

# ECONOMIC EDUCATION SCHOOL-BASED CURRICULUM AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IN PRE-UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

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**Abstract:** *In this paper we emphasized a new approach on school-based curriculum, considered it from the equal opportunities perspective. We related the unique national compulsory curriculum with a traditional understanding of equal opportunities in education as equal type of education for all students in all over the country and the school-based curriculum with a new understanding of equal opportunities in education as equal opportunities of education in school for all students according with their educational needs. Finally, we presented the economic education curriculum for middle school and the way it was introduced in schools.*

**Keywords:** *national compulsory curriculum, school-based curriculum, equal opportunities, economic education.*

The present paper is structured in three parts:

1. National curriculum and equal opportunities in education
2. School-based curriculum and equal opportunities in education
3. Equal opportunities and economic education in middle school

## **1. National curriculum and equal opportunities in education**

Traditional, the philosophy of Romanian pre-university education system was to consider that, by simple fact of imposing a unique national curriculum in all schools students will have equal opportunities of education. According with the path establish by the educational central authorities, all students in the country are studding the same subjects, are

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receiving the same type of education, are following the same curriculum and, consecutively, have all equal opportunities of education at pre-university level and access to higher levels of education.

Decisions regarding what and how much a student should learn are made by central agencies responsible with designing the education system. That agencies are making decision regarding the national unique curriculum (the compulsory curriculum or the core curriculum) on both vertical and horizontal levels, establishing subjects that have to be studied from primary up to high school level, with details in terms of content, skills, attitudes, values, and even learning activities to be conducted into the classes. More than that, they are establishing also how much time, in terms of hours per week, teachers should allocate to teach each subject. The core curriculum (the compulsory curriculum) adopted by central educational authorities covers more than 90% of what students learn. The percentage is diminishing as moving from one level to another. At primary and middle school level, from a total of 26 up to 30 hours per week, 24 up to 28 hours per week are allocated compulsory to the subjects included in the national curriculum. At high school level, the compulsory part of the curriculum is lowering as differences between the types of high schools are more important and students have to choose between profiles and/or specializations. Still there is a core curriculum which is common in all schools. From the educational authorities point of view this is meant to provide to all students, no matter the high school they are enrolled, those knowledge, skills and attitudes at the standards that describe the high school level of education. For high school level, educational authorities admit also the idea that different students, with different knowledge, competencies and expectations have different educational needs and, as a fact, they will choose different educational programs. This is an important change in the way of understanding the principle of equal opportunities, a move from the idea of equal education for all students to the idea of equal opportunities of education in school for all students according with their educational needs, from the supposition that all students will come to the same level of knowledge and competencies through the same type of education, no matter of individual differences to understanding that differences between individuals require differences between educational programs in order to achieve the knowledge and competencies at the standards that describe the high school level of education. The compulsory curriculum stays also much extended at high school level, 60% of the whole curriculum and higher.

## **2. School-based curriculum and equal opportunities in education**

Differently from the national curriculum, the school-based curriculum provides educational paths adapted to different groups of students. Each school designs and develops so called its “educational offer” which includes different subjects to be chosen by the students for 2 out 30 hours average per week. In order to offer these subjects schools have to have resources, such as specialized teachers or educational materials. They also have to identify students' educational needs and to balance the subjects which will be studied by students each year and during the whole period of schooling.

The school offers and the students are choosing between different educational programs. Speaking in terms of supply and demand, we could say that the school has the educational supply and students and their parents accept or reject it and, direct or indirect, express their own educational demand. When students or parents are asking for specific subjects to be thought in school, such as a specific modern language or a subject required at a final exam, we could say that there is a direct demand for a certain type of education. Reversely, when students choose to change the school, because they want to be enrolled in the educational programs offered by that school, we could say that there is an indirect expressed demand for a certain type of education.

By recognizing the students demand of education, educational authorities recognize the idea that students or parents could make good decision in their/their children's educational interest. And also, they recognize that school should be opened to individual educational needs and provide opportunities for development to all students equally.

The school-based curriculum generates differences between students in terms of subjects they have studied. But not significant differences and, for sure, with no major effects on the type of education students receive. What is particular good is that school-based curriculum may emphasize specific circumstances, generate better condition of access to certain information, accelerate de development in one direction or in another, or help achieve specific standards for students which face difficulties in learning process or, on contrary, are fast learners.

School-based curriculum may also compensate minuses of the national curriculum, providing additional opportunities of education for students. The national curriculum cannot entirely cover the educational students' needs. This is quite understood and accepted by students' families who, in many cases, agreed to compensate through private efforts

those minuses. But, it is obvious that not all families can do this. For all students, including those that cannot have support from their family in terms of private lessons, school-based curriculum may be the solution for a more adequate education. In the same time, some schools might offer educational programs to increase the time nationally allocated to different subjects, when it is proved that this is insufficient or scarce, as an economist would say.

### **3. Equal opportunities and economic education in middle school**

Economic education in Romanian middle schools is the result of a successful program conducted by Romanian Center for Economic Education (CREE) in partnership with Center for Economic Education from Hayward State University, California, S.U.A, Council for Economic Education (CEE) din S.U.A<sup>1</sup>, and Romanian Ministry of Education.

Our hypothesis was that economic education in middle school is necessarily in order to familiarize students with basic economic concepts and economic way of thinking, and prepare teaching Economics in high school. In the same time, economic education may help students developing decision making skills and rational behavior.

The curriculum for middle school includes basic economic concepts direct related to everyday life, to the way in which people are acting as consumers and producers. Such economic concepts are: productive resources, scarcity, opportunity cost, economic incentives and rewards, consumer and producer, entrepreneurship, cost of production, profit, productivity, specialization, division of labor, market and price, competition, savings and investments, limited intervention of government, public goods, taxes, governmental expenditures, human capital, money, unemployment, inflation, interdependences and international trade, barriers of trade and free trade.

To teach these concepts attractive lessons which involve students in different learning activities, have been developed. At the beginning of the program 20 lessons have been developed. These lessons were selected from materials published by CEE and adapted to a reality which is familiar to a middle school student in Romania.

Below we present a synthetic table of the lessons, including the lesson content and title, the economic concepts thought in each lesson, and also the content standard and benchmarks that describe the expected

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<sup>1</sup> Former National Council on Economic Education - NCEE

achievements of students. It is particular for the middle school curriculum that the lessons have attractive titles, especially written in terms that make sense to students, not to teachers. For example, the introductory lesson is entitled *Why does not wear George his glasses at school?* It was our intention to attract students interest through this title, to make them understand that Economics can be studied in an enjoyable way and to motivate them to learn Economics.

**Table 1 Economic education for middle school**

Lesson content	Lesson title	Economic concepts in the lesson	At the end of the lesson, students will be able to :
Introduction on Economics	<i>Why does not wear George his glasses at school?</i>	Choices, decisions, costs, and incentives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify opportunity costs and benefits of different decisions</li> </ul>
Productive resources	<i>An Expedition in Jungle</i>	Productive resources, human resources, natural resources, capital goods, scarcity, opportunity cost	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify productive resources used to produce different goods and services</li> <li>• Identify situations that implies scarcity</li> <li>• Draw a resource map in a location and identify economic activities in different communities</li> </ul>
Decision making	<i>Alexandra goes to high school</i>	Choices, decisions, opportunity cost	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make personal decisions using a five steps model of decision making</li> <li>• Identify opportunity costs of different decisions</li> </ul>
Entrepreneur	<i>The Path does not Taken</i>	Choices, alternatives, entrepreneur, opportunity cost	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify alternatives and opportunity costs of entrepreneurship</li> <li>• Identify successful entrepreneurs in the community</li> </ul>
Economic systems	<i>What, How and to Whom to Produce</i>	Productive resources, market economy, command economy, basic economic questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make differences between methods of allocation of goods and services in various economic systems</li> </ul>

Property rights	<i>So few Whales and so Many Chickens</i>	Incentives, benefits, opportunity costs, scarcity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand property rights as generator of incentives and efficiency</li> </ul>
Market	<i>Market Game</i>	Market, supply, demand, price, sellers, buyers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand the interactions between sellers and buyers and the market price</li> </ul>
Productivity	<i>The Secret of Paper Cups</i>	Productivity, income, specialization, division of labor, investments in human capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Calculate the productivity</li> <li>• Identify factors that help increase productivity (experience and professional training)</li> </ul>
Cost and profit	<i>Toys Factory</i>	Cost of production, profit, loss, total income	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Calculate cost and profit</li> <li>• Identify factors that help increase profit</li> </ul>
Trade unions and economies in transition	<i>The Unemployed City</i>	Division of labor, limited intervention of government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand industrial revolution process and the changes in division of labor generated by this process</li> <li>• Evaluate the policies adopted in order to diminish negative effects of different changes in the economy</li> <li>• Understand the role of trade unions</li> </ul>
Beget and government expenditure	<i>Where Does the Money Go?</i>	Public goods, collective consumption, taxes, government expenditures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify government incomes and expenditures</li> <li>• Understand the importance of taxes as a major source of income for government</li> <li>• Identify how citizens would benefit from public goods</li> </ul>

Gross domestic product	<i>An Island Economy</i>	GDP, consumption, investments government expenditure, exports, imports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify final goods and intermediate goods</li> <li>• Identify governmental expenditure</li> <li>• Make differences between exports and imports</li> </ul>
Money	<i>The Rooster and the Bean</i>	Trade, barter, medium of exchange, unit of account, store of value, standard of payment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand the role and the importance of money in economy and in people's life</li> </ul>
Inflation	<i>More Money Doesn't Mean Always More Wealth</i>	Power purchase of money, inflation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Define inflation as increase in the price level</li> <li>• Explain inflation as effect of increase in money supply</li> <li>• Understand the relationship between inflation and power purchase of money</li> </ul>
Unemployment	<i>Hiring a President</i>	Labor force, unemployment, structural unemployment, cyclic unemployment, frictional unemployment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify unemployed people</li> <li>• Identify the major causes of unemployment and the types of unemployment</li> <li>• Choose between different professions depending on job perspectives</li> </ul>
International trade	<i>Labels Around the World</i>	Specialization, comparative advantage, interdependences, free trade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Describe the causes of specialization</li> <li>• Identify the benefits of specialization</li> <li>• Identify the increase of interdependences</li> </ul>

Barriers of trade	<i>Taxes Called into Court</i>	Free trade, barriers of trade, quotas, subsidies, quality standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identifying barrier of trade</li> <li>• Explain why barrier of trade exist</li> <li>• Describe the impact of barrier of trade on prices</li> <li>• Identify people who have gains and losses because of barriers of trade</li> </ul>
Income and education	<i>Why Do We Go to School?</i>	Income, wages, human capital, opportunity cost	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identifying costs and benefits related different level of education</li> <li>• Identifying the opportunity cost of drop out of school.</li> </ul>
Human capital	<i>How to Choose Your Future Profession?</i>	Human capital, opportunity cost, entrepreneur	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analyzing different professions in relationship with personal interests</li> <li>• Analyzing the relationship between human capital and personal carrier choices</li> <li>• Understanding the importance of investment in human capital</li> </ul>
Savings and personal investments	<i>If You Are So Smart, Why Aren't You Rich?</i>	Capital, savings, investments, opportunity cost, shares and bonds, bank account, risk and profit, liquidity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analyzing personal investments alternatives</li> <li>• Understanding basic principles of rational investments</li> </ul>

To introduce economic education in Romanian middle schools, 40 teachers have been selected. They have expressed their availability to take part into the program and to introduce in their school-based curriculum economic education as an optional course. More than 100 teachers have



applied to be included in the program. We have preferred social sciences teachers who were working simultaneous at middle school and high school level, because, normally, they should have economic background or teach economics. We have also taken into account the school status in the local community, its capacity to help promoting the program at county and/or regional level.

The structure of selected teachers on subjects, teaching degrees, age, gender, types of schools, and counties was the following:

a) The structure on subjects,:

**Table 2: The structure on subjects**

Teachers of:	Number	Percentage in total
Economic and social sciences <sup>1</sup>	30	75%
History	8	20%
Psychology	2	5%
Total	40	100%

Source: The data were collected during the research we had in the program „*Economic education in middle school*”

b) The structure on teaching degrees

**Table 3: The structure on teaching degrees**

Teachers with:	Number	Percentage in total
1 <sup>st</sup> degree	24	60%
2 <sup>nd</sup> degree	7	17,5%
Definitive degree	9	22,5%
Total	40	100%

Source: The data were collected during the research we had in the program „*Economic education in middle school*”.

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<sup>1</sup> Excluded history

c) The gender structure

**Table 4: The gender structure**

Teachers:	Number	Percentage in total
Women	31	77,5%
Men	9	22,5%
Total	40	100%

Source: The data were collected during the research we had in the program „*Economic education in middle school*”

d) The structure on age

**Table 5: The structure on age**

Teachers with :	Number	Percentage in total
25-30 years	8	20%
30-40 years	5	12,5%
40-50 years	22	55%
More50 years	5	12,5%
Total	40	100%

Source: The data were collected during the research we had in the program „*Economic education in middle school*”

e) The structure on types of schools

**Table 6: The structure on types of schools**

Teachers who teach in:	Number	Percentage in total
Schools with both high school and middle school classes, such as:	27	67,5%
- national colleges <sup>1</sup>	11	27,5%
- pedagogical high schools	5	12,5%
- high schools in which the teaching language is one of the mother tongues of ethnic groups	2	5%
Regular middle schools (1-8 grade)	13	32,5%
Total	40	100%

Source: The data were collected during the research we had in the program „*Economic education in middle school*”

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<sup>1</sup> ‘National colleges’ are the most prestigious high schools in the country.

f) The structure on counties

**Table 7: The structure on counties**

Teachers from:					
County	Number	Percentage in total	County	Number	Percentage in total
Alba	1	2.5%	Hunedoara	1	2.5%
Bacau	3	7.5%	Galati	1	2.5%
Brasov	1	2.5%	Iasi	4	10%
Bucuresti	7	17.5%	Mehedinti	1	2.5%
Calarasi	1	2.5%	Sibiu	2	5%
Cluj	5	12.5%	Suceava	3	7.5%
Constanta	3	7.5%	Timis	3	7.5%
Dolj	4	10%			
<b>Total</b>				<b>40</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: The data were collected during the research we had in the program „*Economic education in middle school*”.

What is important in respect with the structure on counties is that we wanted to form local or regional teams of 3-4 teachers who could meet and act together to implement successfully the program and to promote it in the future.

All 40 selected teachers have been trained 6 days (48 hours of training) in order to introduce successfully the new curriculum into the classes. During the training program all economics concepts from the curriculum have been explained, all activities recommended to be used in the lessons have been demonstrated, and all working tasks have been solved with the teachers. The participants have practiced active learning strategies, such as simulation, role play, work group, or drama playing. The teachers have took part in auctions, acted as buyers or sellers on the market, produced different goods and services that have been offered then for buying to colleagues. They also have exchanged goods, either directly one good to another (they did barter) or indirectly, using money. They have calculated rates and percentages and draw graphs. By participating in all kind of activities, teachers could understood better the way in which function the market, economic agents are motivated, economic decisions are made, or economic policies are adopted.

At the end of the training program, all teachers' participants have declared that they will apply in the classroom method that have been demonstrated and use the materials they have received. They have recognized that, most of the information and methods demonstrated have been new for them (information, for 55% of the teachers, and methods for 80% of them).

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