

THE HOLISTIC APPROACH TO TEACHING AND LEARNING ABOUT EUROPE AT SCHOOLS – THE 21-st CENTURY APPROACH

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*„We must make great efforts to educate free humans,
who can determine the direction and purpose of their lives.“*

Rudolf Steiner

Abstract

The report focuses on a holistic approach, while presenting its essence and main characteristics. It indicates why this approach, which roots can be found in ancient philosophers, now is particularly relevant and has clearer recognition. Emphasis is placed on its characteristic features, by establishing its intersections with education in the 21-st century, which in order to meet the new needs and challenges, and the skills required for the 21-st century, goes beyond formal education. Its necessity and applicability in teaching and learning about Europe at school is defended, as Europe must be understood as something more than just a geographical and economic concept. It is European spirit, culture, European values, behaviour, belonging, self-confidence. They cannot be taught and learned within the standards of the classroom.

Keywords: holistic approach, 21-st century skills, learning, European Union, modern school.

Holistic education lives up to its name because it focuses on the overall growth of students, not just some of the characteristic human activities. In its essence, it is an education that considers the universe as an indivisible whole and believes that each person has a precise place in the world and everything is interconnected and should not be considered in particular, but as a whole. The person educated with the holistic approach undergoes development not

only in terms of acquiring new knowledge, but also internally, thus creating an atmosphere of good cooperation, mutual respect between all participants in the educational process.

Holistic education contributes to the fullest intellectual development of the learner and contributes to progress in all areas of his life. It deals with the development of children's cognitive, social, aesthetic, spiritual, physical and emotional potential [10]. /Figure 1/



Figure 1. The six elements of holistic education

The idea and the tasks of holistic education are to provoke the interest of adolescents and motivate them to learn, expanding their worldview and beliefs. The main goal of the teacher is to arouse their interest in life. In holistic education, in addition to the importance of students preparing for school subjects, this method also clarifies and shows how students should be taught, how to learn to learn and master what is taught.

The concept of holism comes from the Greek notion of holon¹, which views the universe as composed of integrated elements that cannot be reduced to parts. The Greeks advocated a holistic approach to learning. Socrates can be seen as a holistic educator because he encouraged everyone to explore their own lives: „know yourself.“

Rousseau, though humanistic rather than holistic in his approach to education, provides some of the foundations of holistic education. He sees the child as a fundamental good and believes that the child's soul must be allowed to unfold according to its own natural pattern. This view of the child as good is a fundamental position for holistic education, which rejects the fundamentalist view that children are born in initial sin.

Pestalozzi², who believes that the misfortunes of every nation are due to the ignorance of the humans, so through proper education of the younger

¹ The Greek word Ενντ / holo / means „whole, everything“

² Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi is a Swiss humanist, pedagogue, reformist, philosopher, creator of the first system of primary education.

generation the universal prosperity can be achieved, belief which has been influenced by Rousseau, hence Pestalozzi applies his ideas for education in practice. He sets the classroom as a place for creative activity and encourages teachers to use their intuition.

In the last century, two of the most important holistic educators were **Rudolf Steiner**³ and **Maria Montessori**⁴. Steiner is the founder of Waldorf pedagogy. He places at the centre of upbringing and training the man as a whole, with his physical, mental and spiritual essence, or as psychology calls them, with his body, psyche and self. Based on his in-depth knowledge of the child's development and its needs, Steiner created a teaching methodology in which he worked holistically not only for the child's intellectual development, but also for his volitional and emotional growth. By shaping at the same time the will, feelings and thoughts of the child, Waldorf's education helps to build balanced, confident, motivated and creative personalities that are the basis of a healthy society. The Waldorf pedagogy offers a holistic approach to education and upbringing, in which children willingly go to school and develop long-term motivation to learn and discover the world.

Montessori, at the heart of his teaching method, puts the postulate that every child is an individual and should be approached in this way [9]. This is the reason why there is no uniform programme or method to raise all children. Therefore, the materials used in this method are diverse: for practical and sensory skills, for language, for mathematics, etc., as everything in them is related to the world around them. For her, education cannot be effective if it does not help the child to open up to life.

Holistic education became a visible field of education in the 1980s, when "The Holistic Review of Education" was first published in 1988, with its founder Ron Miller, PhD⁵. He helped to create an international movement for this emerging educational paradigm. Numerous publications by a various authors followed. John Mueller's *Holistic Curriculum* is well known one [8].

For the holistic movement an event of importance was the meeting in Chicago in 1990, at which a statement was developed outlining some of its basic principles. It states: „Holism⁶ is the challenge aimed at creating a sustainable, fair and peaceful society in harmony with the Earth and its life. It includes environmental sensitivity - a deep respect for both local and contemporary cultures, as well as for the diversity of life forms on the planet.“

³ Rudolf Steiner (1861 - 1925) is an Austrian scientist and philosopher

⁴ Maria Montessori, 1870-1952 is an Italian doctor and world-famous pedagogue.

⁵ Ron Miller, PhD, Montessori method teacher. His research focuses on the cultural and historical foundations of education.

⁶ The term „holism“ was coined by Ian Smuts in his book Holism and Evolution, 1926. Holism is a concept that refers not so much to static systemic wholes as to those that change over time, to processes.

Holistic development is a holistic approach to learning that aims to develop many aspects or abilities of the human brain. Conventional education and training systems aim only at the development of intellectual abilities. Holistic development refers to expanding the way we look at ourselves and our relationship with the world, taking into account everyone's innate human potentials - intuitive, cognitive, emotional, physical, imaginative and creative, rational, logical and verbal [6]. Authors also add language skills, and self- and spatial awareness [1] /Figure 2/.

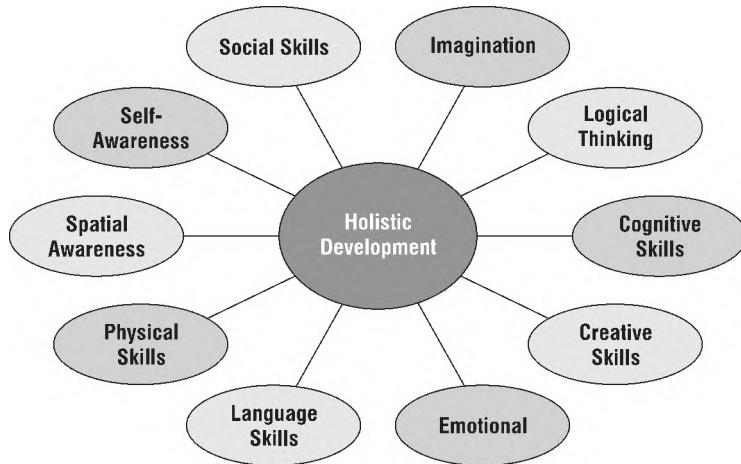


Figure 2. Holistic Development – at a glance

The cognitive development is related to the knowledge and development of mental activity, i.e., the intelligence of the child. It involves reasoning, problem solving and understanding of concepts and is one of the vital elements for overall development. Daniel Gollman adds to emotional intelligence, the main key components of self-awareness, self-management, empathy, motivation and social skills. They are necessary for the existence and development of any successful person and should be nurtured in children from an early age [5].

Why a holistic approach to teaching and learning about the European Union at school?

• Preconditions

Our current educational system is focused mainly on the intellectual development of adolescents and the acquisition of a minimum of knowledge in particular subjects. Undoubtedly, this knowledge is important and significant for the development of students after school, but why then most of them, even those who are materially satisfied do not feel the fullness and value of their existence? Most of them don't care what they do. For them, the world is

grey, boring and monotonous, and the European Union is incomprehensible and distant, even though they are part of it.

Too often, adolescents believe that others are unaware, unwilling, and unable to understand their potential and true abilities. Lost in the way of a correct understanding of life, they do not know how to distinguish between good and evil, right and wrong. At the same time, they need the positive evaluation of others and without it they feel desperate. When they receive it, they are still dissatisfied and thus find themselves unable to touch the true feeling of pleasure and satisfaction.

That is why what Maria Montessori says at the beginning of the last century that every child is unique with its unique personality traits, interests, preferences, values, attitudes, strengths and weaknesses, is more relevant today in the 21-st century, as academic achievement alone can no longer guarantee success and happiness in your personal life and work life. Holistic development through early childhood education has become more important today than in the last century. Holistic development, which essentially means the development of intellectual, mental, physical, emotional and social abilities in adolescents, helps young people to cope with the demands and challenges of everyday life. These abilities are vital to succeed in professional fields of work. The school programme should be able to help each student find their unique place in the world, in accordance with the uniqueness they have. To achieve this, the overall development of the child is extremely important.

Our education must be in line with our reality and develop accordingly to the development of our lives. Our daily lives are increasingly linked to the policies of the European Union, to the decisions of its institutions, but they remain unclear to young people. The school should provide students with the necessary knowledge about the work and functioning of the EU, its role in our daily lives and the opportunities it provides to its citizens, knowledge to guide them about life within the Union, in which the country is a member of and participates in decisions making process. The report finds that knowledge of the European Union is either lacking or too little in our school curricula [12]. The lack of awareness of the origin of the European Union, the reasons for its creation and its main functions in adolescents, is a prerequisite for the formation of false idea of the policies and specific actions the Union takes.

The school education system in Bulgaria shows no educative process, which is inextricably linked with the education of students and the formation of their sense of European spirit, belonging to the European community, for the manifestation an active civil attitude. In the context of the spread of Euroscepticism, the rise of nationalism and extreme populist movements, aggression, violence and xenophobia, exacerbation of social problems arising from the economic and financial crisis and the consequences of COVID-19, the study of European Union issues at school and educating young people in the spirit of European values, becomes a necessary condition for the preparation of European citizens with active positions and ready for participation in the

European socio-political life. The point is that they should not only be simply informed, but also active citizens. Growing up as conscious citizens of their own country and of the European Union, young people would be able to participate fully in European events, in debates about the future of the continent and of their own country. Awareness that they are citizens of a united Europe will broaden their horizons and open up new opportunities for study and work.

So far, relatively little has been said about the social skills of students acquired in school. But the new, rapidly changing society, the opportunities which Europe offers without borders requires adolescents to develop skills and the ability to make contacts, behave in society, skills related to the degree of responsibility, the ability to cooperate with others, to understand and accept foreign cultures, to work in a team, to be creative, to strive for quality, to be communicative. When taught to understand themselves and others, young people can skilfully manage their feelings, communicate successfully with others, and have the will to develop.

• **Education in the 21-st century**

Education in the 21-st century goes beyond formal education, breaks the traditional closed educational model and becomes a determining factor for social development. Oftentimes, we do not talk about the acquisition of certain amount of knowledge and obtaining a qualification, but about „development, building skills that facilitate the search and acquisition of new knowledge, attitudes and metacognitive qualities“ [14]. The aim is to support adolescents in the management of self-improvement and lifelong learning in the whole process of mastering new knowledge. The tendency is that schooling is not subordinated to the needs of the imaginary student with average opportunities, but in search of educational solutions for the development of the individuality of each or minority groups of students, taking into account the learning environment, the local community, the global world. New educational approaches are needed to help students acquire the competence to construct their own world and to participate in the construction of the world around them together with others, competencies to participate in creating a social environment in which there is fusion between individual and group interests. It follows that the individual has increasing control over his life and his environment. Self-assessment and evaluation of achievements are carried out against the background of the comparison of the individual with the socially significant.

• **21-st century skills**

21-st century skills refer to a wide range of applicable knowledge, skills and competences that are necessary for personal and professional realisation, and social adaptability to the rapid changes that characterise the 21-st century. They are work habits and behaviours that are particularly important for success in today's world and give an advantage to those who have them in their adaptability to today's highly competitive world and allows them to take advan-

tage of the opportunities offered by the international environment. These skills focused on the following abilities:

- **Ability to study in order to know** - how to live in this risky world;
- **Ability to learn in order to be able to do something** - building the world around me and my relationships with other people on a harmonious basis;
- **Ability to study in order to live together** - to be able to achieve harmony with myself and the world only together with other people;
- **Ability to study in order to be** - in order to discover myself, in order to establish myself in my world and in the world with others, in order to be myself in my relations with people and with nature. [7]

The new educational paradigm is personality-oriented and respects the rights of the individual, in particular the student. In the didactic aspect it is oriented to key competencies in which transversal skills and metacognition have a dominant role, in the psychological aspect it develops thinking and its qualities.

In the information society, called by P. Drucker the knowledge society, individuals occupy a central place [13]. Unlike money, knowledge is personalised. It is not housed in a book, database, or computer programme. Those contain only information, while knowledge is always embodied in a specific person who carries it within himself, creates it, increases it or enriches it. The educated person, according to him, is looking for opportunities through which the knowledge he possesses is useful today, for him, for the society.

• The school of the 21-st century

A joint report on education and training in the EU related to the implementation of the Lisbon Strategy, published by the Council and the European Commission, highlighted „The school has a key role to play in enabling everyone to be informed and to understand the meaning of the European integration. All education systems must ensure that, by the end of their secondary education, their students acquire the knowledge and competencies they need to prepare for their role as future citizens of Europe“ [2].

Building a knowledge society as an educational goal of the European Union is a constant educational-educative process and the school is the institution that has a leading role in laying its foundations. It remains an irreplaceable place and a means for the development of the personality, for the acquisition of qualities that allow it to take control of the future and the ability to actively integrate into society. The rediscovery of the Bulgarian school as an environment for the development of new relationship between school and society, cultural affairs, school and the surrounding world, school and Europe is the challenge we must still meet.

The Recommendation of the Council of the EU of 22 May 2018 on the promotion of common values, inclusive education and the European dimension of teaching, states that training should aim to help learners to feel their

European identity in all its diversity and to strengthen a positive and inclusive sense of European belonging, complementing local, regional and national identities and traditions. It is recommended to raise awareness in school and improve the understanding of the European Union. It should be implemented through direct interaction with young people by teaching them how to understand the origins, values and functioning of the Union, as well as understanding the European context and the common heritage and values, and without forgetting to educate on raising awareness of the social, cultural and historical unity and diversity of the Union and the Member States [3].

On the basis of a report on the study of the European Union at school [11], a European Parliament resolution [3] was adopted, calling on the Member States to review and update their education system and the content of the European Union in curricula, to address special attention to the training of teachers to develop their abilities and skills on how to educate about the European Union, using modern interactive methods.

The modern Bulgarian school must build the foundations of European self-consciousness and European affiliation, to affirm European values. Values related to human dignity and communication behaviour are developed and deepened when young people have the opportunity to take responsibility, to realise and accept the different and clear ideas of the creative force of tolerance and kindness to the other - the challenge of European spirit. Its task is to provide adolescents with knowledge, practical skills and education that will allow them to orient and positively adapt to the new civil society, to understand the nature of the processes, to think and analyse, to freely express their opinions and positions, including the ability to established personal views. This can protect them from manipulation and deception. Knowledgeable and capable young people can easily orientate, situate and critically understand the things, phenomena and information that reaches them from various information sources. The feeling of learning as a duty is decreasing more and more. Learners should have the freedom to become active drivers of their own learning process in a non-threatening, less hierarchical environment. They must feel motivated from their own free will to invest their time in education, without pressure from social norms. Learning is not seen as a simple transfer of knowledge, but rather a multifaceted process leading to personal growth. This process of teaching and learning, of the interrelated activity of teacher and student, in the 21-st century goes beyond the notion that teaching is the teacher's activity and learning is the student's activity. The roles are not always strictly differentiated. The teacher, in the process of learning, could discover new knowledge together with the students, and the students - could teach their peers or to self-teach. Today's teachers must not only be able to use modern tools and technologies in their work, but they must also keep up with new teaching practices and use them in their lessons. If it is expected from teachers to prepare students to learn throughout their lives, then they themselves must be prepared to develop throughout their entire career.

- **The advantages of a holistic approach in teaching and learning about the European Union at school**

Instead of focusing on teaching EU topics in a separate subject on school curricula, using a holistic approach to European Union learning outside the classroom will enable students to use their academic learning as a support and basis for their emotional and social development. This will develop cognitive, language, communication, emotional and physical skills, which are essential for the positive overall development of students with formed attitudes. These skills are essential to navigate successfully and survive in this ever-changing world.

The holistic approach meets the requirements and expectations in teaching for the European Union at school. It is oriented both to the mental development and to the psycho-social and emotional development of the students. It allows teaching and learning to achieve the multifaceted development of individuals who can live in harmony both with themselves and with the world of other cultures around them. In the process of acquiring knowledge about the European Union, the activities contribute to the overall growth of students, to the development of their intellectual, social, physical, artistic, creative and spiritual potential. Going beyond the classroom, an environment is created in which adolescents experiment, explore, and discover. Involved in activities that provide personal, emotional and social development, students learn in a more attractive and interesting way a topic that at first glance seems dull and boring. Thus, learning gives them a sense of pleasure. This is achieved by:

- The activities in which students participate are accepted by them as a personal choice. Significance is an important factor in the learning process. Students learn better when what they have learned is important to them. When the semantic structures of each student are being respected. A student can know or understand a topic by breaking it down through his worldview, what matters to him, not what others think should matter to them.
- The knowledge and information they receive is understandable and relevant to everyday life.
- Students get actively involved in the activities by developing creative and innovative abilities, as a result of which they acquire knowledge and skills that give them greater confidence in their strengths and abilities to cope with tasks. In interactive games /simulations/, debates, case solving, theatre, competitions, etc., students can quickly and effectively acquire broad, dynamic and interconnected skills.
- Interactivity, creativity and different forms of activities lead to the feeling that they are doing something different, something new and they are involved in this non-standard school.
- Expression is an important moment in which students discover themselves, discover their opportunities, and at the same time feel the attention, they feel important, which is crucial for their self-esteem.

- In trainings definite opinion or view are not necessitated. The education is based on accurate facts and critical attitude. It is allowed to freely share different opinions and political views about the EU of each student, and the formation of personal attitudes is based on true knowledge and critical thinking.
- And in this connected process of activity, emotions, experience, a sense of usefulness from participation arises.

The holistic approach helps the overall development of students, helps them to learn more about the EU and to develop all their skills, to build their strengths. By applying **active learning methods**⁷, students get actively involved in a dynamic process of acquiring knowledge through activities, creativity, experiences, including personal experience, sharing, discussion, expression, application. Corresponding to the environment, this training forms an attitude in pupils that Europe is not just money and markets, it is spirit, culture, values, feeling, self-confidence. It encourages students to think, to reflect, to transfer knowledge, to make connections between their subject knowledge and knowledge of the European Union - for example, using their knowledge of geography, history, civic education for public administration and the functions of institutions in our country, and comparing them with information on the functioning of the EU which makes it easier for them to learn and absorb new knowledge.

At its nature, holistic education is inclusive. It rejects the labelling and separation of students, ignores educational paradigms that rely on „average“ measurements and standardisation. It supports the use of a wide range of teaching and learning methods to reach different groups that are actively involved and knowledge is seen and obtained as less fixed. This way, knowledge about the EU can reach maximum number of students who can build their own meanings and understandings, and the EU can reach closer to its citizens.

It is also transformative. The student's inner world is acknowledged and education is seen as a process in which the student can transform. Holistic development takes place over time. It is a movement towards new levels of value sustainability, a continuous sequence of steps in value change.

Conclusion

The dynamics of the European processes imposes the need to ensure a continuous undertaking of preparation and dissemination of knowledge about the EU - current, interesting, entertaining, interactive, in the form of a game, etc. Information should be presented in an accessible and understandable manner for students by applying new pedagogical solutions. One of them is the

⁷ Active learning is also called „learning through action (doing)“, „learning through participation“, „learning through experience“, „learner-oriented learning“ and others. Widely used since the beginning of the 21-st century, it proves the achievement of very good and lasting educational results.

holistic approach, in which knowledge is built in the context of the world in which adolescents live. It involves change in the reference frame that a person may have - points of view, habits, worldviews. Connected with the surrounding and the acceptance that the world exists in its entirety and people must develop not one-sidedly, but in many different directions, a holistic approach contributes to the overall development of adolescents. It forms an attitude in them that the EU is not just money and markets, it is spirit, culture, values, feeling, self-confidence. The more the Union is known and experienced, the more will then everyone be able to make connections between themselves and the community, to create associations between subjects, to use their creative skills to solve a social problem or practical situation, to apply knowledge to real situations, or to offer solutions for the Europe he wants.

In the application of the holistic approach teachers play a vital role . However, the real teachers „are not the ones who have studies pedagogy as a study for simply working with children, but real teachers are those in whom pedagogy has awakened through the understanding of human nature“ /Rudolf Steiner/.

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