes to the labour market. Hypertrophy of this optics remains in the school system since the period of significant scientific growth after the World War II. Equally, however, education and training systems have to react to major social changes such as currently uneven demographic growth, poverty, population migration on the world scale etc. Explaining the social causes and factors of these phenomena is the key role of education, which has enough power to show the possibilities and conditions for their absorption by a democratically organised society.

In today's post-modern era we have numerous sources of information about the world and its operation. The information is publicly available, often remarkable, useful and necessary, but some time also quite useless. For example, back in 2002, one of the recommendations of the European Steering Committee for Youth (CDJ) within the Council of Europe noted that the education system alone could not deliver all education [2]. There is something that creates the basis of education, and something that represents an added value.

How shall we distinguish in that variety of content relativity what is useful, beneficial and necessary for the preparation and training of young generation? On what basis shall we determine what should be included into the formal education that takes place in schools and educational institutions with its well-defined curriculum, standards and assessment rules?

An individual's takes place only partially at school. What is then the role of other areas in the development of knowledge,

skills and abilities of the young man, if at all? At present, one cannot really specify the boundaries that will define the end of learning; boundaries of further training and learning have now become "borderless". Moreover, through a variety of activities an individual is put in roles where the development of knowledge and competences continues ceaselessly. The process of lifelong learning implies a gradual abolition of separation between the learning processes that lead to professional opportunities and those that help developing other aspects of personality - active citizenship, physical and mental strength and moral maturity.

The above-mentioned 2002 CDJ recommendation in addition to formal education identifies a wide sphere of non-formal and informal education that complements the formal educational process. The Committee of the Council of Europe in the cited document calls for its legal recognition as a relevant form of education.

Non-formal education is a process of social learning of an individual through activities taking place outside formal education systems. Although non-formal education compared to the formal one relies on more liberal rules of assessment, it is important to emphasize that non-formal education should become a part of the structured learning process, with clearly defined educational objectives, with efficient assessment forms and should also be provided by trained specialists. Non-formal education teacher takes into account the overall development of an individual, and more broadly his / her personal experience. Non-formal learning in many ways provides a suitable basis to react to the needs that cannot be met through formal education, such as creativity and social skills. In this context, non-formal education contributes to the development of working experience skills, which are generally required by employers today. In

Slovakia, the equality of formal and non-formal education is addressed in the 2008 Youth Act.

Informal education is understood as a learning process derived from the social experience without any conscious educational objectives and without any formal training of those who generally provide it. Informal learning takes place in the family, among peers, etc. It includes lessons learned from life and amongst them those that were obtained through personal cultural experience.

To monitor the efficiency of knowledge and skills utilisation acquired comprehensively in all forms of education and in particular through informal and spontaneous education CDEJ proposes a specific measure - the creation of the European Portfolio (similar to the European Language Portfolio) as a descriptive tool to capture the individual experience and skills acquired through education. Creation and recognition of the European portfolio, forming a sort of an annex to the structured CV of a graduate is mentioned particularly in the European ELOS project.

5. Education for Europe in the 21st century

Jürgen Habermas in his article -We need Europe!- ... pointed out that politicians and public administrations of European countries still do not realise that the creation of public opinion on a common Europe should be pursued through active education. Only this way leads to what we once promised: "the consciousness that across national borders we share a common European destiny." In the European integration, education and training have an utilitarian meaning. Therefore, education should be pro-European. That means education is a right platform to explain to young people the political organisation of a society, to teach

them to honour universal human values, fundamental principles and values of European civilisation, and lead them to respect human rights and democracy, as well as tolerance and solidarity.

The purpose of an educational process is to prepare an individual for life in society both in a moral and a professional dimension. The school should therefore change the education of future citizens of Europe, so that pupils and students get the opportunity to become familiar with different geographical, cultural and political aspects of the continent. Through this knowledge, young people can understand how different cultures affect their own lives and the lives of local communities, regions, nations and ultimately the lives worldwide.

Internationalisation of educational process is one of the focus in another product made by the European Commission - the so-called Bologna's process, which has gradually started to evolve from 1999. It targets higher education students and encourages them to complete a part of their studies abroad, while guaranteeing the mutual recognition of educational achievements and credit transfer between universities abroad. [2] The strategy calls for gaining intercultural experience in order to seeking what is common in diversity.

The new educational mission is a natural reaction to the problems that exist in multi-ethnic and multilingual communities of European countries. Democratic and humanistic traditions of the old continent force to observe democratic principles in the environment of pluralistic cultures, and their diversity of values and traditions. The role of education in the broadest sense is constantly reminding of common roots, which for millennia have grown into a rich diversity of new Europe. Similarly, education is able to help correcting another possible extreme – the spread of unilateral Euro-centric opinion on the

world's history.

6. International project ELOS – Europe as Learning Environment at School

In the introduction we mentioned as a significant inspiration for the author of this paper in recent years her active work in the international project ELOS as a definite implementation of the European dimension in education and training. From the work in this project, we drew the conclusion that the specification of objectives, methods and means of application of the European dimension in formal and informal education in Slovakia was quite limited and did not have sufficient publicity in the educational system.

A need to introduce the European dimension into education and training is contained immanently in all basic schools-related documents, openly at least since 1998. However, it should be pointed out that it was never understood in terms of targeted pro-European education (e.g. as in the UK, Germany, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Estonia or Cyprus), and was not translated into measurable standards. This was not even the case during the preparation of the current school reform, which came into force in Slovakia in 2008.

Stronger pro-European education in the educational system in Slovakia is currently achieved thanks to citizenship education, multicultural (intercultural) education, global education, ethics, art education where there are more themes corresponding to the objectives of the European education. The current situation, however, is far from the requirements imposed by the implementation of the European dimension. Let me mention at least the ones, which I hope will shortly find an understanding amongst the majority of the Slovak teaching community:

-the pro-European education should start at early age - in elementary school or even earlier

-teaching should be organised interdisciplinarily and should not be limited to one special subject or group of subjects

-the pro-European education should become a part of the curriculum and activities in and outside the school

-content emphasis should be placed on the common cultural heritage, cultural unity and diversity, interdependence and the need for cooperation, a sense of European pluralism, the objectives of European integration and on the Europe's role in the global context

-it is important to promote education in as a way to include geographically and culturally every European country.

On the other hand, it would not be true to claim that nothing has happened in this field in Slovakia. What has not come into the curriculum is somehow saturated by extracurricular school activities. Schools in Slovakia are increasingly involved in many international projects or in extracurricular activities of their peer groups / individuals abroad. Students and teachers do participate in various international competitions, camps, volunteering activities and other forms of youth exchanges and mobility. The importance of international activities is also underscored by the fact that the European Commission provides their systematic and long-term financial support. I mention just a few: Comenius - support programs for international cooperation in primary and secondary schools, and also for individual teachers' training, Erasmus program - designed for cooperation between universities, Grundtvig program – addressed to adult education, Leonardo da Vinci - training program for youth. Finally let me also mention the Youth in Action Programme, which itself represents a wide range of policies and youth

mobility. The policy of the European Union is therefore based on the belief that networking, exchange of experiences, good practices and, ultimately, informal interpersonal relationships will, all of them, bring results and we will gradually find more that unites us rather than opposites.

Currently, there are numerous opportunities for pro-European school activities addresses either to pupils and students, or to teachers and youth workers. It is worth mentioning that this is perhaps one of the few advantages of education and the teaching profession in general. The problem is that all these activities are purely voluntary. Schools may or may not participate in international projects (we have many examples of such cases). Individuals - pupil, student or teacher are in the same position. Motivation is just personal. The fact that we are at the beginning can be shown by the results of the Slovak participation in these activities - until recently, they were not measured or assessed by anyone.

On the contrary, ELOS is a project that combines everything that education currently requires, especially its connection to the labour market. It is inspiring and motivating for teams, for the entire school community and for other related groups. It equals rights and access to the information that do motivate the activities leading to the acquisition of knowledge and skills. The tools the project tries to apply to achieve its objective are far-reaching. - They enable to monitor and evaluate the degree and the implementation level of the European and international orientation of a particular school (EIO) up to their final profiling. By fulfilling certain set of requirements (e.g. a need to teach several subjects in a foreign language), schools may apply for a grant to be recognised as "ELOS school " and enter the international network of ELOS. Such

network provides certain benefits, such as the opportunity of spontaneous alliances and cooperation that will ultimately force each school to maintain and improve its status.

If we were to metaphorically express what are the time and competitive advantages of schools participating in ELOS, then we can state that they represent international Europe as a multicultural society and use the European cultural and political phenomenon as an area for teaching. This profiling is then reflected in the curriculum of various subjects and as a cross-curriculum theme is contained in international educational projects that enhance the knowledge and competency framework, making the education more meaningful and attractive.

If the school maintains its ELOS status, it then subordinates everything else - its internal structure, the composition of its teaching staff specially trained for that purpose, and functional organisation of employees. As a matter of principle, the school assumes active participation in international projects, organises international exchanges and work placements, both for students and teachers. Therefore, the school must have amongst its school staff not only people capable of coming up with ideas and stimulating the interest of pupils and students in an international project, but also people able to carry out this idea. A teacher's elementary skills of a teacher should include the ability to create a project, knowing how to finance it, how to apply for a grant, how to create a team work on the project, how to organise an exchange or placement and how to monitor and continuously evaluate the project's progression from its inception to its final assessment, including accounts settlement. The ELOS schools offer their teachers the possibility for career development - from the beginner level up to the school co-ordinator of international

projects. They also provide a space for teamwork skills development.

The process of pupils and students education creates core competencies. For the ELOS schools the critical competencies are the ones we call "European" (CFEC). Achieving them is not unrealistic. Schools can acquire them by monitoring their teaching contents and by assessing their results, but also through their own activities (in 21st century schools these are imperative); resulting in the creation of personal portfolios of pupils and teachers from their participation in formal, informal and spontaneous learning and they become the subject of long-term assessment. ELOS school graduates can acquire knowledge, as well as language, social, organisational and business skills that enable them to spontaneously adopt the European space as a natural focus of their existence, to get a sense of sovereignty and the possibility to exercise their rights of European citizens. They will lose the unnecessary fear of the unknown or foreign and all that will happen without a loss of national identity or pride in their homeland.

Institutions that acquire the ELOS status have the right to award its graduates a certificate. ELOS project creators are trying to ensure that such certificates are recognised in the future in the same way as the assessment certificates which are being used today.

In Slovak Republic, thanks to our participation in the international ELOS project, we have access to all necessary materials allowing the selected schools to start the process of transformation into the ELOS school type. We also have a legislative environment supporting ELOS projects. Millennium - the National Programme of Education in the Slovak Republic sets the priority and objectives. Reform of the education system provides sufficient flexibility in the choice the

schools' direction and profile. The Law on Teaching Staff finally stimulates teachers (although not very convincingly) to career development and makes lifelong learning attractive in terms of internal and external material incentives.

7. Conclusion

ELOS has a chance to become a real tool for fulfilling the strategy Europa 2020. However, for the practical implementation of the project, European countries have to do more. The decisive role in its implementation will be in the hands of the government of each state. If the Ministry of Education in Slovak Republic adopts the ELOS strategy, it will create a demanding climate in the entire educational system. The climate which actually could fulfil all requirements of the European labour market. Then it would not be an experiment, but a real transformation of the traditional school into a modern one. (Just let me mention on the edge - the modernisation process would also be unthinkable without the innovation of teachers' training preparation).

ELOS school mission is not to become a school of elites. Modestly it would be unreasonable to say, that they do not have the potential to become the schools of prerogative excellence that prepares young people for the role of highly qualified European citizens. For these reasons, it is worth to deal with them and further expand the number of teachers who will deal with them.

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Notes:

1. The strategy Europe 2020 should concentrate exclusively on the economic growth and quality labour market that will require:
 - a. increase productivity and competitiveness
 - b. increase of the of the workforce capacity to adapt to changing conditions, market integration of products and services
 - c. transition to eco-efficient economy built on sustainable and low carbon-based basis with the effective growth of resources to address the economic implications of such transition
 - d. support of the open policy and international trade, rejection of protectionism.

In determining the specific substantive priorities a more focused and significant growth-supporting and cost-efficient policy will be required where in particular we consider the following key areas:

- e. education
- f. research, development and innovation
- g. a quality business environment including reduction of the administrative burdens of entrepreneurs
- h. increased energy security
- i. improving the functioning of the internal market to create fair competition
- j. international dialogue on norms and standards.

Available at <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2010:2020:FIN:SK:PDF>

2. The Bologna process unifies the system of higher education, which i.e. allows a smoother transition from one college to another and enables students to receive unlimited training throughout the Europe. The process of higher education therefore should attain not only a guarantee of quality and consistency across Europe, but also should unite the lengths of study period. Higher education was divided into three degrees: bachelors, masters and doctoral. Recognition of diplomas and degrees helps not only academics, but also gives equal rights to the candidates in finding employment. Available at: http://www.euractiv.sk/vzdelavanie/0/zoznam_liniek/bolonsky-proces