Teachers' Attitudes Towards Teaching and Learning Social Studies in Fifth Grade

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Abstract	This study explores the attitudes and practices of teachers regarding the teaching and learning of Social Education in fifth-grade classes in Romania. Introduced as a distinct subject in the national curriculum in 2017, Social Education promotes critical thinking, children's rights, democratic values, and civic engagement. Grounded in constructivist learning theory and a rights-based pedagogical framework, the subject aims to support students in becoming active and responsible citizens. Through a quantitative analysis based on a structured questionnaire applied to 162 teachers, the research investigates the frequency and perceived effectiveness of specific teaching methods such as debates, role-playing, group projects, and reflective activities. The findings reveal that while most educators favour participatory and experiential approaches, there is still a strong reliance on traditional resources such as textbooks. Teachers reported limited access to diverse educational resources and a moderate use of digital platforms. The study concludes with a call for ongoing professional development and curricular support to enhance pedagogical strategies and to strengthen the integration of children's rights and critical thinking in everyday teaching practice.

Keywords:
social education, children's rights, critical thinking, teacher attitudes, participatory pedagogy, fifth grade

1. Introduction

In a knowledge society dominated by information and pseudo-information, students need anchors to support their education and development. Social education supports them and offers a range of content that promotes and targets the acquisition of the skills needed to become active, informed, and responsible citizens of contemporary society. In this context, teachers have the role of "equipping students with the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to engage meaningfully in social life, to think critically, and to appreciate cultural diversity" (Andronache, 2024, p. 420).

Introduced in Romania in early 2017 as a subject at the middle school level, social education is included in the content of the approved by OMENCS No. 3590/06.04.2016 and is subordinate to the Man and Society curriculum area, with a budget of 1 hour/week over the four school years. Social education begins in the fifth grade with critical thinking and an introduction to the study of children's rights, aiming at a critical interpretation and reporting of facts and events in personal life, but also at formulating opinions and solving problems related to children's rights.

2. Theoretical foundation

Social education is defined as a complex educational process that aims to develop social, civic, and ethical skills, through which students learn to participate actively, responsibly, and reflectively in social life. It promotes values such as tolerance, solidarity, fairness, and respect for diversity (UNESCO, 2015). In the Romanian national curriculum, social education is integrated as a separate subject in lower secondary education and aims to develop general skills such as understanding social relationships, awareness of the role of norms and values, and taking responsibility in the community (Ministry of Education, 2017).

The integration of this form of education is based on a constructivist paradigm, which assumes that learning is an active, socially contextualised process in which knowledge is constructed through interaction and reflection (Bruner, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978). Thus, students not only accumulate information about society, but also learn to critically analyze social phenomena and actively participate in shaping reality.

2.1. Definition

Kelemen (2011, p. 52) argues for a distinction between two concepts that are often confused in common usage: social pedagogy and social education. Social pedagogy, the author states, refers to a field concerned with "the social integration of the human person and their access to various values and models

of action promoted by society." Social education, on the other hand, is defined as "a process of assimilation, attachment to the social group, and integrative discipline of the individual, in the sense of preparing them to comply with the rules of conduct set by the social group."

In the course material for the Social Pedagogy course for students specializing in the same field, Davidescu (2012) emphasizes the values and action strategies promoted by this field. The author supports the legal-legislative component of the discipline, noting that it aims to "transmit the rules of community life and social interactions, cultural models, techniques and beliefs, and, above all, value systems" (p. 16). The same author emphasizes the prosocial role of the discipline, under a democratic umbrella, "with an emphasis on decisions made through group debate, responsibility in fulfilling social tasks, and involvement in community actions."

Critical thinking, seen as a transversal competence and a tool for social learning, is recognised as one of the key competences for lifelong learning, being necessary for active and informed participation in society (European Commission, 2023). This involves the ability to analyze information, formulate and evaluate arguments, make rational decisions, and reflect on one's own assumptions and beliefs (Facione, 2011).

In social education, critical thinking allows students to question aspects of social justice, identify stereotypes and prejudices, recognize information manipulation, and develop a reflective and responsible attitude towards themselves and others (Jerome & Kisby, 2011). Teaching focused on the development of critical thinking involves the use of active teaching methods (debate, case studies, analysis of moral dilemmas, role-playing) that encourage active participation and the reasoned expression of opinions (Brookfield, 2012).

Another fundamental theoretical reference point is education on children's rights, based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), an international document ratified by Romania, which stipulates the right of the child to education, protection, participation, and development. Education about and for rights is not limited to the transmission of information, but involves creating an educational climate in which rights are respected, practiced, and internalized (UNICEF, 2014). This convention enshrines the right of the child to education, protection, participation, and development, and the

implementation of these rights in schools involves more than just conveying content; it involves transforming educational practices and institutional culture so that rights are felt, practiced, and integrated into everyday school life (Lundy, 2007).

The rights-based education model emphasizes that students are active participants in the educational process, not just recipients of knowledge. This approach involves developing a democratic school culture in which autonomy, mutual respect, and participation are constantly promoted (Robinson et al., 2020). As a result, children's rights become not only the subject of learning, but also the normative framework for educational relationships. The implementation of rights-based education has significant effects on students' well-being, their actual participation in school life, and the reduction of exclusionary behaviors, and Levy et al. (2022) argue for a human rights-based framework to address the global children's rights crisis.

Covell and Howe (2008) showed that such an approach contributes to improving the school climate, the teacher-student relationship, and children's perception of self-efficacy. Subsequently, current research (Robinson et al., 2022; Bajaj & Suresh, 2021) has reinforced these conclusions, demonstrating that rights-based education supports inclusion, tolerance, social equity, and the cultivation of active democratic citizenship from primary school onwards. They also show that implementing rights-based education contributes to improving the school climate, student-teacher relationships, and children's self-esteem. Efforts to promote these values foster inclusion, tolerance, and a reduction in violent or discriminatory behavior (Jerome et al., 2015).

We conclude by offering a working definition of the term social education that captures the most relevant and specific aspects found in the literature: Social education is a branch of educational science that studies the formation of moral, civic-social, and democratic skills, as well as the promotion of the skills, values, attitudes, and beliefs necessary for active, informed, and responsible participation in society, with an active role in achieving social cohesion and supporting the holistic development of individuals.

2.2. The specifics of Social Education as a discipline in Romania

2.2.1. Civic Education and Civic Culture, the precursors of Social Education

Studied during grades III-IV (with a weekly frequency of one hour), the subject of civic education aims, as stated in the 2014 Civic Education Curriculum, "the internalization of rules of conduct and the manifestation of moral and civic behavior skills based on natural life contexts and the groups to which students belong at this age" (p. 3).

The subject is designed from a curricular point of view in a competency-based learning paradigm, which replaces the objective-based design model. Such an approach, say the authors of the curriculum (2014), facilitates "the transfer and mobilization of knowledge and skills in new situations" (p. 2). In fact, we understand that civic education is oriented towards "education through and for democracy," with the primary goals of moral and civic literacy for children, the development of positive attitudes towards oneself and others, the valorization of age-specific experiences, and the initiation of students into the practice of moral and civic behavior in a democratic society.

With its call-to-action content and structure, civic education takes the form of a complex and lengthy process of integrating students into the community. By combining formal contexts (within and outside school) with non-formal and informal contexts (highlighted by community partnerships), the assimilation of a value system consistent with a democratic and pluralistic society is encouraged.

In Romania's National Report on the International Study on Civic and Citizenship Education (pp. 230-236), authors Tacea et al. (2022) present, in Chapter 11 – Policies on Civic and Citizenship Education in Romania, an evolution of the discipline of civic education, referring to its specific characteristics in each period of Romanian education. Consulting the document National Curriculum for Compulsory Education. Reference Framework (1998), the authors summarise the main objectives of Civic Education and Culture at that time (also included in the Man and Society curriculum area): "the development of specific skills related to understanding the values of democracy and respecting the norms of behavior in society; the formation of a cultural universe regarding national and international social and political values and structures; the development of the student's ability to use specific modes of argumentation in communication, based on the acceptance of diversity of opinion." (p. 235). The stated goals are limited, as the authors insist, by the discontinuity of the study of this discipline, namely by the interruption of its study during the 5th and 6th grades.

Against the backdrop of a legislative change, namely the emergence of the new education law (relating to the period 2010-2015), Law 1/2011, existing curricular approaches are being reconsidered and a reconstruction of the National Curriculum is being proposed. In this sense, Civic Education retains its status as a subject studied in grades 3 and 4, and Civic Culture is changed to Social Education—a generic name, specific to each grade.

The new paradigm of the Social Education curriculum is mentioned in its presentation note (2017, p. 3) and emphasizes the idea that the proposed approaches go beyond learning about ... (specific to the cognitive, informative level of learning) and that the learning promoted is that through ... (which calls for action, participation, and active involvement), but also learning for ... (related to the transposition of learning into values, attitudes, and behaviors).

Comparing the school curricula of the two disciplines (Civic Culture and Social Education), we clearly see a change in the design paradigm, with a transition from a focus on content to one focused exclusively on students and the development of their skills. The reduction and consolidation of the number of general skills highlights the reconsideration and reformulation of an updated version of the outcomes that are truly relevant to the study of the subject over the four years. In other words, specific skills are associated in the new curriculum with a series of examples of learning activities, which facilitate a greater degree of applicability at the level of design by teachers. The last two categories listed in the curriculum present a restructuring from a curricular point of view: the learning content is presented systematically (grouped into content areas), and the methodological suggestions provide comprehensive and detailed recommendations for specific planning, in line with the curricular orientation of the current curriculum.

2.2.2. Curriculum for Social Education

The school curriculum for this subject is a common core curriculum for grades V–VIII. The subject retains its generic name of Social Education, but each year it also has a subtitle that reflects the specific content studied, namely: Fifth grade - Critical thinking and Children's Rights, Sixth grade - Intercultural education, Seventh grade - Education for democratic

citizenship, and, last but not least, Eigth grade - Economic and Financial education.

The structure of the document includes: Presentation Note, General Competencies, Specific Competencies and Examples of Learning Activities, Content, and Methodological Suggestions.

Analyzing the Methodological Suggestions section, we notice a new vision, much more applied, detailed, and exemplified, emphasizing a series of essential aspects in the development and planning of curricular documents by teachers. We refer to the following subsections: Teaching planning and design, Teaching strategies, and Educational project. We note that this section is at the end of the entire document, so it presents an integrated, comprehensive vision, with examples for all four years of study, for all four sub-headings of Social Education (with examples for formal, non-formal, and informal contexts).

In the section dedicated to teaching planning and design, the authors of the curriculum offer a series of recommendations for good practices in the development of school documents: calendar planning (tabular structure) and the design of a learning unit (structure & reflection questions). The teaching strategies promoted are those with a pronounced practical-applicative, participatory, and creative character. For the fifth grade, the curriculum exemplifies the application of the "starburst" method with instructions, working methods, a graphic organizer, and additional details for teachers. As mentioned above, the emphasis is also on activities carried out in non-formal environments, but also on a theoretical foundation based on documents that constitute fundamental references for the topics covered (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Law 272/2004 on the protection and promotion of children's rights, etc.).

As a new feature compared to the old school curricula of the subjects that preceded Social Education, the educational project is explicitly targeted by the new curriculum, being an integral part of the specific competences, learning activities, and proposed content. With a time budget of 25-30% of the total time allocated for the study of the subject each year, the educational project evaluates the activity of each student within the team, and is then graded according to pre-established criteria.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Research aims

The objective of this research is to investigate teachers' attitudes toward the specifics of teaching and learning social education in fifth grade, by leveraging existing teaching methodologies. Thus, we aim to assess the extent to which the methodology supports the teaching and learning process of social education, as well as teachers' perceptions of its usefulness and effectiveness, and to identify models of good practice.

3.2. Research objectives

In our research, we followed several directions that served as a guide for both the theoretical foundation and the actual assessment stage:

O_1: *Investigating teaching approaches and teachers' attitudes towards teaching and assessing social education in the fifth grade*

O_2: *Measuring the frequency of use of various teaching methods (e.g., role-playing, projects, debates, reflection) in social education classes*

3.3. Research questions

Below we list the questions that formed the basis of our investigation::

R.q.1: *What is the attitude of teachers towards teaching and assessing Social Education?*

R.q.2: *What are the most frequently used teaching methods in Social Education?*

3.4. Subjects

162 teachers in Romania who teach, have taught, or will teach social education, selected at random, with no preliminary conditions to be met.

The evaluation grid was disseminated through online groups on social networks, distributed to beneficiaries and partners of relevant associations, and through collaboration with representatives of educational management structures (specialized school inspectors from the County School Inspectorates in Romania).

3.5. Research methods and instruments

Our investigative approach was based on a questionnaire survey, a method frequently used in the field of educational sciences (and social sciences and humanities in general) due to its ability to collect data from a large number of respondents in a short period of time. We justify the choice of this method by the fact that it facilitates the investigation of teachers'

opinions, attitudes, and practices in a standardized, easily interpretable, and comparable framework.

The method gives us access to the subjective perspectives and opinions of respondents. Thus, we can identify a number of general trends among teachers, but also some specific difficulties or needs that are relevant to the purpose of the research.

As a research tool, we chose to apply a 3-section evaluation grid to respondents, comprising 17 items to be evaluated, of which 9 were closed-ended (Likert scale), 1 was open-ended (editorial) and 7 referred to socio-demographic data. The grid allowed us to measure current teaching attitudes and practices using Likert scales, thus facilitating the quantitative and comparative analysis of the recorded responses. The motivation for developing and applying such a tool was the desire to obtain standardized, relevant, and easily statistically processed data at the primary level.

The assessment grid applied to respondents was developed in Microsoft Forms and distributed via a link to be completed on social media and by email.

The content included in the assessment grid was adapted from the questions and aspects detailed in the national report Civic Education in Romania, published by researchers at the National Center for the Study of Democracy (Bădescu et al., 2024), which is a reference document and a topical source of information on the current status of civic and social education in Romania.

3.6. Demographic Data section

Contains 7 single/multiple choice questions from a drop-down list, as follows: gender, age category, highest level of education completed, field of study completed, teaching experience, teaching degree, qualification level.

3.6.1. Section I: Approaches and attitudes towards teaching and assessment in Social Education classes

The requirement was to "Indicate the frequency of use of each method or routine on a scale from 1 (very rarely) to 5 (very often)."

The Likert scale values were:

1 – very rarely; 2 – rarely; 3 – sometimes; 4 – often; 5 – very often

The nine statements evaluated were:

I use the textbook as my main working tool.

I prefer written assessments to oral assessments.

I encourage students to carry out projects in small groups on various topics.

I involve students in role-playing games or simulations of real-life contexts.

I encourage students to debate current issues in society.

I encourage students to suggest topics to be covered in future lessons.

I assign tasks that require research from multiple sources (physical/online).

I use essays as a means of assessing students.

I facilitate discussions and encourage students to reflect on what they have learned.

3.6.2. Section II: Use of educational resources

What tools/applications/platforms/websites do you use in designing and teaching Social Education classes? List a few examples

4. Results

Below, we will present and analyze the responses received in the evaluation grid for each item proposed. For this purpose, we will use comparison histograms, a category of graphic organizers that can illustrate the data obtained.

4.1. Demographic data section (summary)

Most respondents are female teachers (76%), predominantly aged between 46 and 60 (56%) and with between 10 and 25 years of teaching experience (46%). In terms of education, the most common level of study completed is a master's degree (55%), and the predominant field of study is "Other fields" (51%) (mainly history, geography, philosophy). Professionally, most respondents hold a first degree in education (59%) and are tenured in another subject, teaching social education only to complete their teaching load (36%).

4.2. Section I: Approaches and attitudes towards teaching and assessment in Social Education classes (synthesis and interpretation)

Analyzing the nine statements, we can highlight the fact that Social Education teachers generally adopt a predominantly applied and interactive approach to teaching, associated with a relatively moderate dependence on the formal (traditional) resources provided by the system. The use of the textbook (A1) appears to be a stable benchmark: more than half of the respondents use it "often" or "very often," confirming its role as a benchmark tool in a relatively

new discipline. In contrast, written assessments (A2) and essays (A8) are used rather occasionally, with the assessment profile being flexible and oriented towards other forms of student learning assessment.
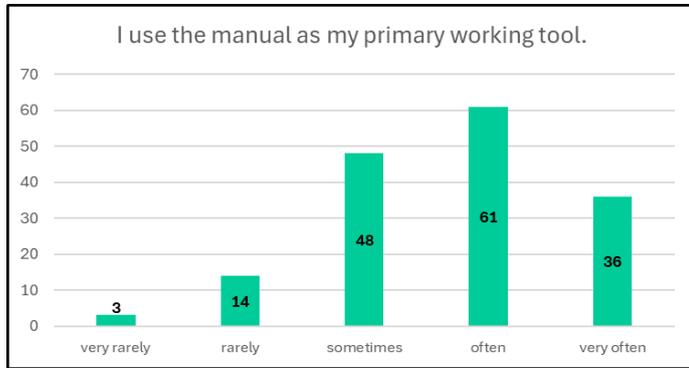
Figure 1

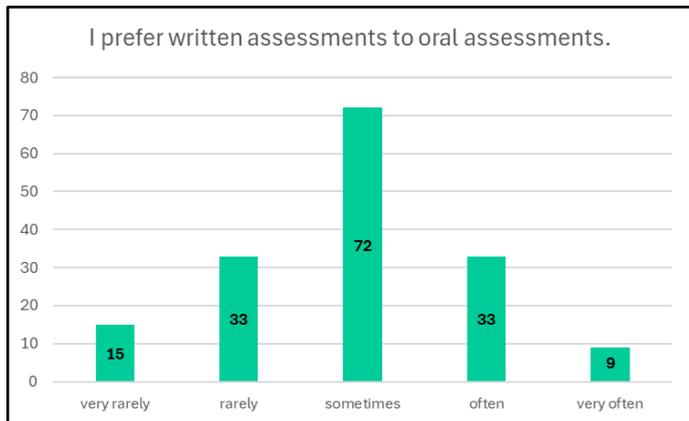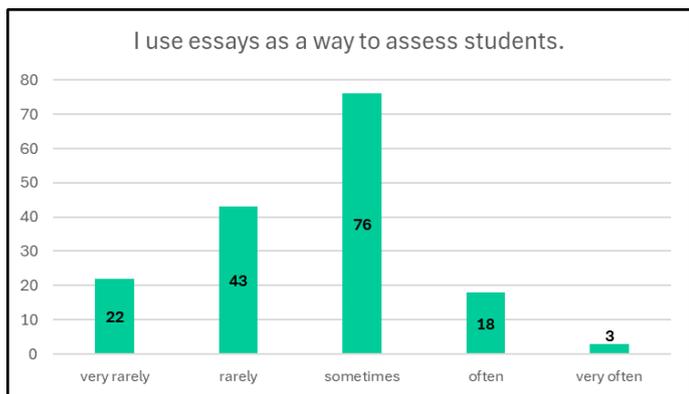*Section I – A₁*

Figure 2

Section I – A₂

Figure 3

Section I – A₃

Active-participatory methods are the most frequently used. Small group projects (A3) and role-playing or simulations (A4) are common practices: most teachers say they use them "often" or "very often," which shows a clear focus on experiential learning and connecting content to students' lives and current events. The same trend is confirmed in the case of debates (A5), where approximately 80% of

participants frequently encourage discussions on current issues, the highest level of agreement in the entire set of items, suggesting that teachers value this discipline as a space for civic education and critical thinking.
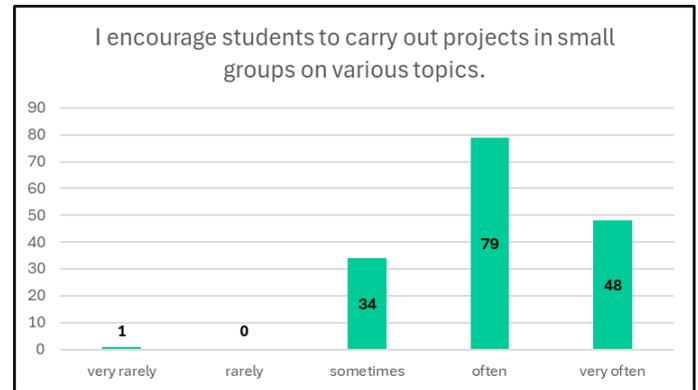
Figure 4

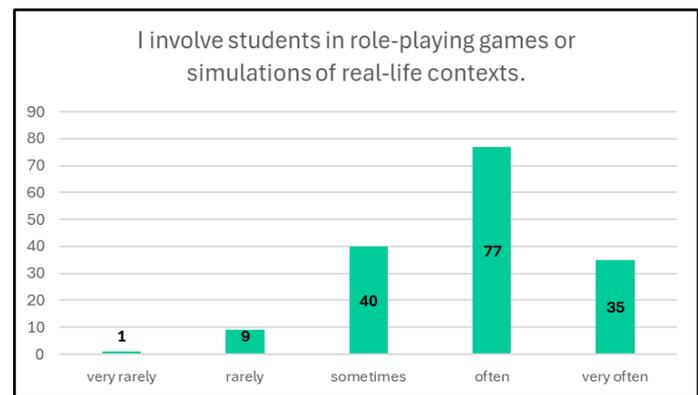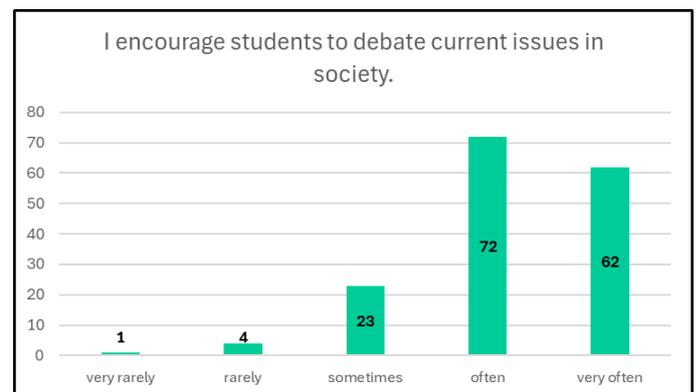*Section I – A₄*

Figure 5

Section I – A₅

Figure 6

Section I – A₆

However, openness to curriculum customization is moderate: although teachers say they facilitate debates and various activities, only some of them allow students to propose future topics (A6), with most responses falling into the "sometimes" category. This reservation may reflect curricular constraints (imposed mainly by the school curriculum) or the limited

expertise of teachers who teach the subject as a supplement (to their teaching load).
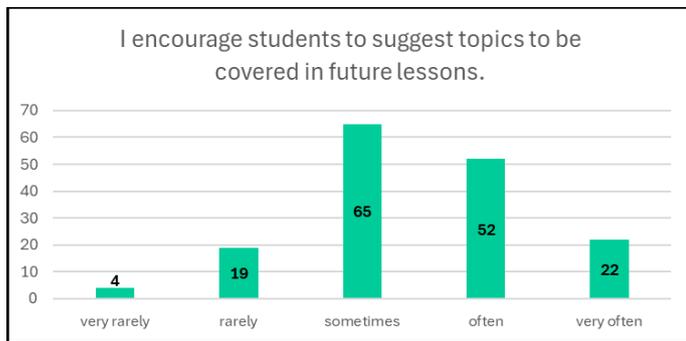
Figure 7

Section I – A₇

I encourage students to suggest topics to be covered in future lessons.

Figure 8

Section I – A₈

I offer tasks that require documentation from multiple sources (physical/online).

Figure 9

Section I – A₉

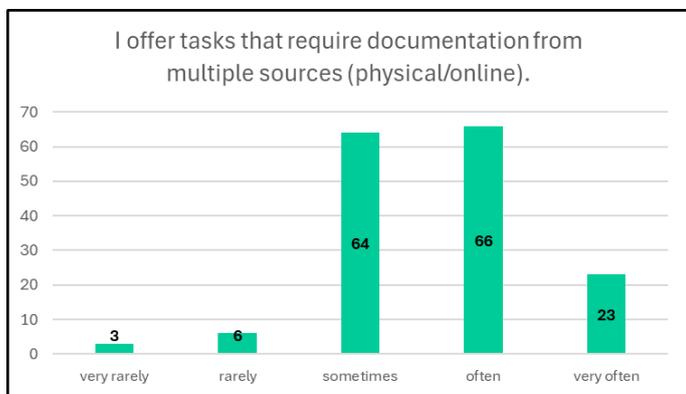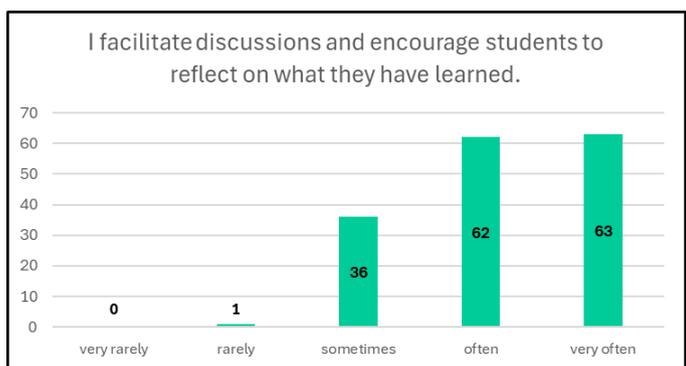I facilitate discussions and encourage students to reflect on what they have learned.

With regard to students' ability to conduct independent research, the item on requirements based on the use of multiple sources (A7) shows a significant openness to the development of digital skills: approximately 70% of teachers assign such tasks at least "sometimes." However, the values for "very often" remain moderate, confirming the existence of barriers such as the risk of unethical use of information or interference from generative artificial intelligence tools, an aspect also highlighted in the teachers' descriptive testimonies (answers to the open question).

Finally, facilitating reflective discussions (A9) is one of the most established teaching behaviors of social studies teachers: over three-quarters of respondents say they consistently support reflection sessions on learning. This practice, combined with the high frequency of debates (as a method), outlines a profile of teachers who prioritize metacognition, dialogue, and the development of students' social skills.

4.3. Section II: Use of educational resources

What tools/applications/platforms/websites do you use in designing and teaching Social Education classes? List a few examples.

This last section aimed to collect examples of good practices in teaching and assessing Social Education. Below is a summary of the results obtained.

From the 162 responses received, we created a Top 10 Ranking of the most frequently mentioned:

1. YouTube: a free online platform where short and attractive videos can be browsed and viewed. Top response, in line with the responses to the previous items.

2. educred.ro: digital platform, the largest library of REDs in Romania. Accessible and useful for teaching design, the materials are aligned with current curriculum documents and approved by the Ministry.

3. Kahoot: online application for generating quiz-type contests. Intuitive to use, attractive interface, encourages learning through play. Requires an account, but is free.

4. manuale.edu.ro: platform developed by the Ministry where all approved school textbooks appear in digital, interactive format, with the possibility of downloading in .pdf format. Often used by teachers to project textbook pages onto interactive whiteboards.

5. didactic.ro: Romania's largest platform containing teaching projects and educational materials for all levels of education and subjects. Requires account registration, is free, but the materials are not approved or checked by an authorized entity.

6. Wordwall: online application with an impressive collection of interactive games and activities that utilize various learning and assessment items (quizzes, multiple choice, order of events, T/F, challenge wheel, etc.). Registration is required, and the free version is limited to 3 created materials. It offers flexibility, with some published materials being editable and customizable.

7. Google Suite (classroom/docs/forms/slides, etc.): free, account-based, intuitive, and practical applications for converting documents from Microsoft Office applications (Word, Excel, PowerPoint, etc.) into an online version that is editable and ready to be shared with other collaborators.

8. Padlet: a kind of digital "notice board" or "panel" where work, materials, questions, and impressions can be published and voted on or commented on, depending on the specific activity. The free version limits users to three padlets, but users still have free access as collaborators to other shared padlets. It excels in presenting timelines, hierarchies, rankings, or even managing and organizing ideas generated in a brainstorming session.

9. Canva: online graphic design tool, with a free version, but also a PRO version (for a fee, in exchange for more features). With an interface similar to classic text editing and presentation applications, it offers fully editable templates and various options for exporting material, depending on the user's needs.

10. Quizziz: interactive digital platform for creating and administering tests, quizzes, and various activities to deepen knowledge. Free access, user-friendly and intuitive interface, with live or asynchronous use mode (theme, for example). Students' answers are automatically recorded, and the application generates detailed and useful reports for personalized feedback.

This ranking of the most used platforms shows a clear preference for audio-visual resources and interactive digital tools, with YouTube, Kahoot, Wordwall, and Quizizz consistently mentioned in the top positions. This trend confirms that teachers feel an acute need for visual, dynamic, and immersive materials that can capture students' attention and support learning through play, exploration, and practical application. At the same time, the use of platforms such as educred.ro, manuale.edu.ro, and didactic.ro indicates a desire to combine official resources with flexible, adaptable tools that can compensate for the lack of specific materials for a subject that is still insufficiently covered in the curriculum.

It is noteworthy that, out of more than 150 open responses (to the above question), only 2-3 mention the use of artificial intelligence-based tools in the design or evaluation of Social Education classes. This absence can be explained either by a lack of knowledge about these resources and their potential, or by a reluctance to acknowledge them for reasons related to professional ethics, shame, or distrust of

their educational validity. It is also possible that many teachers have used them occasionally, but without explicitly associating them with the idea of genAI (short for the concept of "generative artificial intelligence").

5. Discussions

Teachers were found to prefer encouraging project-based learning, debates, and assignments that require research. The general trend is to facilitate discussions, promote open dialogue, and support one's own opinions in the context of a reflective approach based on critical thinking.

Measuring the frequency of use of various teaching methods and approaches in Social Education classes, the results reveal a lack of diversity in the resources available for this discipline. Most respondents refer mainly to the provisions of the School Curriculum and the content proposed by the textbooks approved by the Ministry. However, an encouraging percentage of respondents mentioned the REDs proposed by relevant associations and various scientific publications as a benchmark in their teaching design approach.

6. Conclusions

The research results reflect the idea that Social Education remains a relatively new discipline in the Romanian curriculum, which is why "ideal" or unanimously validated educational practices have not yet taken root. Although there are valuable premises—such as teachers' openness to reflective methods, the use (at least partial) of open educational resources, and interest in the formation and development of critical thinking—there is a clear need for continuous adaptation and improvement of teaching practices. This adjustment must be constant and take into account both the complexity of the topics covered and the dynamics of contemporary society, in which children's rights, active participation, and values-based education are becoming increasingly relevant for the formation of young people as active and responsible citizens.

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