

Social Education in Public Schools Between Regulatory Frameworks and Pedagogical Constraints: A Critical Analysis

Lecturer **Iulian MITRAN**¹

Abstract

Social education is one of the compulsory subjects for grades V–VIII, its objective being to stimulate the process of socio-cultural literacy, thus contributing to the formation of a stronger civic culture within civil society. For future students, this discipline strengthens critical thinking skills, understanding of institutional mechanisms and fundamental rights, as well as the ability to participate responsibly in public life, which are indispensable prerequisites for academic and professional integration in a democratic and pluralistic environment. The civic education programme has a well-defined theme for each class, addressing topics related to critical thinking, Romania's institutional infrastructure, multiculturalism, and economic systems. There are a number of limitations and shortcomings when it comes to the topics covered in the curriculum and the way the textbooks have been designed. The fifth-grade curriculum covers children's rights, and as easy as the topic may seem, it is just as difficult when we consider that even a superficial understanding of it is completely dependent on addressing complex subjects such as democracy, freedom, coercion, power relations, state/political power, institutions/institutional structures, discrimination, marginalisation, etc. This paper aims to analyse the recommended curriculum and pedagogical approaches from a comparative European and international perspective, with the aim of identifying potential errors and developing proposals for their correction. The importance of social sciences and humanities has been underestimated when it comes to social awareness and civic participation, especially in the current global socio-economic context where hyper-individualism and major social inequalities have eroded the foundations of many societies.

Keywords: curriculum, education, pedagogy, citizenship, involvement, training, children's rights.

JEL Classification: I23, K23, Z13

1. Introduction

School culture in post-December Romania has been shaped by a multitude of external factors, with a clear synchronization between it and the socio-economic evolution of society. The popularization of the internet, which has had the effect of liberalizing access to information, has brought about a major change in the perception of the role of schools and teachers in society. Currently, one aspect that is easy to observe at the national level is the monopoly that exam subjects have within schools. We are not referring to the way in which hours are allocated to each subject according to the framework plans adopted by the Ministry of Education. We are referring to the willingness of schools, teachers, students, and families to allocate time and financial resources to facilitate learning. Thus, we can see a picture of a school environment in which a great deal of resources and involvement are pumped into a very limited number

¹ Iulian Mitran - Department of de Psychology and Social Work, Faculty of Life Sciences and Human Development, Danubius International University of Galați, Romania, iulianmitran@univ-danubius.ro.

of subjects, while the rest of the subjects included in the core curriculum end up being completely neglected. The formation of a school culture that prioritizes only exam preparation is not a phenomenon that is unique to Romania; it can be observed in several countries where hyper-competitiveness is encouraged.

Social education pedagogy is based on several axioms, including academic freedom. Academic freedom is particularized in the sphere of contemporary social sciences through a multidimensional perspective on the world and social phenomena, discouraging ethnocentric approaches that can take the form of propaganda messages. Academic freedom also gives us the opportunity to critically analyze unpopular, even controversial ideas, as well as social initiatives that have been contested over time.² As a result, social sciences teachers must be able to navigate, on an almost daily basis, a sea of ideas, opinions and perceptions, many of which may be completely opposed to the values they hold dear. Coercing or ridiculing a student for a particular opinion does not encourage constructive dialogue, especially if the teacher does not provide arguments to prove the contrary.³ A multidimensional perspective on society makes inclusive education possible, which refers not only to better integration into the educational process of students with learning difficulties, physical or intellectual disabilities, but also to transforming the classroom into a safe space where students, regardless of their ethnic or socio-economic background, do not feel marginalized, ridiculed, isolated or harassed.⁴

Creating an inclusive educational space is all the more relevant when we talk about the pedagogy of social sciences and humanities, given that the content of many lessons deals with social issues that students have faced on a personal level, with life experience shaping a specific approach. Inclusive education is all the more discouraged in the current context, where the quality of education is measured strictly in terms of quantifiable data, with very little interest in the socio-emotional development of students.⁵ The traditional model is almost exclusively interested in cognitive development and standardised test results, neglecting the formation of key skills related to communication, cooperation and relationships - aspects directly linked to the development of emotional intelligence.⁶

The framework plan for secondary education aims to cover a diverse range of subjects, thus giving pupils the opportunity to develop a wide range of skills and competences. In the framework plan, subjects are grouped into curricular areas, namely: Language and Communication; Mathematics and Natural Sciences; People and Society; Arts; Physical Education, Sport and Health; Technology; Counselling and Guidance. Subjects marked as part of *the common core* (CC), which are taught in all public schools, or *the school curriculum* (SCC), group together optional subjects. The People and Society curricular area includes the subjects History, Geography, Religion, and Social

² Hyacinth Udah, Wili Suluma & Lucy Jordan, "Academic Freedom as an Ethical Imperative: Pedagogies for Teaching Across Difference in Social Work Education", *Social Work Education*, February 2026: 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2026.2633210>, p. 3.

³ Ibid., p. 2.

⁴ Angel Deroncele-Acosta, Althia Ellis, "Overcoming Challenges and Promoting Positive Education in Inclusive Schools: A Multi-Country Study." *Education Sciences*, vol. 14, no. 11, 2024: 1169. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14111169>.

⁵ Eirini Karakasidou, Georgia Raftopoulou, Konstantina Raftopoulou, and Thanos Touloupis, "Positive Education in Schools: Teachers' Practices and Well-Being", *Psychology International* vol. 7, no. 2, 2025: 51. <https://doi.org/10.3390/psycholint7020051>.

⁶ Ibid.

Education. It should be noted that geography was included in the Man and Society curriculum area as a result of the 1998 curriculum reform (Ministry of National Education 2016), social education is one of the subjects included in the Man and Society curriculum area, being taught in lower secondary school (grades V, VI, VII, VIII). It is preceded by Civic Education, a social studies subject adapted for teaching in primary school, namely grades III and IV.

Civic Culture aims to familiarize primary school pupils with the norms governing human relations, the relationship between man and society, and awareness of the socio-moral profile of a good citizen. At the same time, emphasis is placed on the inclusion of certain elements related to identity, both at the individual level and at the level of the group, society, and nation. The proposed learning activities are in line with the cognitive development level specific to the age of 9-10 years (third grade), which is the stage of concrete operational thinking. At this stage of cognitive development, pupils can use logic in real-life situations, but still have difficulties with abstract thinking. As a result, the proposed learning activities focus on role-playing, teamwork, forming discussion groups, etc.

Overall, the curriculum and the proposed pedagogical approach are well aligned with the typical cognitive development level of students aged 9-11. The lessons focus on using the skills developed in art classes to visually represent certain concepts presented in the lesson, especially when it comes to moral traits, which have a higher level of abstraction. Social education is part of the People and Society curriculum for lower secondary school, having a syllabus that is very well organized thematically according to the year of study, namely Years 5, 6, 7 and 8.⁷

There is a significant leap in the level of complexity of the topics covered in Civic Education classes (4th grade) and those covered in Social Education classes - Critical Thinking and Children's Rights (6th grade).⁸ The curriculum for Year 5 can be divided into two thematic areas, the first dealing with laying the foundations for logical thinking, the second focusing on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. In Year 5, the curriculum focuses on Intercultural Education, in Year 7 on Education for Democratic Citizenship, and in Year 8 on Economic and Financial Education. Referring to the current curriculum, content and pedagogical approaches proposed, we can observe certain deficiencies that may compromise to a certain extent the development of the proposed skills. As a result, we can bring up for discussion:

How well do the content, teaching methods, and cognitive development level match up for each class?

What is the level of consistency between the curriculum and textbooks? How well are textbooks designed in terms of visual appearance, structure, and content?

Is it possible that the thematic diversity of the curriculum gives the subject a fragmented character?

⁷ Ministry of National Education. Framework plan for secondary schools. Bucharest: Ministry of National Education, 2016. Accessed 14 October 2025. <https://www.portalinvatamant.ro/dbimg/files/Plan-Cadru%20gimnaziu.pdf>.

⁸ Ministry of National Education. Order No. 3393 of 28 February 2017 on the approval of school curricula for lower secondary education (Annex No. 2): Social Education (Critical Thinking and Children's Rights – 5th grade; Intercultural Education – 6th grade; Education for Democratic Citizenship – 7th grade; Economic and Financial Education – 8th grade). Official Gazette of Romania, 28 February 2017.

2. Methodology

This paper is based on an analysis of the framework plans, curricula, and textbooks that have been developed for the subject of Social Education. The approach will take into account three types of sources:

Information taken from written sources, consisting exclusively of public documents made available by the Ministry of Education (framework plans, curricula, school textbooks - digital format, syllabus for school competitions), which provide us with a very good picture of the status and role of the subject within the common core curriculum, as well as information on how well the content, teaching methods, and age-specific intellectual development level are synchronized with skills training. The documents in question are: Cabinet Ministerial Order on homework in pre-university education (2016); Order No. 3393 of 28 February 2017 on the approval of school curricula for lower secondary education (Annex No. 2)

Digital textbooks provide us with a clear picture of how the content included in the curriculum is converted into informative materials for students and teachers. The role of the textbook in the lesson is to serve as an informative material. In some cases, this role is not very clearly understood, and the lesson ends up being centered around the textbook. Teachers are required to build their lessons around the content included in the curriculum for each year of study.

The purpose of using the set of information is to determine whether the principles governing modern curriculum design have been respected: balance, rigour, coherence, relevance, vertical integration, correlation with age-specific intellectual development. The analysis of textbooks gives us a very good picture of how, in most cases, the content is presented in classroom lessons. Although we have a wide variety of documents, we must bear in mind that what happens in the classroom is very different from what the ministry recommends. These aspects are not mentioned in the documents, but are known within the field as common practices: teaching focused exclusively on textbooks, the use of technology without a clear purpose, the poor pedagogical training of teachers after completing psycho-pedagogical modules, and the phenomenon of exhaustion among students.

The phenomenon of exhaustion that we see among students in Romanian public schools is largely concentrated in schools and high schools in large urban areas. We refer in particular to those schools that have a good reputation, which usually achieve good results in national assessments, as well as in school competitions and contests. In these schools, there is a culture of hyper competitiveness, which is maintained and often encouraged by teachers. Unfortunately, this culture of hyper competitiveness often comes with many pedagogical approaches that cause a great deal of stress, frustration, and overload. We can point to both the desire to cover topics in class that are beyond the students' comprehension and the excessive amount of homework.

The Ministerial Order on homework in pre-university education, issued in 2016, provides clarification on the purpose of homework and the rationalization of the time needed to complete it.

The following aspects are mentioned: The proposed homework assignments will aim to "achieve immediate learning outcomes (consolidation/ deepening/expansion; application of school acquisitions in new learning contexts, etc.)". With regard to the time needed to prepare homework, it is specified that "The time needed to complete

homework for a student is a maximum of 2 hours, including all subjects, so that the daily average of the student's preparation, in and out of class, is between 5 and 8 hours per day." At the same time, it is specified that the level of difficulty of the homework should be moderate, so that it can be easily completed by most students.

Although the Order makes very clear statements regarding the content, volume, and time required to complete homework, in many cases these are not respected at the school level. Thus, we are faced with a situation where homework is prioritized for exam subjects, especially Romanian language and mathematics, while when it comes to "marginal subjects", which include social education, teachers are discouraged from giving homework. Paradoxically, the management of many schools discourages homework in "less important subjects," arguing that students already have a very large amount of homework, but omitting the fact that this situation violates the provisions issued by the Ministry. This situation creates a series of contexts that inhibit the multifaceted intellectual development of students, sending the message that intellectual development is strictly linked only to learning Romanian and mathematics. Social education, by its nature and structure, can propose homework assignments that take the form of micro-research projects that students can work on over several weeks.

Another aspect that is taken into account in the present study relates to external factors that contribute significantly to the decline in the quality of learning in public schools, which are more or less controllable by the school. In large urban areas, there is a phenomenon of overloading middle school and even primary school students with extracurricular activities that take place exclusively outside of school, in many cases in private centers. This phenomenon means that children attend several clubs/extracurricular activities, both during the week and at the weekend. We are talking about an excessive variety of activities, with parents encouraging their children to get involved in as many as possible, in some cases with the expectation that the child will perform well. The considerable stress caused by the expectations of the school, the demanding curriculum and the large amount of homework is further amplified. Unfortunately, there are not many studies analyzing this phenomenon.

Poor pedagogical training of teachers who teach social education. This is the result of several aspects related to the way in which the psycho-pedagogical module is organized within universities. It should be noted that the psycho-pedagogical module consists of two components: courses attended by all students, regardless of their specialization; and the pedagogy of the specialized subject, a course attended by students according to their specialization. In many cases, due to the smaller number of students, those who have a degree in history, sociology, law, administrative sciences, political sciences, take the pedagogy of the specialized subject together. The general trend is for history graduates to become tenured in history, while the rest with the aforementioned study programs have the option of choosing social education. Due to the diversity of bachelor's degree programs completed by students, it is very difficult to illustrate teaching methods based on content. There is a major difference in content between the programs for obtaining a teaching position in history, sociology and social education.

The phenomenon of private tutoring is another major factor that shapes the quality of teaching. Private tutoring has a well-defined role in the learning process, filling in certain gaps that students have accumulated for various reasons. The purpose of private tutoring is to support students who have fallen behind in their studies or who have difficulty understanding the content. However, the way in which the role of private

tutoring is understood and the way in which it is carried out violates certain ethical principles of the teaching profession. The extension of the tutoring period over several years is promoted, without a clear objective in terms of the student's academic progress. Some argue that a child who does not receive private tuition can easily score 5 or 6 in national assessments, but this statement is incorrect given that many students who do not receive private tuition fall behind, while those who do receive private tuition have an unfair advantage.⁹

One of the most problematic aspects of this phenomenon is tutoring with students from the same class, which affects the teacher's impartiality when it comes to grading class activities or homework. Thus, some students receive undeserved privileges. At the same time, it creates an atmosphere based on mistrust, suspicion, and a lack of real desire for collaboration among teachers. We must bear in mind that the academic success of students is to a certain extent determined by the ability of teachers to collaborate, especially in the case of those who teach subjects from the same curriculum area. The mistrust that exists between teachers is further amplified by the additional income that teachers who give private lessons earn, thus generating significant income inequalities that are not reflected in official documents.

3. Results

An analysis of the topics covered in the Social Education curriculum can determine how slow the transition from one topic to another is. We consider that in order to understand certain topics; students must already have a solid theoretical foundation. We can observe a certain discontinuity in the topics covered in the curriculum. The first aspect noted is the significant differences in topics between the proposed curriculum for Year 5 and Year 6, but a similarity between the topics covered in Year 5 and Year 7. In Year 5, the topics covered are critical thinking and children's rights according to the UN Convention, while in Year 7, the topics covered are related to the structure and organization of the state and democratic participation. At the same time, we can also observe that eighth grade covers economic and financial education, which is completely disconnected from the topics covered in previous grades. We can observe certain aspects that may create learning difficulties, which stem from the way the subject matter is divided thematically throughout the lower secondary school cycle:

a) Thematic discontinuity between the fifth and seventh grades. If we were to maintain the current topics, we could suggest that the fifth-grade curriculum would be better suited to the sixth grade, thus avoiding very abrupt transitions.

b) The topics proposed for Year 8 are completely inappropriate from several points of view. We are talking about a major break in terms of the topics covered in grades 5, 6, and 8 and what is taught in the last year of secondary school. Economic and financial education requires knowledge of concepts that have not been addressed at all in previous years. We must also take into account that the subject matter gives students the impression that a completely different subject is being introduced into the timetable.

⁹ Antonia-Laura Pup, "*Meditațiile în România: sistem educațional paralel sau complementar?*" Policy Brief no. 78. Bucharest: Romanian Academic Society; Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy (IRES); Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Romania, 3 June 2021. Accessed 14 October 2025. <https://publicatii.romaniacurata.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Policy-brief-78-Meditatiile-in-Romania-1.pdf>, p. 1.

Year 8 is a terminal year, with most of the academic effort focused on exam subjects, which makes it even more difficult to assimilate the material.

c) The major discrepancy in subject matter between the first three years of study (grades V, VII, VII) and the last year of study (grade VIII) also presents major difficulties for teachers. Teachers who are certified in social education have degrees in social sciences and humanities (law, public administration, political science, etc.), so they are not very familiar with the content covered in the eighth-grade curriculum.

d) According to the *Centralised Register of Pre-university Education Subjects, the fields and specialisations of graduates of pedagogical, post-secondary and higher education, the competitive examinations valid for the classification of teaching staff in pre-university education, as well as the subjects for the 2025 national teaching certification exam* Graduates with degrees in fields such as psychopedagogy, psychology, sociology, social work, philosophy, education sciences, political sciences, economics, international relations, theology, archival science, and law can obtain tenure in the subject of social education. Within these bachelor's degree programmes, economics is part of the compulsory course grid for the three or four years of study (law specialisation). However, it should be noted that economics is a marginal subject and is not studied in depth. In the case of other study programmes such as psychology, education sciences, sociology, and social work, we can speak of a complete absence of economics courses from the curriculum. As a result, we can speak of a lack of preparation in the case of graduates who do not have a degree in law or administrative sciences.

An analysis of the curriculum for grades V-VIII has highlighted certain inconsistencies caused by very abrupt jumps from one topic to another. There is no continuity to facilitate a gradual transition between the contents of the specific curriculum for each year of study. Even in the case of the curriculum for Year 5, there is a discrepancy between the component related to critical thinking and the one based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Learning the elements of critical thinking could be enhanced by applying them in everyday situations, with an emphasis on aspects of civic behavior, recognizing sources that promote fake news, and how we make decisions in everyday life. Practicing critical thinking concepts by analyzing the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is not ideal because students are much more interested in applying the concepts they have learned in scenarios that reflect 'real life'.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child seems very detached from the realities of everyday life in the eyes of students, a document drafted by a global intergovernmental organization that is rarely directly present in public life in Romania. Given that the political system and institutional structure of Romania are taught in the seventh grade, it is quite difficult to believe that a fifth-grade student would have a well-contextualized understanding of a document issued by an international intergovernmental entity. In terms of how the textbooks were designed, there are a number of weaknesses that are found in most textbooks, regardless of the year of study:

- a) the absence of case studies focusing on Romania's socio-cultural specificities;
- b) the presentation of fictional scenarios that are meant to illustrate many of the concepts in the context of everyday life;
- c) for the sixth-grade curriculum (intercultural education), concepts such as xenophobia, racism and marginalization are addressed, but they are not contextualized

for Romania's socio-cultural context, even though they describe problems that are still very present at the social level;

d) the absence of a critical voice when discussing lessons that present Romania's political and institutional system (seventh grade), we can see that in the case of sixth grade material (intercultural education), this exists to a certain extent. However, in the case of Year 7 material, topics such as corruption, the obstruction of democratic participation and institutional fragility are not addressed.

e) the concept of social class is almost non-existent, although discrimination based on social class (classism) is a real problem in Romanian society, being one of the least recognized forms of discrimination;

f) the absence of intersectionality, a very insular approach to many of the social issues addressed.

Social education textbooks can be evaluated based on criteria related to form and content. Often, aspects related to form are underestimated in terms of their impact on learning. We will conduct an analysis that considers both form and content aspects for the textbooks used during the four years of social education study:

Table 1. Issues related to the form and content of social education textbooks for grades V–VIII

Grade	Textbook	Comments	
V	Social education. Grade V, Ministry of Education (Adina Grigore, Cristina Ipate-Toma, Georgeta-Mihaela Crivac, Nicoleta-Sonia Ionică)	Background	Use of video materials without a clearly defined purpose in the learning process; the amount of resources needed to carry out the activities in the "Portfolio" section may create problems in schools in poor areas.
		Form	Use of stock images; cluttered pages; inappropriate colour scheme (visual overstimulation).
5th	Social education. Textbook for Year 5, Litera Publishing House (Liliana Zascheievici, Nicoleta-Laura Crețu, Tamara Mănatu, Elena Nedelcu, Maria-Dorina Stoica)	Content	Proposals for activities that are difficult to carry out; proposals for activities that reinforce discriminatory ways of thinking rather than combating them.
		Form	Use of stock images; poor integration of images into the graphic template of the textbook (heterogeneous appearance); images that are not accompanied by a description; reduced clarity of diagrams.

Grade	Textbook	Comments	
6th	Social education. Sixth grade, Didactic and Pedagogical Publishing House (Victor Bratu, Elena Bratu, Alina Lupşa)	Background	Completing the rebuses is not intuitive due to the way the questions are formulated; cultural differences resulting from belonging to a particular social class are not mentioned; there is no emphasis on <i>intersectionality</i> when addressing topics such as marginalisation, discrimination, etc.; the concept of <i>social construct</i> is not discussed, especially in texts dealing with racism and racial discrimination.
		Form	Use of stock images; cluttered pages; inappropriate colour scheme (visual overstimulation); lack of stylistic consistency.
VI	Sixth grade textbook, Sigma Publishing House (Andreea Ciocâlţeu, Robert Florea, Cristina Gunea, Mădălina Radu, Aurelia Stănculescu)	Background	Caricatured representation of members of minority groups; misidentified photographs; some case studies present scenarios that are divorced from the reality of everyday life.
		Form	Use of stock images; poor integration of images into the textbook's graphic template (heterogeneous appearance); crowded pages; images not accompanied by a description; poor clarity of diagrams.
7th	Social education. Textbook for Year 7, CD Press Publishing House (Daniela Barbu, Ancuţa Bondar, Cătălina Neagu, Stan Stoica)	Content	Very few case studies; emphasis on definitions and concepts.
		Form	Use of stock images; poor integration of images into the graphic template of the textbook (heterogeneous appearance); crowded pages; images not accompanied by a description.
7th	Social education. Textbook for Year 7, Sigma Publishing House (Andreea Ciocâlţeu, Robert Florea, Cristina	Content	Very few case studies; emphasis on definitions and concepts.
		Form	Use of stock images; poor integration of images into the

Grade	Textbook	Comments	
	Gunea, Mădălina Radu, Aurelia Stănculescu)		graphic template of the textbook (heterogeneous appearance); crowded pages; images not accompanied by a description.
8th	Social education. Textbook for the 8th grade, Litera Publishing House (Ortansa Moise, Elena Lucia Bălan, Violeta Elena Hera)	Content	Case studies based on scenarios that are not based on everyday situations; emphasis on definitions and concepts.
		Form	fragmented pages; use of stock images; poor integration of images into the graphic template of the textbook (heterogeneous appearance); crowded pages; images without descriptions
8th	Social education. Textbook for Year 8, CD Press Publishing House (Daniela Barbu, Viorica Bella-Dorin, Nina Mihai, Daniela Minzu, Cătălina Luiza Neagu)	Content	very few case studies; teaching activities that are difficult to carry out; emphasis on definitions and concepts.
		Form	fragmented layout; use of stock images; poor integration of images into the textbook's graphic template (heterogeneous appearance); crowded pages; images without descriptions

Source: Table created by the author based on data taken from school textbooks available in digital format at www.manuale.edu.ro.

We can observe a number of aspects that compromise the quality of the textbooks to a large extent, both in terms of content and form. Aspects related to form are often ignored or not given the importance they deserve. The way in which the textbook is designed visually has a major impact on learning. A recurring problem found in the textbooks analyzed is the cluttered appearance of the pages, which often contain graphic elements that are not absolutely necessary. The cluttered appearance of the pages is due to the excessive use of photographs, the excessive use of graphic elements, the pagination, and the presence of color schemes that use too many contrasting shades.

Another aspect that must be taken into account has to do with the nature of the photographs used. Many of these photographs are taken from websites where stock images can be purchased, and they have a very generic appearance, with the scenes in the photographs seeming decontextualized. At the same time, the physical features of the characters, as well as their clothing, clearly indicate that we are not talking about Romania.

The use of these photographs in texts referring to Romania creates an obvious

logical disconnect between the content of the text and that of the image. The role of photography is to visually represent some of the messages in the text. There are also images with characters on a white background, especially in texts about multiculturalism. This type of representation should be avoided because it tends to portray members of these groups in a one-dimensional way. Presenting them in a clear context (school, work, playground etc.) can discourage the formation of negative stereotypes. With regard to substantive issues, i.e. content, there are a number of problems that we can highlight. There is a tendency for lessons to be based largely on going through definitions and assimilating certain concepts, with case studies often being marginal or non-existent. When case studies do exist, some of them are based on scenarios that are unrelated to the realities of Romanian society. At the same time, scenarios that could provide a very good representation of the social reality in which most students live are avoided.

The proposed classroom activities are in some cases difficult to carry out, and in others it is difficult to understand how they will contribute to the learning process. The sixth-grade textbook suggests celebrating Roma Ethnicity Day by dressing up in "traditional Roma clothing," organising discussions about Roma customs and traditions, listening to folk music, and dancing. We can identify several aspects that are very problematic. First of all, it is assumed that all Roma wear traditional clothing, which is not true, and there are also differences in clothing depending on the Roma group in question (*căldărari, ursari, gabori* etc.). At the same time, wearing clothing specific to a group is encouraged without a clear understanding of its social role. Wearing ethnic clothing should not be confused with wearing fashion items. In the case of groups whose history has been largely written and interpreted by the state to which they belong, or by the groups with which they have had contact, it is important to promote voices from within the community.

One of the objectives of the proposed curriculum for the sixth grade is to help students understand the cultural diversity typical of the world we live in, thus discouraging the perpetuation of negative stereotypes in schools and society. Thus, we would like to believe that the content of textbooks does not present cultures as one-dimensional caricatures. At the same time, we are also thinking about avoiding Orientalist representations, or those that present members of different groups through the lens of exoticism. However, we can see concrete examples where these principles are violated. In one of the sixth-grade textbooks, three children are depicted, each belonging to a different culture: Ana (Romanian), Emre (Turkish), and Miklos (Hungarian). The theme addressed is that of personal and cultural identity, with each of the three characters providing information that indicates the culture to which they belong. Ana only mentions her age (twelve), Emre states that "I like baklava!", and Miklos says that he is from Târgu Mureș. It is noteworthy that Ana, because she belongs to the majority group, does not have to give too many details about her cultural identity. Emre's representation is caricatural, the identity marker used to be a food that is stereotypically associated with Turkish culture through consumerism.

Social education textbooks have notable problems in terms of form and content criteria. There may be several reasons for this, including: a lack of good pedagogical training among textbook authors, a misunderstanding of the characteristics that define a good-quality textbook, and the low budgets used to produce these textbooks: the impossibility of having good quality graphics, the impossibility of setting up a team of

reviewers specialized in social sciences and humanities pedagogy to evaluate the textbook.

4. Discussions

The role of social education is very poorly understood at the social level. We can attribute this situation to the underdevelopment of the social sciences in Romania, as well as their marginal nature within the framework plans. The underdevelopment of the social sciences and the lack of attention given to them in compulsory education clearly reflect Romania's state of social underdevelopment. This state is characterized by the presence of a weak civil society, the lack of community involvement in issues that directly affect them, the presence of reactionary attitudes, fear of the new, and the presence of very pronounced social polarization. We must bear in mind that social education should complement the other social and human sciences studied, as they are part of the same curriculum area - Man and Society.

A notable problem is that there is no minimum synchronization between the social studies, history, and geography curricula. A similar situation exists in the case of subjects in the mathematics and natural sciences curriculum area. Even though the principles underlying curriculum design encourage syllabus synchronicity, the situation tends to be quite different in practice. A major problem with the social education curriculum at present is its inability to critically address issues that children face in their daily lives. Even when topics such as racism and xenophobia are addressed, no details are given about the roots of these problems in Romanian society.

The proposed classroom activities are often difficult to carry out, requiring a lot of props or advance planning. As a result, they will be ignored by teachers or implemented poorly. One aspect that is overlooked is the fact that some of the proposed activities require costs or resources.

Rural schools have major difficulties when it comes to allocating funds and resources. In large urban schools, these costs can be covered by families, but in rural areas, especially isolated communities, families do not have the financial means to contribute money or resources due to major material difficulties. At the same time, we must bear in mind that there are two behavioral patterns when it comes to families in large urban areas and rural areas in relation to school. Due to socio-economic stability, parents in large urban areas have more time to get involved in their children's school life, taking part in parent-teacher meetings, maintaining close contact with the school, and contributing financially or with other resources to the proposed educational activities. Parents in poor rural areas are fairly uninvolved in their children's school life, or may be completely absent. Socio-economic instability, lack of money, day labor, long commutes to work, and the very low level of education of parents mean that their involvement in school life is very limited or non-existent. Therefore, taking into account these discrepancies between schools, the activities proposed in the manuals should be achievable without the need to allocate a large number of resources.

Excessive planning for an activity should be avoided, considering that many social education teachers have a fragmented workload, teaching at several schools, and in some cases they also teach other subjects to complete their workload. It should be noted that in such situations, the teacher will have considerable difficulty with planning, given that they are unable to build a close relationship with either their students or their

fellow teachers.

It should be borne in mind that the ability of a subject to change the way a student thinks depends on the coherence of the curriculum, the level of pedagogical training of teachers, and the quality of textbooks and other teaching aids used in the classroom. Added to this is the student-family-school triangle, which takes into account the need for communication between the family and the school to ensure the student's academic success. Unfortunately, Romania's socio-economic context creates a number of problems that compromise the quality of teaching to a certain extent. When discussing curriculum design or textbook development, it is absolutely necessary to take into account the realities of everyday life, which is all the more relevant when discussing a subject that studies society. If these issues are not better understood in the future, social education will remain a subject that has failed in its fundamental objective: to stimulate students' understanding of society, how it operates, and how they can get involved in eliminating injustices.

5. Perspectives on content and approaches to disciplines in Romania and the Republic of Ireland

The development of communication technologies, and implicitly the internet, has led to the *internationalization of education*. This internationalization has nothing to do with the existence of international framework plans to standardize the curriculum taught in a school cycle, but rather with the existence of educational philosophies and approaches that are validated on a much broader scale. Romania's EU membership has inevitably placed the public system in a broader context that encourages the exchange of ideas and experiences between students and teachers in member states.

Migration to Western countries, the integration of Romanians into those societies, and the integration of their children into other education systems have inevitably led to comparisons between these systems and the national one. In this section, we will make a comparative analysis between social education included in the framework plan for secondary schools in Romania and various related subjects included in the curricula of public and private schools in Ireland. We must bear in mind that in some cases, *social education*, in the context of other educational systems, refers to the social literacy of children, which begins in kindergarten. More specifically, it refers to everything related to understanding society, human interactions, and the environment. In the Irish system, we have the *Social, Environmental and Scientific Education* curriculum area, which comprises three subjects: History, Geography, and Science Education.¹⁰

These subjects are taught from kindergarten to sixth grade. A surprising aspect, at least in relation to the specifics of national education, is the teaching of history to very young and very young age groups. However, we must bear in mind that the way history is taught in Romania is very different from that in most Western countries. In many Western European countries, history is used to impart knowledge about social structures

¹⁰ Government of Ireland, Department of Education and Skills. Science Curriculum: *Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (Primary School)*. Curriculum Online. n.d. Accessed 14 October 2025. https://www.curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/346522bd-f9f6-49ce-9676-49b59fdb5505/psec03c_science_curriculum.pdf.

and dynamics, combining official history with military and political history. Moreover, in the lower grades, history focuses heavily on family and local history, thus attempting to make students aware of their immediate social environment. In Romania, the approach to teaching history is completely different, with a strong emphasis on studying history chronologically, from ancient to modern times. In contrast, the approach to history in Ireland and the UK is through the study of concepts and ideas. Understanding the concept of society, social class, or war. There is not so much emphasis on studying history based on chronology, but rather on understanding history based on concepts, ideas, and mentalities.¹¹ At the same time, it should be noted that the study of social history is considered, which offers the perspective of ordinary people (peasants, craftsmen, small traders), who formed the most numerous segments of society, on history, bringing into discussion many aspects that are not only related to the military.

In Romania, the history curriculum places very little emphasis on understanding the structures and social organisation of past societies. As a result, it is almost inevitable that they will end up judging past events and facts through the prism of modern social realities. Social education, in its current form, presents only contemporary society, with a very strong emphasis on the 'now'. The way in which topics related to multiculturalism are approached clearly shows that there is a very limited understanding of the past, suggesting that multicultural societies are more a product of modernity. This is totally untrue, as multiculturalism was very well represented in the centuries when Europe was dominated by empires, all of which were quite ethnically diverse.

One aspect worth mentioning regarding the history curriculum in Romania is that there have been a number of notable developments in terms of the content of school curricula.

Firstly, if we talk about the curriculum for primary education (0-IV), history is only taught in the fourth grade, where for a long time Romanian history was taught from a very narrow and ethnocentric perspective. The 2017 curriculum brings a slightly more current perspective to Year 4, introducing topics that emphasise the study of local communities and minorities¹², to a certain extent. However, we still see the repetition of old patterns, such as the exclusion of Dobrogea from discussions about Romanian territory.

Another aspect we can observe is the insular presentation of the cultural development of Romanians. To a large extent, this type of approach can be found in most Balkan and Eastern European countries, with history taught in public schools having a nationalist slant. Even though in the fifth grade there is a transition to the cultures of great civilizations, when talking about their contributions to universal culture, the information provided by certain textbooks is ridiculous. In the fifth-grade textbook published by CD Press, on the page discussing Islam and Islamic civilization, it is mentioned that Muslims "*worship Allah*," suggesting that this is a different entity from the one worshipped by Christians and Jews. Also, in the section on Islam, when discussing its contributions to world heritage, it mentions "*gunpowder, paper from China, Arabic numerals (taken from the Indians)*". In this case, we can clearly speak of

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ministry of National Education. *Order No. 3393 of 28 February 2017 on the approval of school curricula for lower secondary education (Annex No. 2): Social Education (Critical Thinking and Children's Rights – 5th grade; Intercultural Education – 6th grade; Education for Democratic Citizenship – 7th grade; Economic and Financial Education – 8th grade)*. Official Gazette of Romania, 28 February 2017, p. 2.

a tendency to trivialize, given that Islamic civilization has brought numerous innovations in medicine, mathematics, and architecture.

Table 2. Comparative analysis of how fundamental concepts of society and culture are addressed in three social science disciplines, each taught in a different educational system

	History (Irish curriculum) ¹³	Social education (Romanian curriculum) ¹⁴	Global perspective (Cambridge curriculum) ¹⁵ [3]
Society	The course covers the modern history of Ireland and European history (late modernity).	It is based on a decontextualised 'present', with no references to current cultural and political events and personalities.	It presents society through the lens of the "present," with events of significant cultural and political importance being presented. Emphasis is placed on research and group projects.
Culture	References are made to national culture and how the Irish diaspora developed.	Intercultural education is included in the sixth grade curriculum. Lessons are dominated by fictional scenarios in which different aspects of culture and cultural interactions are presented.	Critical analysis of cultural events of global importance.
Interdisciplinarity	Addresses topics found in subjects such as politics and society, geography, religious studies.	Addresses a number of concepts common to history.	It covers a number of elements common to sociology, cultural anthropology, and history (Cambridge curriculum).

Source: Table created by the author based on data taken from school textbooks available in digital format.

Unlike the typical approach taken by public schools in Ireland, the Cambridge curriculum takes a slightly different approach to history and social sciences. Given that there are private schools all over the world that use the Cambridge curriculum, it is diversified, with subjects adapted to national specificities, but the syllabus used for

¹³ Cambridge Assessment International Education. *Cambridge International AS & A Level Global Perspectives & Research (9239) Syllabus 2023–2025*. 2020. Accessed 14 October 2025. <https://www.cambridgeinternational.org/Images/595455-2023-2025-syllabus.pdf>.

¹⁴ Government of Ireland, Department of Education and Skills. *Leaving Certificate History Syllabus (Ordinary and Higher Levels)*. n.d. Accessed 14 October 2025. https://www.curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/da556505-f5fb-4921-869f-e0983fd80e50/SCSEC20_History_syllabus_eng.pdf.

¹⁵ Ministry of National Education. *Social Education: School Curriculum for Grades V–VIII*. 2017. Accessed 14 October 2025. <https://www.ise.ro/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Educatie-sociala.pdf>.

English, Science and Mathematics are uniform.

Unlike the Irish and Romanian curricula, the Cambridge curriculum focuses on *exam preparation*, with several types of exams, each with a specific level of difficulty. Cambridge Lower Secondary (Checkpoint) is reserved for students in grades 6 and 8, and is required to qualify for the next level, IGCSE (International General Certificate of Secondary Education). After passing the IGCSE exam in Year 9 or Year 10, students prepare for the AS and A level exams in Years 11 and 12. These have the highest degree of difficulty and specialization. The A Level diploma is equivalent to the Leaving Certificate in Ireland and the Baccalaureate in Romania.

A well-known feature of the Cambridge curriculum is the particular emphasis placed on the practical aspects of each subject. Great importance is attached to presenting theoretical content in a contextualized form, avoiding approaches that rely heavily on abstraction. At the same time, the way in which the curriculum and content are designed discourages learning based exclusively on memorization and reproduction. In contrast, Romanian education still encourages learning centered on memorization and reproduction, compounded by the fact that the answers accepted for subjective items are often very stereotypical. Therefore, it is very difficult to talk about encouraging critical thinking when the exam candidate must always agree with the positions accepted by the author. We must also bear in mind that Romanian exams place great emphasis on the validity of the final answer, but very little emphasis is placed on understanding how that answer was reached - the analysis of the mental process.

Analyzing the thought process can reveal a great deal about the student's level of understanding of a particular subject. According to Bloom's taxonomy¹⁶, there are several levels of learning complexity. The first two levels relate to the production of information and understanding meanings. Most of the items proposed in the exam cover only the first two levels, with the last item usually intended to access the application and analysis levels. In the case of state education in Ireland, and that based on the Cambridge model, items that only allow access to the primary levels of learning are not used very much. In the Romanian system, a lot of emphasis is placed on the final answer given by the candidate, rather than on the mental process they followed to arrive at that answer. Another major problem when it comes to high-stakes exams is related to the body responsible for designing exam questions and assessing papers.

In Romania, we cannot talk about a highly professionalized body of assessors with a high degree of stability in this role. There are many reasons for this situation, one of the major factors being the very poor pay received by assessors, given the high degree of responsibility that this position entails. In the case of the Cambridge system, the body of assessors is much more stable, with rigorous training for those who are to be appointed as markers. In the case of the three systems, payment for marking exams is based on the number of papers marked. One weak point that Romania has, strictly referring to the case of social sciences and humanities, is the very low level of teacher training, as these subjects have not been given much importance over time. At the same time, we must bear in mind that in Romania, due to the way the system is structured, social sciences and humanities are much less present in the school curriculum, especially at secondary

¹⁶ Hans Ott, *Bloom's Taxonomy Revised*. Centre for Instruction and Professional Development, Utica College. n.d. Accessed 14 October 2025. <https://www.utica.edu/academic/Assessment/new/Bloom%20tx%20revised%20combined.pdf>.

school level. Thus, there are few secondary schools where subjects such as sociology and philosophy are taught, as these are taught in classes specializing in social sciences. The lack of financial attractiveness of marking activities has, in some cases, led to significant problems in terms of the level of preparation of the teachers involved, with some papers receiving 1-2 extra points after appeal.

6. Conclusions

Social education faces several difficulties that are a direct consequence of the way the curriculum is designed, the poor quality of textbooks, the poor pedagogical training of teachers, a school culture that prioritizes only exam subjects, and the low visibility of social sciences and humanities in Romania.

We can talk about a series of problems related to the way the curriculum is designed. There are major discrepancies between the topics covered in each year of study, with no gradual transition. The topics covered in the curriculum for Year 5 are more closely related to those covered in Year 7, but have less in common with those in Year 6. If we compare the topics for the seventh and eighth grades, we get the impression that we are talking about two completely different subjects. In the eighth grade, economic and financial education is studied, thus creating a very abrupt transition in terms of difficulty between the seventh and eighth grades. Another aspect that creates limitations and difficulties in teaching eighth-grade material has to do with the fact that most social education teachers have degrees in fields related to the social sciences and humanities (law, sociology, social work, political science, administrative sciences, etc.), and therefore did not include economics courses in their university curriculum. If they did include them, they were considered marginal courses. The way the eighth-grade curriculum is designed is all the more problematic given that we are talking about a final year in which most of the time is reserved for preparing for exam subjects.

The quality of textbooks is also an aspect that negatively impacts the quality of teaching. A general problem we observe in textbooks, regardless of the year of study, is the crowded appearance of the pages, the lack of good synchronization between text and image, the use of stock images, excessive focus on presenting concepts and definitions, the small number of case studies, case studies that present scenarios that are unlikely in everyday life, the presentation of minority groups from a caricatured perspective, and the omission of fundamental concepts for the proposed lessons.

The public education system in Romania is disadvantaged by the fact that the way in which the subject matter and content are presented does not encourage access to higher levels of learning. The problems are largely created by the decontextualized manner in which much of the content is presented, especially in the case of social sciences and humanities, and by the way in which more emphasis is placed on the final result, neglecting the mental journey to get there.

Bibliography

1. Cambridge Assessment International Education. *Cambridge International AS & A Level Global Perspectives & Research (9239) Syllabus 2023–2025*. 2020. Accessed 14 October 2025. <https://www.cambridgeinternational.org/Images/595455-2023-2025-syllabus.pdf>.

2. Deroncele-Acosta, Angel & Althia Ellis, "Overcoming Challenges and Promoting Positive Education in Inclusive Schools: A Multi-Country Study." *Education Sciences*, vol. 14, no. 11, 2024: 1169. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci 14111169>.
3. Government of Ireland, Department of Education and Skills. *Leaving Certificate History Syllabus (Ordinary and Higher Levels)*. n.d. Accessed 14 October 2025. https://www.curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/da556505-f5fb-4921-869f-e0983fd80e50/SCSEC20_History_syllabus_eng.pdf.
4. Government of Ireland, Department of Education and Skills. *Science Curriculum: Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (Primary School)*. *Curriculum Online*. n.d. Accessed 14 October 2025. https://www.curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/346522bdf9f6-49ce-9676-49b59fdb5505/psec03c_science_curriculum.pdf.
5. Karakasidou, Eirini, Georgia Raftopoulou, Konstantina Raftopoulou, and Thanos Touloupis, "Positive Education in Schools: Teachers' Practices and Well-Being", *Psychology International* vol. 7, no. 2, 2025: 51. <https://doi.org/10.3390/psycholint7020051>.
6. Ministry of National Education. *Framework plan for secondary schools*. Bucharest: Ministry of National Education, 2016. Accessed 14 October 2025. <https://www.portalinvatamant.ro/dbimg/files/Plan-Cadru%20gimnaziu.pdf>.
7. Ministry of National Education. Order No. 3393 of 28 February 2017 on the approval of school curricula for lower secondary education (Annex No. 2): Social Education (Critical Thinking and Children's Rights – 5th grade; Intercultural Education – 6th grade; Education for Democratic Citizenship – 7th grade; Economic and Financial Education – 8th grade). Official Gazette of Romania, 28 February 2017.
8. Ministry of National Education. *Social Education: School Curriculum for Grades V–VIII*. 2017. Accessed 14 October 2025. <https://www.ise.ro/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Educatie-sociala.pdf>.
9. Ott, Hans, *Bloom's Taxonomy Revised*. Centre for Instruction and Professional Development, Utica College. n.d. Accessed 14 October 2025. <https://www.utica.edu/academic/Assessment/new/Bloom%20tax%20revised%20combined.pdf>.
10. Pup, Antonia-Laura, "Meditațiile în România: sistem educațional paralel sau complementar?" Policy Brief no. 78. Bucharest: Romanian Academic Society; Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy (IRES), Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Romania, 3 June 2021. Accessed 14 October 2025. <https://publicatii.romaniacurata.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Policy-brief-78-Meditatiile-in-Romania-1.pdf>.
11. Udah, Hyacinth, Wili Suluma & Lucy Jordan, "Academic Freedom as an Ethical Imperative: Pedagogies for Teaching Across Difference in Social Work Education", *Social Work Education*, February 2026: 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2026.2633210>.