

Building Democratic Citizenship Beyond the Classroom: A Comparative Study of Extracurricular Education in Finnish and Romanian Lower and Upper Secondary Schools

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Abstract:

Across Europe, democratic societies are increasingly challenged by political polarization, populism, misinformation, declining civic participation, and growing distrust in democratic institutions. These developments have renewed scholarly and policy interest in the role of education as a cornerstone of democratic resilience. While civic education has traditionally been associated with formal curricula, recent international research demonstrates that democratic competencies are more effectively developed through experiential learning, participatory school cultures, and meaningful extracurricular engagement.

This paper examines the contribution of extracurricular educational activities to democratic citizenship education in Finland and Romania through a comparative perspective. It analyses how debates, student councils, Erasmus+ projects, eTwinning partnerships, civic festivals, environmental campaigns, Model European Parliament simulations, community volunteering, and democratic school governance contribute to developing civic knowledge, critical thinking, intercultural dialogue, social responsibility, and democratic participation among secondary and upper secondary students.

The study is situated within a broader comparative research project currently conducted during the 2025–2026 school year involving teachers, principals and students from secondary and upper secondary schools in Finland and Romania. While empirical data collection is ongoing, the present paper provides the theoretical framework, comparative educational context, research methodology and expected outcomes. Existing evidence from OECD, PISA, ICCS and Eurydice reports indicates that educational systems systematically integrating extracurricular civic education achieve stronger democratic attitudes, higher civic participation and greater student engagement.

The article argues that democratic citizenship cannot be developed exclusively through classroom instruction but requires authentic participation in democratic school life. Finland illustrates a mature model where democratic education permeates the entire curriculum and school culture, whereas Romania demonstrates considerable progress through national educational initiatives and European projects despite continuing structural challenges. The paper concludes that extracurricular education represents an essential dimension of democratic consolidation in contemporary schools and offers practical recommendations for strengthening democratic education across Europe.

Keywords:

Democratic citizenship, extracurricular activities, civic education, Finland, Romania, democratic consolidation, secondary education, Erasmus+, school democracy, participatory learning.