

Education for Democratic Citizenship: A Study of The Romanian And Icelandic Learner's Profile

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Abstract

Education for democratic citizenship is a major pillar of today's society and is strongly acknowledged by educational systems worldwide. In the context of learner-centered education, a prerequisite for the effectiveness of the learning process is a good understanding of the learner's profile, to which the teaching practice should be consistently adapted. When analyzing the factors that influence the learner's profile, Tomlinson (2003) and Brice Heath (1983) have pointed out the importance of societal culture, while Jónsson & Sigurðardóttir (2012) have emphasized the pivotal role of education in preparing students for active participation in society.

Against this background, our research proposes an approach to the learner's profile in the framework of education for democratic citizenship and starts from the hypothesis that national cultural features play a significant role in shaping it. By means of a comparison between two groups of students from Romania and Iceland – two countries positioned on opposite levels in The Democracy Index 2018 – the authors of this study aim to identify and analyze the differences that may be motivated by cultural specificities.

This study is underpinned by the following leading questions: What are the viewpoints of the Romanian and Icelandic respondents from the target groups regarding education and democracy, in general, and education for democratic citizenship, in particular? What specific cultural features may explain differences between the two groups? Which cultural characteristics of the two groups can influence their approach to education for democratic citizenship? To answer these questions, a questionnaire including multiple-choice, open-ended, and rank ordering questions was administered to two groups of students, one from the University of Craiova and the other from the University of Iceland identical in size and field of study. The data were interpreted using a mixed methodological approach: the ordinal data collected was analyzed using quantitative methods, and the nominal data were subjected to content analysis. Thus, the investigation outlines the Romanian and Icelandic respondents' profile, focusing on the main aspects relevant for education for democratic citizenship, and puts forward a set of differences between the two groups induced by intrinsic cultural characteristics.

Keywords: education, learner profile, democracy, citizenship, culture

Introduction

Educational research is increasingly focused on how teaching practice has to be tuned to students' needs and expectations. In the context of student-centered education (Weimer, 2002; Machemer, Crawford, 2007: 9), the educational process implies a good knowledge of the learner's profile (Glowa, Goodell, 2016). According to Tomlinson (2003), learning profiles, defined as a factor of efficient education, consisting of four elements: Learning style, Intelligence preference, Gender, and Culture. Moreover, Brice Heath, in her work *Ways with Words: Language, Life and Work in Communities and Classrooms* (1983), strongly supports the idea that culture-based differences play a significant role in the learning process.

Based on these theoretical premises, our research attempts to identify the similarities and differences between two groups of learners from two culturally and geographically remote areas, Iceland and Romania. Iceland is a country that ranks second in *The Democracy Index* (EIUL, 2019), being a full democracy. It is characterized by fundamental political freedom, respect for civil liberties, and a long history of political culture. On the other hand, Romania has a flawed democracy. It occupies the lowest level for an EU country in *The Democracy Index* and scores particularly low on political culture and participation (EIUL, 2019).

Education plays a pivotal role in preparing students for active participation in society (Jónsson & Sigurðardóttir, 2012), so educational activities must be organized to naturally and implicitly include democratic thinking and behavior (Wolfgang, 2010). Future citizens can be the driving force for cultural change, which can, in turn, impact the country's democratic strength, considering that "[a] culture of passivity and apathy – an obedient and docile citizenry – is not consistent with democracy" (EIUL, 2019: 48). Furthermore, language education is recognized as "a site of learning for democratic citizenship" (Starkey, 2002: 20), fundamental for intercultural communication across cultural boundaries. The quality of communication depends on respect, tolerance, and acceptance of basic human rights standards, such as equality.

Societal cultures impact the learning process (Brice Heath, 1983), and Icelanders and Romanians differ in many cultural aspects (Hofstede, 2012; 2019). First, the Romanian people accept a hierarchical order in which everybody has a place based on inherent inequalities, with great respect for those on a higher social level. On the other hand, the Icelandic hierarchy is established for convenience with informal and direct communication between people with different occupations and expertise.

Second, the Icelandic culture is individualized; people are expected to look after themselves and their immediate families. On the other hand, Romania is a collectivistic society: everyone has a strong commitment, responsibility, and loyalty to the extended family and extended relationships. Third, the Romanians tend towards pessimism. They do not put much emphasis on leisure time and believe that social norms restrain their actions. Unlike the Romanians, the Icelanders are optimistic and exhibit a willingness to fulfill their impulses and desires. Lastly, Iceland and Romania have a different “long-term orientation” (Hofstede, 2001: 351), as they tend to connect to and make use of the past when dealing with the present and the future. Thus, while Iceland has a “normative” (Hofstede, 2001: 415) culture, exhibiting great respect for traditions and established settings, the Romanian culture is a more pragmatic and future-oriented one.

Although a significant amount of information is available on the Romanian and Icelandic education systems (e.g., data provided by OECD, Bohonnek, et al., 2010, Gallup Organization, 2009), only a few comparative studies have been published (Brancu, Guðmundsdóttir, Gligor, Munteanu, 2015; Tilea, Duță, Reșceanu, 2017). Furthermore, to the best of our knowledge, research focused on a comparative approach of Romanian and Icelandic student profiles has been undertaken so far, neither on the level of the general student population nor on specific groups.

In our research, we started from the hypothesis that, besides the inherent differences between students nowadays (e.g., age, education levels), there are other particularities determined by their different cultural, social, and economic environment, which also contribute to configuring a specific background for the educational process. Thus, we aimed to analyze the differences between two groups of Romanian and Icelandic students enrolled in the same field of study and identify those who may be motivated by cultural factors. To this end, we used a questionnaire-based approach to compare the profile of two groups of higher education students from the University of Iceland and the University of Craiova studying to become language teachers. The research was based on the following leading questions: What are the standpoints of the Romanian and Icelandic respondents from the target groups regarding education and democracy, in general, and education for democratic citizenship (EDC), in particular? What specific cultural features may explain differences between the two groups? Which cultural characteristics of the two groups can influence their approach to EDC?

Methodology

To verify this study's hypothesis, we drew up a questionnaire and administered it to Romanian and Icelandic students enrolled in language study programs. The independent variable used in this study was the country of residence. There are, obviously, other intrinsic differences between the students from the two groups, such as age, gender, educational background, or level, but these are beyond the scope of this study.

The questionnaire included seven questions dealing with relevant aspects of the learner's profile in the context of EDC. The questions focused on the students' preferred way of learning, their general perception of education (actors, process, system), the relationship with the world they live in, their representations of democracy, their awareness of democratic issues, and their previous contact with EDC informal education programs.¹

In this study, the data collection, processing, and interpretation is underpinned by a mixed methodology, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches.

Questionnaire design

In designing the questionnaire, we took into account the extensive guidelines provided by Cohen et al. (2007), specifically those regarding the questionnaire's planning and sequencing, the different types of questions, and the questionnaire's administration. The questionnaire envisaged the collection of both nominal and ordinal data and included a combination of multiple-choice questions (questions 1 and 2), open-ended questions (questions 3, 4, 5, 7), and a rank ordering question (question 6).

Generally speaking, multiple-choice questions enable respondents to select the response that best fits their view, and the response categories include only features of interest for the study team. Additionally, the utility and relevance of multiple-choice questions lie in the possibility of quickly coding and aggregating the responses to obtain frequencies. For questions 1 and 2 of our questionnaire, the respondents could tick several answers (multiple answer mode).

¹ This study uses the questions 1-7 from the questionnaire available on the ACTA project website: <http://proiecte.ucv.ro/acta/media/a2/Students'%20Profile.pdf>

Open-ended questions are highly recommended for smaller-scale research since “the open-ended responses might contain the ‘gems’ of information that otherwise might not be caught in the questionnaire” (Cohen et al., 2007: 330). The categories included in the open-ended questions 3, 4, 5, and 7, i.e., education (question 3), democracy (questions 4 and 5), education for democratic citizenship (question 7), reflect the fundamental pillars of our research.

Rank ordering questions (Cohen et al., 2007: 325) identify options from which respondents can choose. They foster the respondent’s engagement with the questionnaire, requiring them to compare items and make choices. In question 6, the respondents were asked to rank their first five options in terms of competencies underpinning EDC, thus observing Wilson & McLean’s (1994: 26) recommendations and ensuring that the task is not overwhelming.

Questionnaire administration

This small-scale research does not intend to generalize its findings, which is why the sampling group was not chosen according to representativeness criteria. The applied strategy was what Cohen et al. (2007: 113) refer to as convenience sampling, which involves choosing the nearest individuals (“captive audiences such as students”) to serve as respondents or those who happen to be available and accessible at the time. Furthermore, in terms of sample size, the only envisaged criterion was a minimum number of 30 respondents from each country, the minimum number of cases that would allow the performance of a statistical analysis of the data (Cohen et al. 2007: 101).

The questionnaire was administered in the students’ native language in order to avoid misunderstanding and to allow them to provide a high rate of response and more detailed answers. In terms of setting, the questionnaire’s administration was performed, taking into account the specificities, the customary procedures, and each institution’s target groups. Thus, the conditions under which the questionnaire was conducted were determined based on the European Commission’s official indicators that show the existence of a gap between Iceland and Romania in terms of basic digital skills. According to the Digital Economy and Society Index, in 2019, 90% of the Icelandic population and only 36% of the Romanian population had at least basic digital skills, while, for a higher level of digital skills, the numbers were 62.3% for the Icelandic population and only 9.45% for the Romanian population. Consequently, instead of delivering the questionnaire to both groups, in the same manner, the authors of this study considered that the Romanian students should receive it in hard copy and the Icelandic students in digital format. The choice was

also motivated by the fact that the Icelandic students were enrolled in distance learning study programs, thus being more accustomed to the digital, online approach.

The questionnaire was administered to the same number of students in both universities. Based on direct observation, their knowledge of the student population's specificities, and the possibility of gaining access to the respondents, the authors of this study established the respondents' profile (Bachelor or Master cycle, full-time studies, or distance learning programs). The target audience at the University of Iceland included 120 students enrolled in the distance learning Master programs of the School of Education. The questionnaire was administered by e-mail, and the answers were collected on an online platform, from which they were subsequently exported to a Microsoft Excel format. Students answered the questionnaire in their own time (within a 1-month timeframe) and were not assisted by a teacher or any other institution staff. The invitations to fill in the questionnaire included an e-mail address for the questionnaire administrator, which students could use if they had any questions or concerns about the questionnaire, but no such e-mails were received. At the University of Craiova, the questionnaire was also administered to 120 students, but, in order to ensure a good response rate, the Romanian researchers chose students from the full-time Bachelor study programs of the Faculty of Letters trained as future language teachers, of which 83 students enrolled in study programs focused on primary education and native language teaching and 37 students enrolled in foreign language teaching programs. In class, the questionnaire was given out in the presence of a facilitator (a teacher), in hard copy, and the students provided handwritten answers.

To ensure the relevance of the results, it was decided that only the questionnaires answering at least three of the seven questions of the questionnaire would be validated. This resulted in the validation of 120 questionnaires filled in by the University of Craiova students and 32 questionnaires from the University of Iceland students. Hence, the students' discretion and freedom in answering the questionnaire correlated negatively with the rate of return, and the physical presence of the facilitator acted as a catalyst from this point of view. The Romanian students had to face time limitations when filling in the questionnaire (i.e., on the spot, in 60 minutes) but still provided answers to all the questions. On the other hand, the Icelandic students were able to fill in the questionnaire whenever they wanted or could spend it as much time as they liked, but many never even clicked on the link or just gave it up after the first question, which resulted in a high rate of non-response. As Reips puts it, "the response rate for an Internet survey is typically lower than for a paper-based survey, as is the rate of completion of the whole survey" (Reips 2002a apud Cohen et al., 2007: 257). However, despite this low response rate, the minimum targeted number of answers (30) was also reached for the Icelandic

students. The final data processing was performed after all answers were collected, digitized, and translated into English.

Data analysis

The answers were analyzed in accordance with the types of questions. Thus, the multiple-choice questions' answers were subjected to quantitative analysis to establish and understand behavior patterns. The answers to the open-ended questions were subjected to qualitative analysis, whose main characteristics, as identified by Cassell & Symon, are:

[...] a focus on interpretation rather than quantification; an emphasis on subjectivity rather than objectivity; flexibility in the process of conducting research; an orientation towards process rather than outcome; a concern with context – regarding behaviour and situation as inextricably linked in forming experience; and finally, an explicit recognition of the impact of the research process on the research situation (Cassell & Symon 1994: 7).

The nominal data were analyzed employing content analysis, a qualitative research method that allows the subjective interpretation of text data content through the systematic coding and identification of themes or patterns (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005: 1278). Thus, the answers to questions 4, 5, and 7 were analyzed according to the coding categories identified in the respondents' answers, while the answers to question 3 were processed with the freeware corpus analysis tool AntConc in order to obtain a word frequency list that would underpin the selection of relevant coding terms. Furthermore, the answers to question 6 were processed according to the weighted scoring approach, which involves quantifying each attribute's relative importance by assigning a suitable weight to it (Nagalingam, 1999: 61).

Results and discussion

Question 1, a multiple-choice question, targeted the preferred way of learning, and both the Icelandic and the Romanian students clearly expressed their preference for individual learning – 78% and 73%, respectively. The figure below shows that some Icelandic students also acknowledged the benefits of other learning ways by ticking two or three answers. 44% of the Icelandic students stated they preferred working in a team/group, while only 23% of the Romanians mentioned this option. Twenty-two percent of the Icelandic students would instead work with a teacher or a tutor, while this was a preferred option for only 8% of the Romanian students. In our opinion,

the contrast between the Icelandic and the Romanian students regarding the work with a teacher/tutor or in a team/group can be explained by the different characteristics of the study programs the students are enrolled in: the Icelandic students, who are enrolled in distance learning programs, feel a more stringent need to work with a teacher or in a team, while the Romanians, who attend full-time courses, do not experience this to the same extent. These aspects prove important in defining the learner's profile, as they trigger specific learning habits. This explanation is also supported by the fact that, although the students were provided with the possibility to point out additional ways of learning, they limited their choices to the options stipulated in the questionnaire, failing to take a proactive stance regarding their education and to move beyond their actual educational setting and experience.

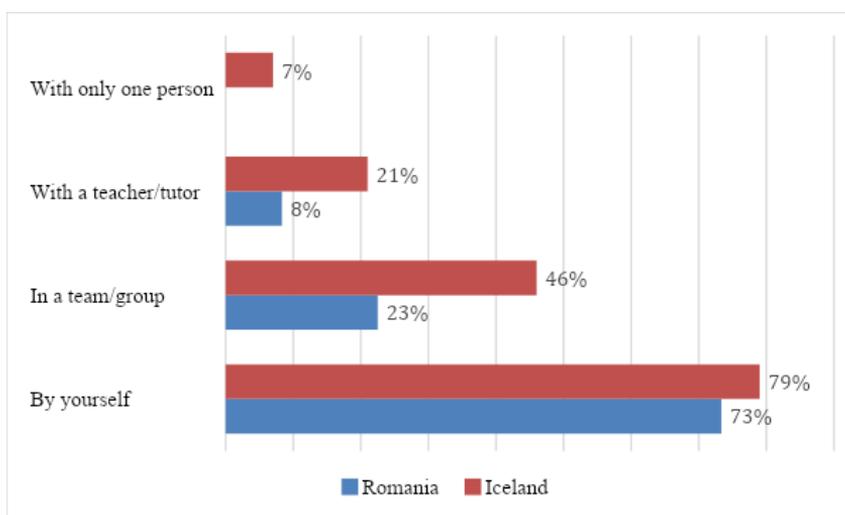


Figure 1. Answers to question 1

Question 2 deals with the students' involvement in extracurricular activities during their current enrolment with their university (with the possibility to choose two or more answers). All the Romanian students answered this question, and many of them admitted to having been involved in extracurricular activities, such as volunteering (58%), participation in online initiatives/petitions (24%), and social/political/international projects or activities (15%). Under the option "Other," the Romanian students mentioned conferences and student competitions, while the Icelandic students did not specify any other particular activities. Moreover, 33% of the Icelandic students completely skipped this question. In our opinion, the low rate of the Icelanders' responses to this question may indicate that they were not interested in its content, or could again be due to their enrolment in distance learning

programs, where extra-curricular activities, coagulating students to the benefit of personal empowerment and community development, are more challenging to organize.

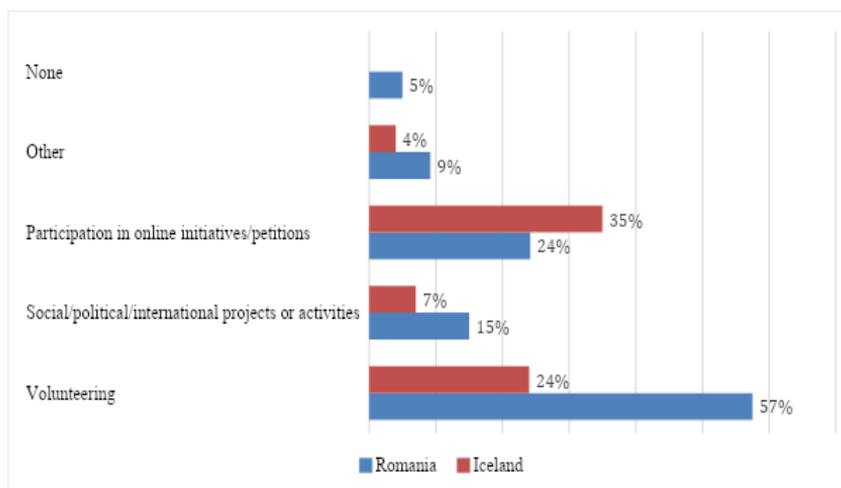


Figure 2. Answers to question 2

Question 3, an open-ended question asking the students to list up to 3 strong points and up to 3 weak points of the educational system in their country, generated the most complex and developed answers. These answers represent a comprehensive corpus of 912 units of content provided by 152 respondents, with the following distribution: 120 answers provided by the Romanian respondents, summing 3400 words; and 32 answers provided by the Icelandic respondents, summing 1085 words.

The content analysis of this corpus shows that the most frequent words in the students' answers (i.e., the coding terms) can be classified into three main coding categories:

Table 1

Coding terms for the answers to question 3 and number of occurrences

<i>Coding category</i>	teaching (75)	students (48)	education (52)
<i>(no. of occurrences)</i>			

<i>Coding terms (no. of occurrences)</i>	teachers (44), methods (10), activities (24)	learning (11), pupils (40), children (11)	resources (15), financing (12), technology (10), computers (11), system (22), free of charge (33), schools (31), curriculum (16), subjects (13), schedule (12), information (27), knowledge (11), practice (12)
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Although the students seem to have a heterogeneous perception of their teachers, some of the latter's main characteristics can still be identified in their answers. Hence, the two relevant features for both the Romanian and the Icelandic respondents are the quality of the teachers' training and the teachers' communication skills. The answers also revealed differences between the students' points of view from the two participant countries: the Icelandic students were more objective in their assessment and pointed out general aspects of education (e.g., that it should be practical). On the other hand, the Romanian students referred mostly to their personal, educational experiences; they were more critical and dissatisfied with the teaching methods, which they claimed to be obsolete, rigid, and non-interactive. However, in an underfinanced educational environment, such as the Romanian one, motivation and commitment stand out, in the students' opinion, as two major strengths of their teachers. The Icelandic students valued their teachers' enthusiasm and the fact that they participated in public debates about current issues, sharing their professional point of view. Both groups of students proved to be aware of contemporary issues of the society in which they live. They appreciated the diversity of subjects and the quality of information and emphasized the importance of foreign languages and sports.

It is noteworthy that the Romanian and the Icelandic students appear not to consider themselves as actors of the educational process but rather as recipients of teachers' actions within the educational system.

The respondents referred to education in terms of curriculum and study schedule, resources, educational institutions, and national policies. When talking about curriculum and study schedule, the students' answers mostly focused on three issues: curriculum content, curriculum characteristics, and schedule. As for their opinion on the curriculum, the Icelandic students made no explicit comments, while the answers of the Romanian students emphasized its weaknesses, describing it as "bulky" (6 answers), "rigid" (4), and "useless" (10). Thus, the Romanian students were again critical of educational issues. Moreover, they complained that education is focused on hard skills (24 students), on theory, rather than practice. The same idea was suggested by the Icelandic students' answers, who stressed the need to focus on soft skills, such as collaboration, emotional development, counseling, and financial literacy.

The answers provided by the Romanian students included 103 references to the resources of the educational process (15 – positive aspects/vs./88 – negative aspects), whereas only 2 Icelandic students mentioned issues connected to resources ("good infrastructure"/vs./"more financial resources"). Regarding the educational institutions, the Icelandic students did not refer to them at all in their answers, whereas 10% of the Romanian students implicitly referred to them as they list, as a positive aspect, their involvement in international projects. In terms of the national policies on education, both groups of students indicated three strengths of their system: promotion of equal opportunities, free of charge/low school tuition, internationalization of studies. The Romanian students mentioned several other positive aspects (freedom of speech, reforms, and changes, encouraging volunteering), but they also expressed their discontent about the ill-managed education at the national level.

When asked to mention a country with democracy problems (question 4), 27.5% of the Romanian students indicated their own country. The fact that almost all of them (31 out of 33) also provided explanations and arguments for their answer clearly puts forward the students' critical stance regarding their own country. Thus, in their view, democracy in Romania is seriously flawed, mostly due to corruption, scarce opportunities, and the lack of respect for human rights.

Other countries ranking high among the Romanian students in terms of flawed democracy were Venezuela (12), China (7), Russia (7), Poland (7), North Korea (6), Moldova (5), and Turkey (4). The explanations for their choices prove awareness of global issues: they talked about human rights violations and famine in Venezuela, about communism in China, and dictatorial actions in Russia and Turkey.

The Icelandic students mentioned countries such as North Korea (4), United States of America (3), China (2), and Russia (2) to be most affected by dictatorship. Brunei, Italy, Iran, Columbia, and Mexico, as well as “many countries in Africa” and “Muslim countries” (as they put it), were also brought up in the answers. They also referred to apparent and actual democracy issues, expressing their doubts on the US elections' reliability, which they considered to be influenced by “the power of money.”

The analysis of these answers shows that China, Russia, and North Korea are considered to have problems with democracy by both groups of students.

When asked whether they would be interested in knowing if a country has problems with democracy before deciding to visit it (question 5), more than half of the Romanian students (55%) gave an affirmative answer, claiming that a more democratic country would make them feel safer. This aspect was irrelevant for 45% of the Romanian students, who considered that they would only focus “on visiting the tourist attractions or whatever the purpose of [their] trip might be” and that they “would not move to that country.” Only two Romanian students expressed their willingness to turn this into an opportunity to “help people and try to make a change,” as they would like to “discover the problems faced by that country and the solutions to such problems.”

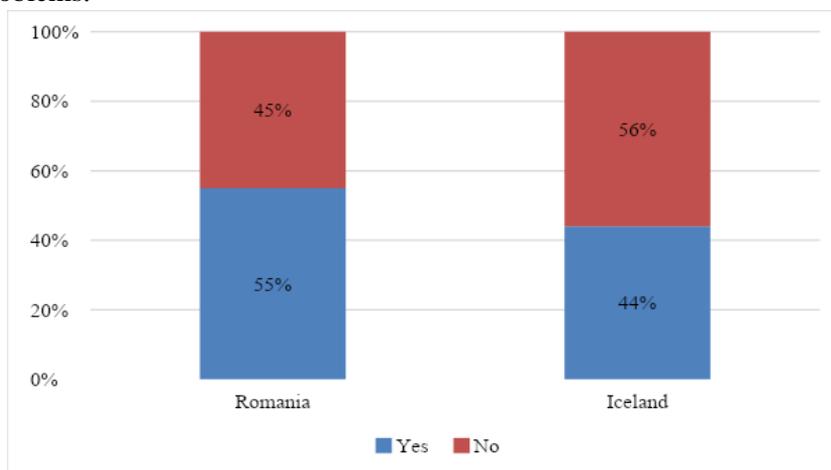


Figure 3. The distribution of answers to question 5

Out of the 32 Icelandic students, 56% would not be interested in the democratic status of a country they would visit, claiming to be “apolitical” and mentioning that they are not used to considering this aspect when planning a trip. On the other hand, 44% of the Icelandic students stated that they would not visit a country “where the government misuses power” or infringed human rights, as they wanted to feel safe

1st position	1	4	3	2	14	0	2	0	2	1	0	0	0	0
2nd position	3	2	5	6	4	0	3	2	3	0	0	0	0	0
3rd position	2	5	6	7	3	0	4	0	1	3	0	0	0	0
4th position	3	1	5	7	1	0	6	0	3	2	0	1	0	0
5th position	1	5	0	1	4	1	3	5	2	2	2	3	1	1

The initials stand for the following topics related to democracy:

- a. active citizenship
- b. freedom of speech
- c. right to vote/universal vote
- d. equality (gender, race, LGBT, disabilities, etc.)
- e. human rights
- f. freedom of assembly and association
- g. universal access to education
- h. free access to information
- i. fair justice system
- j. ethnic/multicultural tolerance
- k. patriotic values
- l. the right to privacy

m. the right to ownership

n. language skills

The answers provided by the Romanian and the Icelandic students were processed according to the weighted score method, i.e., decreasing scores were assigned to the topics listed by students, in descending order of importance: 1 – first position, 0.8 – second position, 0.6 – third position, 0.4 – fourth position, 0.2 – fifth position. Since the number of students is not comparable between the two countries involved in the study (120 Romanian students versus 32 Icelandic students), these scores, shown in Table 4 below, cannot be compared, but they are useful hierarchically ordering the topics.

Table 4

Scores for topics related to democracy, obtained based on the answers of the Romanian and the Icelandic students

Topic	Global score from 120 Romanian respondents	Topic	Global score from 32 Icelandic respondents
freedom of speech	72.4	human rights	20.2
human rights	69.4	right to vote/universal vote	12.6
universal access to education	49.6	equality (gender, race, LGBT, disabilities, etc.)	14
equality (gender, race, LGBT, disabilities, etc.)	47.4	freedom of speech	10
right to vote/universal vote	36	universal access to education	9.8

fair justice system	22.4	fair justice system	6.6
free access to information	16	active citizenship	6
ethnic/multicultural tolerance	15.8	ethnic/multicultural tolerance	4
the right to privacy	14.6	free access to information	2.6
the right to ownership	6.4	the right to privacy	1
active citizenship	5.8	patriotic values	0.4
freedom of assembly and association	2.4	freedom of assembly and association	0.2
patriotic values	1.8	the right to ownership	0.2
language skills	1.6	language skills	0.2

The classification of topics related to democracy yields a thought-provoking result, as the first five positions, on a global scale, are occupied by the same topics for both groups of students: freedom of speech, human rights, universal access to education, equality (gender, race, LGBT, disabilities, etc.), right to vote/universal vote. It shows that most students listed the same prerequisites for democratic societies, which could be explained by the existence of a common basis for democracy in both educational systems and cultures. Moreover, it has to be pointed out that both groups consider universal access to education as being inextricably linked to the exercise of democracy, which shows that, in the students' opinion, education plays a fundamental role in the development of responsible citizenship and democratic societies.

As for the topics with the lowest ranking, it can be observed that neither the Romanian nor the Icelandic students linked language skills or freedom of assembly and association to democracy. It is, in our opinion, a surprising result, since “foreign language education today may be conceived of as being the intersection of the major political issues of our time” (Kramsch, 2004). By no means does this answer show a lack of interest in learning foreign languages; it merely shows that students did not associate language skills with democracy. It is worth considering as the majority of respondents were participants in language courses.

The answers for question 7, referring to the students’ experience with education for democratic citizenship in their pre-university studies, again show some differences between the Romanian and the Icelandic students, as demonstrated in Figure 4.

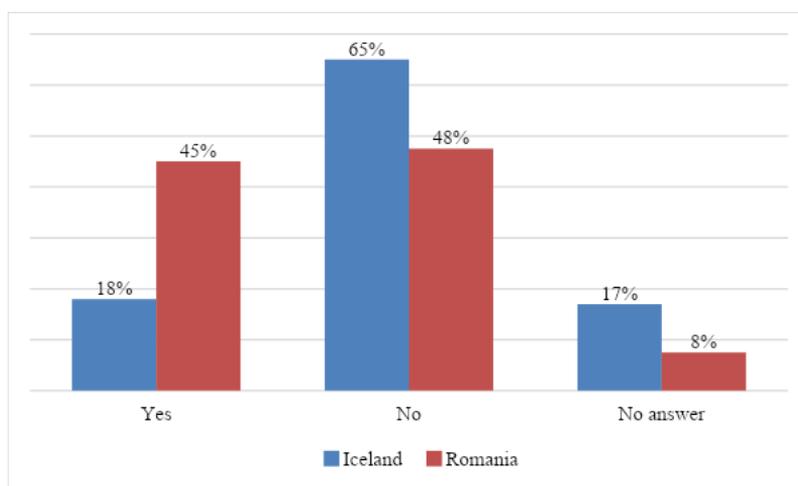


Figure 4. The distribution of answers to Question 7

On the one hand, almost half of the Romanian students declared that they discussed education for democratic citizenship during their primary or secondary studies, within various subjects (e.g., civic education, history, sociology) or extra-curricular activities. On the other hand, few Icelandic students (18%) provided a positive answer to this question, and 17% did not answer. It may be due to the fact that Icelanders, whose country ranks high in terms of democracy, do not need to specifically refer to democratic citizenship, whereas references to this topic in educational programs are necessary in Romania. It confirms that educational policymakers are aware of the importance of education in building and maintaining democracy.

Conclusions

This research aimed to gain better insight into the profile of two groups of Romanian and Icelandic students enrolled in the same field of study, focusing on identifying the differences that may be explained by specific cultural features in the particular context of education for democratic citizenship. The questionnaire answers' quantitative and qualitative analysis outlined a range of common and specific features of the respondents.

Overall, both groups of students showed their interest in issues related to education and democracy, which they were able to approach in a critical and complex way. They all proved to be mindful observers of the world they lived in and expressed an active engagement in their learning activities. However, even if all the students showed advanced critical thinking skills, they proved to have a limited capacity to think out of the box and to provide creative solutions to the issues they identified themselves. Furthermore, when asked to express their opinion on education, students from both countries had difficulties reflecting upon their own behaviour and needs and failed to describe them clearly and coherently. In our opinion, this points out the existence of a similar need in both countries: both the students' creativity and their ability to be self-reflective should continue to be actively encouraged and put into practice as often as possible.

However, two main differences can be identified between the respondent groups. Firstly, the Romanian students' views were much more critical than those of the Icelandic students, perhaps because Romania is a young democracy and the educational system has constantly been changing over the past 30 years. This unstable setting has been generating active discussions and debates in the Romanian society, triggering the students' engagement and reflection. The Romanian students have more issues to criticize in terms of democracy, as the society they live in ranks significantly lower than Iceland. Moreover, they are not hesitant to criticize their teachers, which shows that they fully take advantage of this opportunity when they are allowed to express their opinion. Even though their criticism stems from concrete, personal dissatisfaction, it reflects the Romanian educational system's genuine shortcomings.

Secondly, the Romanian students were much more eager to provide answers to open-ended questions, which may be due to the setting in which the questionnaire was administered (face-to-face/vs./online) and their increased willingness to comment upon the topics proposed in the questionnaire. Possibly, this is also related to the cultural difference between the two nations. Though it could be argued that the Icelandic students had both the possibility to answer the questionnaire at their own

pace, with no time constraints and the benefit of experience, which could have led to more elaborated and meaningful answers, this research showed that they answered spontaneously, providing brief and synthetic answers, in order to complete the questionnaire as quickly as possible. Most likely, they did not want to spend much time on this questionnaire, which can be explained by the fact that Iceland is an “indulgent” country, where people “place a higher degree of importance on leisure time” and “act as they please” (Hofstede, 2019).

Another difference between the two groups of students, which may also be explained by cultural specificities, is their participation in extra-curricular activities, like volunteer work – more than half of the Romanian participants claimed they had taken part in such activities compared to only a fourth of the Icelanders. The Icelandic culture is individualized, and people are expected to look after themselves and their immediate families, while Romania is a collectivistic society, where everyone has a strong commitment, responsibility, and loyalty to the extended family members or extended relationships (Hofstede, 2019).

To sum up, this quantitative and qualitative analysis on the Romanian and Icelandic students’ profile in the particular context of education for democratic citizenship allowed to identify differences induced by the cultural background, thus confirming the initial research hypothesis. This conclusion is also supported by the analytical and data-driven approach to culture developed by Hofstede (2001; 2010; 2019), according to which cultural features play a significant role in shaping the learner’s profile.

In an age where multiple intelligence theories have been posited (Gardner, 1983; Sternberg, 1997), the determination of a learner’s profile is not meant to lead to students’ categorization, but it could be used to identify successful communication strategies for the teaching/learning activities. This research was designed as a first insight into the learner’s profile of Romanian and Icelandic students, and its quantitative and qualitative results could be capitalized in future studies. Nowadays, when higher education institutions must “meet the demands and interests of an increasingly heterogeneous student population” (Aleksarov et al., 2014: 5) and need to continually evolve to develop the process of internationalization and to ensure the transferability of skills, educational resources, or credits, a complex understanding of culture and cultural differences among the learners is a crucial factor to take into account when creating educational messages for effectively targeting learners from different cultural backgrounds, especially when dealing with a global issue such as democratic citizenship.

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