

HAPSc Policy Briefs Series

Vol 1, No 1 (2020)

HAPSc Policy Briefs Series



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Foteini Asderaki, Olga Sideri

doi: [10.12681/hapscpbs.24977](https://doi.org/10.12681/hapscpbs.24977)

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To cite this article:

Asderaki, F., & Sideri, O. (2020). Teaching EU Values in Schools through European programs during COVID-19 pandemic. The “Teachers4Europe: setting an Agora for Democratic Culture” Program. *HAPSc Policy Briefs Series*, 1(1), 259-270. <https://doi.org/10.12681/hapscpbs.24977>

Teaching EU Values in Schools through European programs during COVID-19 pandemic. The “Teachers4Europe: setting an Agora for Democratic Culture” Program^{1,2}

Foteini Asderaki³ & Olga Sideri⁴

Abstract

The establishment of the European Education Area is fundamental for the development of the European Union of Values. The importance of education is the basis of active citizenship and fundamental values that should lie at the heart of the EU as stated in the Paris Declaration 2015, the EU Leaders’ Agenda at the Social Summit for Fair Jobs and Growth in Gothenburg, 2017 and the new EU strategic agenda 2019-2024. In order to achieve this goal, special attention must be paid to human resources, especially teachers, who, as the main pillars of education, are the key-actors to promote European values. This policy brief outlines the importance of teaching EU values in a digital environment due to Covid-19 pandemic era. “Teachers4Europe setting an Agora for Democratic Culture” program establishes a European network of teachers. Teachers4Europe network challenge is to become the driving force for the promotion of the EU values even in times of social distancing. A prerequisite for promoting EU values lies in the continuous training of teachers and students on issues related to the EU, the reshaping of the curricula, the enhancement of digital skills and digital literacy to advance civic competences and the participation in European programs. The flexibility of European programs offers the opportunity to teachers and students to interact with their peers and stakeholders through e-conferences, e-schools and online lessons. Through this process, effective policy proposals and good practices would emerge, while at the same time alternative forms of education will be established in cases of global crisis as the Covid 19 pandemic.


Who is this aimed at?

This policy brief is aimed at policymakers and stakeholders on European, national, regional, and local level.

Recommendations:

Promoting EU values in time of social distancing could be enhanced by:

¹ To cite this paper in APA style: Asderaki, F. & Sideri, O. (2020). Teaching EU Values in Schools through European programs during COVID-19 pandemic. The “Teachers4Europe: setting an Agora for Democratic Culture” Program. *HAPSc Policy Briefs Series*, 1(1): 259 – 270. DOI: 10.12681/hapscpbs.24977

²  Co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union

Disclaimer: The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

³ Foteini Asderaki is Associate Professor at the University of Piraeus, Jean Monnet Chair on European Union’s Education, Training, Research and Innovation Policies, Academic Coordinator-Erasmus KA3 2018 – 2021 / “Teachers4Europe: setting an Agora for Democratic Culture” (2018-2021), Chair of the European Security and Defense College Doctoral School on CSDP/European External Action Service (2019-2021). (correspondent author)

⁴ Olga Sideri holds an Msc in International and European Policies in Education, Training and Research from the University of Piraeus.

- Enhancement of digital skills and digital literacy to advance civic competences
- Fostering digital skills and competences of digitally excluded groups through partnerships between schools, business and the non-formal sector, including public libraries.
- Supporting digital skills development with an emphasis on encompassing EU values in the school curriculum through the implementation of teaching platforms.
- Enhancing the synergies between all levels of education in a digital environment.
- Redesigning initial and in-service teachers' training through distance learning and educational platforms so they acquire the flexibility required and incorporate their knowledge into actions.
- Developing and supporting interaction between European and international teachers' e-networks as a common understanding of EU values.
- Highlighting best practices on teaching the EU values, along with OER in a platform in which teachers across the EU and beyond can have access to.
- Working toward the implementation of the EU values and inclusive education in the digital environment.

Table 1: Teachers4Europe consortium

The T4E consortium consists of:

1. University of Piraeus Research Center-Greece, Coordinator of the Project
2. St Margaret College, Malta
3. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Universität Hannover - Germany
4. Universitatea Babeş - Bolyai – Romania
5. EURACTIV – UK
6. Hellenic National Commission for UNESCO
7. Pedagogical Institute - Cyprus
8. Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs, Greece
9. Learn to Change – Change to Learn[L2C]

The impact of Covid - 19 pandemic on Education

In January 2020, the global community was faced with an unprecedented crisis. The covid - 19 pandemic, hit most of the world's population, disrupting daily life. A few weeks later, the crisis spread to all areas of daily life, including education. Most of the world's leaders have ordered the suspension of schools, introducing teachers and students to a new reality. However, the educational process did not stop but adapted to the unprecedented conditions by making coordinated efforts to create homeschooling and online education environments where students and teachers can interact. Although the effectiveness of online courses has not yet been evaluated, there have been initiatives

which, due to their flexibility, have had a positive impact. In the above context and after recognizing the contribution of education to social problems, Erasmus+ KA3 Teachers4Europe:Setting an Agora for Democratic Culture Program shaped its actions by utilizing digital forms of interaction to promote literacy and strengthening the digital skills of the participants.

The Framework

Education and teachers are important factors to promote understanding of the European Union and construct the European identity. The European Union is not only an economic community but also a community of values. Despite the European Union's 70 years of history and the significant normative and legal acquis based on democracy, non-discrimination and human rights, teaching values lies mainly in national perceptions and curricula, which not necessarily include the teaching of European Union values as outlined in Article 2 of the Treaty of Lisbon and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union⁵. The 2018 Council Recommendation on Common values, Inclusive Education, and the European Dimension of Teaching encouraged the Member States to promote EU values and active democratic citizenship from an early age and at all levels and types of education and training (Council Recommendation, 2018a). Moreover, many of these values are at risk (Erasmus+ KA3 "Teachers 4 Europe: Setting an Agora for Democratic Culture", 2018 - 2021) as a consequence of the European and international crises as the euro-crisis, the migration crisis, BREXIT and the Covid 19 pandemic.

"The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail."

Article 2 Treaty of the European Union

The Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 encouraged the Member States to continue to implement the commitments of the Paris Declaration, notably through:

- (a) promoting active citizenship and ethics education as well as an open classroom climate to foster tolerant and democratic attitudes and social, citizenship and intercultural competences;
- (b) enhancing critical thinking and media literacy, particularly in the use of the internet and social media, so as to raise awareness of risks related to the reliability of information sources and to help exercise sound judgment.

⁵ See: Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, *OJ C* 326, 26.10.2012.

- (c) using existing or, where necessary, developing new structures that promote the active participation of teachers, parents, students and the wider community in schools; and
- (d) supporting opportunities for young people's democratic participation and an active, critically aware and responsible community engagement;

Source: Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on promoting common values, inclusive education, and the European dimension of teaching ST/9010/2018/INIT, OJ C 195, 7.6.2018

Teaching EU values in schools requires a common understanding of their significance for inclusive societies and their promotion through interactive and innovative pedagogical methods. The lack of courses on the European Union, including a strong dimension of education for democracy and human rights, within schools' curricula limits the emergence of active European citizens. In addition, insufficient teachers' initial and continuous training on European issues and digital skills, weaken their roles as mediators of the European values towards students and society.

It is widely acknowledged that the EU through Erasmus+ programs promotes the European dimension in education and teachers' professional development (Symeonidis, 2018). However, Covid 19 pandemic suspended the operation of schools limiting teaching methods to digital environments only. Accordingly, the restrictions in face to face education as well as the introduction of distance learning during the pandemic create new challenges as long as students should effectively be adapted to the new context and at the same time pedagogical methods and actions should maintain their core principles and continue to foster democratic EU values.

In the framework of international crises such as Covid 19 pandemic the Council, following a proposal made by the Commission, revised the Key Competences for Lifelong Learning and the European Reference Framework initially adopted in 2006. The Council stresses that since the penetration of technologies in both work and life has been significantly increased, "the individuals should be able to use digital technologies to support their active citizenship and social inclusion, collaboration with others, and creativity towards personal, social or commercial goals." (Council Recommendation, 2018b) In addition, it encourages the creation and interaction of e-networks of teachers, students and other stakeholders through the eTwinning platform. Moreover the European Commission released the Digital Education Action Plan (2018 - 2020) presenting measures for 'preparing citizens for an increasingly interconnected, globalised future' (European Commission, 2018).

Table 2: Digital Education Action Plan (2018 - 2020)

Priority 1: Making better use of digital technology for teaching and learning	Priority 2: Developing digital competences and skills	Priority 3: Improving education through better data analysis and foresight
Action 1 - Connectivity in schools Action 2 - SELFIE self-reflection tool and mentoring scheme for schools Action 3 - Digitally signed qualifications	Action 4 - Higher Education Hub Action 5 - Open science skills Action 6 - EU Code Week in schools Action 7 - Cybersecurity in education Action 8 - Training in digital and entrepreneurial skills for girls	Action 9 - Studies on ICT in education Action 10 - Artificial Intelligence (AI) and analytics Action 11 - Strategic foresight

Source: European Commission, Digital Education Action Plan (2018 - 2020) Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/digital-education-action-plan_en (Accessed: July 20, 2020).

The Erasmus KA3+ Teachers4Europe: Setting up an Agora for Democratic Culture (T4E) Program which consists of nine partners from European countries, aims to create a cross-border, sustainable and long-lasting teachers' network, will promote social and civic competences through enhancing digital skills. The participation of over two hundreds stakeholders and policymakers will increase the positive momentum of the program on a social and policy level; it will improve the quality of training and learning through synergies by utilizing digital literacy. Despite the restrictions that Covid-19 has posed, the Teachers4Europe program continues its actions through e-learning platforms as a means to enhance democratic dialogue and common EU values.

The Teachers4Europe program focuses on:

- a. fostering knowledge about the EU, its origins, functioning, policies and strategies
- b. promoting the significance of participation at the local, national and European elections and the decision-making processes,
- c. enhancing understanding and ownership of the EU values and fundamental rights and
- d. appreciating democracy and solidarity as basic EU values with the ultimate aim to become mainstreamed in the curriculum.

The above issues will be accomplished through practical activities and knowledge in the following six areas:

1. Knowledge on EU issues to enhance active citizenship and European identity
2. The EU democratic values
3. Global Citizenship
4. Human and fundamental rights
5. Digital literacy to enhance civic competences
6. Inclusion in Diversity

Teachers4Europe program will evolve as a European learning network involving schools, teachers, policy representatives and community stakeholders that will be committed to act in favor of EU values. In this way, not only the teachers' role will be upgraded but also inclusive and democratic multi-actor learning environments will be established. As an output the dissemination and exploitation not only of the directly involved target groups, but also of the stakeholders in politics and the community, will be promoted. Moreover, the program will foster social and civic competences, communication in the mother languages and, occasionally, also foreign languages, cultural awareness and expression and digital competence and the sense of initiative and entrepreneurship. Through its implementation, Teachers4Europe program aims to promote a bottom-up policy reform, which starts from the educators, engages social stakeholders and policy representatives and reaches the educational curricula of the partner countries involved with a relevant impact on the European Education Area.

Fostering EU values in a Digital Era

The Teachers4Europe program aims to support and train teachers on how to approach and teach the EU fundamental values, active citizenship and democracy. But do all Europeans, including teachers and stakeholders, perceive the European values in the same way? Do they rank the European values just the same?

To answer these vital questions, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Universität Hannover along with the programs' partners conducted two Needs Analysis Surveys. The first Survey explored teachers' understanding of the EU values and respective teaching needs; questionnaires have been answered by one hundred twenty three teachers who work and live in ten different European countries. The second Survey has been answered by fifty six stakeholders, and investigates stakeholders' understanding of the EU values. The Needs Analysis results shared Bellamy's view for the meaning of citizenship which has been linked to the participation of a particular type of political community. People who participate in the community are equal and they have internalized the EU values (Bellamy, 2008).

Teachers and stakeholders defined the EU values and what they mean to them both on a personal and social level. On a personal level, a significant share of teachers answered that the EU values help them to understand their role in society as European citizens and as a way of life. On a social level, most of the teachers perceived the EU values as a common communication code and they also stressed that they are the core elements of the European citizenship.

Table 3: Teachers' ranking of the EU values

Greece	Germany	Cyprus	L2C	Malta
Democracy	Human rights	Human rights	Love	Human rights
Equality	Freedom	Democracy	Freedom	Respect
Freedom	Peace	Freedom	Tolerance	Freedom
Respecting human rights	Democracy	Equality	Solidarity and cooperation	Equality
Respecting human dignity	Equality	Respect	Equality	

Source: Erasmus+ KA3 “Teachers 4 Europe: Setting an Agora for Democratic Culture” (2018 - 2021), Needs Assessment Report for Teachers”, Chapter 3.2: “Most important European values in the partners’ countries”, Page:11, Edited by Leibniz University Hannover.

Teaching EU values, educational methods and approaches

Regarding the EU values teaching and the preferred educational methods, most teachers answered that they have already integrated the EU values in the classroom through projects. Further to that, most of them choose experiential and interactive learning methods while teaching in foreign languages and treating everyday European policies in their classroom is rather unlikely. Moreover, teachers stressed that they rarely have the opportunity to discuss methods and approaches and exchange good practices.

Table 4: Teaching methods on the EU values

Teaching method / type of teaching	Examples
Interactive and experiential methods	simulations, role plays, educational games, animations
Learning through projects	Cross curricular projects, telephone conferences with pupils from other countries, visiting institutions or NGOs, sporting events, intercultural and international projects, school exchanges
Pupils Discussions in class	Different types of debates, presentations, forming an opinion in class, fish bowl
Using true-to-life material/media	Story-telling, videos, multimedia tools, documentaries
Teaching in foreign languages	-----
Engaging pupils to articulate their own opinion through certain institutions	Students' council, simulation of the EU parliament, developing class rules
Teaching knowledge about the operating principles of the European Union	Working with school books, developing a chart with the title “House of Europe”, arrange the EU in higher-level relations
Using biographies to explain European ideas such as rapprochement and integration	Referring to own (teacher's) biography

Treating everyday European policies in class	-----
Creative tasks	Theatrical plays, drawing comics
Enhancing social competences in class	Games, group work, jigsaw method

Source: Erasmus+ KA3 “Teachers 4 Europe: Setting an Agora for Democratic Culture” (2018 - 2021)., “Needs Assessment Report for Teachers”, Chapter 3.3: “Teaching European Values”, Page:11, edited by Leibniz University Hannover.

“Teachers 4 Europe” program contribution to teaching EU values

To encourage the EU values teaching, Teachers4Europe program will further exploit, expand, and scale up the Teachers4Europe network which has proven quite effective at national and local level implementing successful EU projects in Greece since 2011. Generally speaking Teachers4Europe transnational network act as an inspiring social and cultural incubator that will foster the dialogue with relevant stakeholders on a social and policy level; in addition, the program will contribute to building synergies between institutions at all levels of education and improving the quality of training and learning on EU issues even through the usage of distance learning methods due to the pandemic.

The first step to achieve all the above is the implementation of a platform designed for the program requirements; Teachers4Europe Academy includes online training (MOOC) and educational material and in particular a Handbook on Teaching EU values and a Handbook on EU. It also includes on site annual training activities and two summer schools named “4EU Values” in Malta and “Learning4Europe2Change” in Cyprus. The Teachers4Europe Academy provides teachers with the necessary training, and guidance tools to help them create democratic and inclusive learning environments that will enhance their student’s social skills, democratic thinking, and active citizenship. At the same time, educational material embeds civic education with a particular focus on democratic values, tolerance, non-discrimination, gender issues and social inclusion. The educational material for the training of the Ambassadors has been based on context analysis and the methodology guides. The material includes both conventional and non-conventional methods, extracurricular activities as well as best practices emerged on the European level on the teaching of EU values and active citizenship. In addition, concrete proposals for new school curricula and out of school educational activities will be formulated. In the long-term, European Union itself will be the recipient of the program. Addressing discrimination as well as promoting active citizenship, is a European priority that must be supported by an effective educational strategy both by the EU institutions and national governments.

Enhancing digital literacy to enhance civic competences

Media Information Literacy (MIL) is recognized as a tool for democratisation and an agent for soft change. The T4E consortium will actively support media and technology literacy of teachers

The project will involve:

- The creation of an online platform aiming to enhance communication, collaboration, e-learning, and provide mentoring to T4E ambassadors/teachers and pupils
- A series of webinars on civic education, highlighting excellent examples and best practices in teaching and disseminating values of democracy. Experts on the field will be hosted at the webinars and discussions will be organised in synchronous and asynchronous modes.
- The establishment of an active community of practice to enhance European teachers' participation
- Participating in European networks using social media
- Organising annual meetings to disseminate best practices

As it was expected Covid-19 affected the smooth implementation of the training due to overloading of teachers and professors, so the needs of the target groups were oriented into digital methods and innovative approaches. The dissemination events “T4E Agora for Democracy”, and the “T4E simulation exercise”, are rescheduled. Nevertheless, Teachers4Europe program adapts its actions according to the guidelines which are given by health professionals. The consortium replaced the above actions with a European e-conference held on 6-7 June 2020 under the title “Promoting EU values in the time of social distancing”.

The topic priority of the e- Conference was the onsite and online teaching of EU values in school settings. As such, its main purpose will be to disseminate and discuss innovative methodological approaches and teaching techniques and tools, as regards the teaching of EU values during the recent emerging changes. The two-day conference was available through ZOOM with Youtube LiveStreaming. Thirty-six works by sixty eight presenters were announced in ten panels and seven hundreds live attendees participated in the debates.

Regarding synergies with other actions/sectors which have had a positive impact on the project until now, it is remarkable that L2C launched a webinar series called “Teaching and Learning in during the Covid-19 school closures: towards human centered and meaningful online teaching”. The series aimed at supporting teachers during the transition to online teaching. They gathered more than 100 teachers, including teachers from the T4E network and 4 guest-speakers and facilitators invited to give expert input to teachers.

Due to the expansion of Covid-19 and the sequent uncertainties surrounding the future possibility of travel in Europe, the summer school “Learning4Europe2Change ” in Cyprus will be replaced by an e-winter school which will focus on supporting the implementation of competences for a democratic culture, including civic competences and competencies for intercultural understanding and diversity. At the same time e- winter school will aim at strengthening the digital skills of the participants.

In this context a Virtual Simulation exercise of the European Parliament will be conducted in order to empower young participants (pupils from secondary education) through experiential learning. Accordingly, it will enhance human rights, tolerance, solidarity, youth engagement, gender and general equality through increasing the awareness on European citizenship. Thus, we aspire to achieve the maximum possible results for the essential non formal education, information and awareness, namely, all the prerequisites that every citizen needs in contemporary society. Only this holistic approach can, in practical terms, prepare and achieve the essential and integrated democratic identity of an active citizen in the 21st century. Taking all these under consideration, several steps have been prepared in order to reach a successful simulation. Firstly, an e-study guide with all the necessary information for the simulation has been distributed both to educators and to pupils. Also, we have participated in the International e-Conference: “Promoting European values in the time of social distancing” in order to promote this project. Finally, we have planned the conduction of web-meetings with educators and students in order to properly prepare-train them for the Simulation Action.

However, the overall impact of the activities should be the entire society at national and European level. Thus, both television, radio and YouTube channels have significant roles within the implementation of the project especially due to the inability to organize face to face dissemination actions after the outbreak of covid-19 pandemic. Additionally, the dissemination of the project will be guaranteed by the invitation of educational and local authorities, stakeholders, parents’ associations, press Media, the whole school community, the teaching staff association, education coordinators, and/or the local communities. Teachers4Europe setting an Agora for Democratic Culture project will evolve as a European learning hub that encompasses additional schools, teachers, policy representatives and community actors committed to working for EU values.

Interactive learning and dissemination activities

Teachers4Europe Agora for Democracy conference in Athens, 2021

T4E e- Simulation Exercise of the EU institutions and decision-making process with students from the participating countries, 2020

Students' Rhetoric Symposium "Global Citizen: Supporting Sustainable Cities and Communities" in Elefsina, the European Cultural Capital 2021.

Political Dialogue for Education and Democracy at national level and in Brussels aiming at reforming education systems, 2021

Ancient Agora, located in Athens was the political, judicial, economic, cultural, and social Assembly of Polis (City). Consequently, T4E project intends to replicate a both live and virtual "European Agora for Democratic Culture" targeting at policy reforms on curricula of all levels of education; implementing non-formal educational activities such as role models; redesigning initial and in-service-teachers' training; establishing transnational T4E networks and engaging local governments and communities in raising democratic awareness. Specifically, at the policy level, the countermeasures of the program will be visible to policy makers and those interested at the national level and European level. Their participation would be immediate in order to gain expertise, exchange of good practices and commitment to policy reforms. The ultimate goal of the program is to motivate them to contribute to the "Market for Democratic Culture" that will ultimately lead to a long-term policy reform from the ground up after the end of the project.

My Message to Europe videos

"My message to Europe" section has been created in the website, where AT4E's, T4Es' and students' voice can be addressed. The messages are also circulated through the Facebook page
The messages are subtitled in English.

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL8Lkmz-9O9Df0VD_fTRQtgjriyZOuq3V8

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