



Student Voice Romania

Report prepared by:

Olimpius ISTRATE

Luciana-Simona VELEA



Centre for Development and Innovation in Education



Institute for Education Sciences, Bucharest

**Bucharest
April 2006**

Contents

Summary	3
1. Context.....	4
2. General presentation of the Student Voice project.....	5
3. Student Voice Romania – a learning community	6
4. Formative aspects of SVR.....	8
5. Local Voices – Global Visions: Student Voice Forum	10
<i>Values promoted in schools.....</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>School – freedom of expression and appearance</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>School climate</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>About teachers.....</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>The ideal teacher, described by Student Voice</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>Teachers’ strike</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>Efficient learning</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>Learning style</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>Knowledge versus competences.....</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>Curriculum</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>New technologies in education.....</i>	<i>18</i>
<i>Absenteeism.....</i>	<i>18</i>
<i>Examination and assessment.....</i>	<i>18</i>
<i>Education: “a gateway to the rest of life”</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>Today’s students – tomorrow’s adults</i>	<i>19</i>
6. Personal pages.....	20
7. Conclusions	22

Summary

Student Voice Romania is an initiative of an institution of the civil society that proposes a new educational tool for schools, which is possible to be used both in formal and non-formal contexts. The project values the benefits of the new technologies, especially the Internet, for the purpose of participative learning and pupils' involvement in the decision making, establishing a collaborative distance education environment where activities falling into the following categories take place: (a) information and reflection on educational issues, (b) consultation within the virtual learning communities, expressing opinions, reasoning, (c) direct participation in the decision making process.

The Student Voice project, developed by British Council Romania, addresses the complex *knowledge – abilities – attitudes and values* by recomposing a wide range of social practices in a secure online learning environment, which fosters the development of competences needed by students in the modern, knowledge-based society.

Beyond the formative and informative characteristics, the Student Voice Romania platform is also a consultation tool which can serve the Ministry of Education and Research to survey the opinions of beneficiaries – students and teachers – relative to the impact of recent changes, the adequacy of introducing new punctual reforms, the efficiency of the education system and especially of some components of the hidden curriculum.

The topics chosen by students on the Student Voice forum reflect, on one hand, their interest in collaborating with students from other high-schools in finding realistic solutions to concrete problems encountered in the day-to-day school life, and on the other hand their interest in undertaking challenges launched by representatives of other institutions that have a decision-making and/or a supportive role in the education system: British Council, Ministry of Education and Research, The Institute for Education Sciences, NGOs acting in the field of education. The question "***What do you want your school to look like in the future?***", addressed to the participants in the Student Voice project by the state secretary for pre-university education, made the start on students' expressing their vision upon different components of the education system and the education process.

The students think that the school of the future should promote quality education and focus on values they believe in and can identify with, and it should meet two conditions, fundamental from their point of view: they should like it and it should be an efficient school.

"Do not forget that, in the end, the quality of education depends on students' attitude towards education [...] as well as on teachers' expectations in this respect." (The Education Quality forum)

The students' discussions focused on diverse interesting and/or topical issues: values promoted by schools, school climate, teachers' strike, qualities of the ideal teacher, efficient learning, learning styles, curriculum, new technologies in education, absenteeism, assessment, the education aims, etc. The debates and the exchange of ideas on these subject matters mainly took place between high-school students from 5 Romanian schools and 3 British high-schools, with interventions from teachers, representatives of some NGOs with a supporting role for education, the Ministry of Education and Research, the Institute for Education Sciences and the British Council Romania.

1. Context

Improving the quality of education through a diversification of objectives, contents, methods, and the promotion of innovation through the use of information and communication technologies are strategic objectives asserted by education institutions, governments and international organisations. Against the background of rapid economic and technological development, the education systems are gradually re-defining their landmarks, in a continuous effort for convergence towards the new social ideal – competent, autonomous people, capable of making decisions, of continuous learning and active participation in creating knowledge.

In order to define the mission of education in relation to contemporary challenges, the Report to UNESCO of the International Commission for Education for the 21st Century proposed four strategic “pillars” of learning.

1. *Learning to live together* aims, from a didactic perspective, to develop the students’ knowledge and abilities to accept and use pluralism and diversity, the values of democracy and the human rights. In other words, it intends to develop relationing and communication competences, and to form attitudes open to cooperation.

2. *Learning to know* means “providing” students with knowledge techniques and tools, and especially with learning techniques – learning to learn. Oral and written, verbal and non-verbal communication, arithmetic and problem solving, knowledge and understanding of the world, of rights and responsibilities are some examples of basic skills needed by an individual able to continuous adaptation.

3. *Learning to do* – another landmark of contemporary education – underlines the pragmatic orientation: the need to develop work-related skills and social competences so as to enable people to make rational decisions in different life situations, to develop social and work relations, to participate in the community life, to use the new technologies and, overall, to improve the quality of personal life and living together.

4. *Learning to be* emphasizes the importance of the development of autonomous and responsible personality. It refers to competences complementary to those already mentioned. The school activities must consider the development of attitudes and values, accepting responsibilities, developing pro-active social relations.

“Learning to be” presupposes developing competences for self-critical observation, relating to the others, accepting responsibilities and recognizing the others’ rights. These competences must be developed both through cross-discipline activities and outside school activities by social, cultural, etc. means and sources.

The UNESCO Report highlights a new conception of learning, in a dynamic, technological and global world: education is no longer done only in school, as there is more and more interest in non-formal and informal education; the concept of culture is suffering changes, with the shift from academic culture to the functional one, from written culture to the oral and audio-visual one, from the dominance of mono-culture to intercultural opening.

Given the increasing diverse challenges schools have to face, non-formal education has gradually become a means for supplementing formal education. Therefore, in response to the new social conditions, schools are broadening their scope of activities towards non-

fromal education through partnerships with the civil society, the local communities and different cultural and educational institutions.

The methods considered to be specific to non-formal education have special importance. Learning takes place through active, responsible participation, both in large and small groups. The process of confronting personal visions on some processes to the collective ones (either of the majority, or of the minority) leads to an objective and lasting understanding. Thus, participative learning takes place at several levels: family, school, local community, state, international community. The non-formal approach considers all these levels so that the young people are really aware of the fact that active and responsible participation is the best way for their intellectual and professional development as European citizens.

The successful practices of the last years prefigure a series of benefits which outline the added value of the new technologies, especially the Internet, for participative learning and students' involvement in the decision making and in school government through (a) activities of information and reflection on general issues, (b) consultation activities within the virtual learning communities, expressing opinions, giving reasons, (c) activities of direct participation in the decision making.

2. General presentation of the Student Voice project

Student Voice Romania (SVR) is a project addressing e-learning and e-government aspects, which has been designed to develop high-school students' civic competences through the use of ICT tools, providing them with innovating ways for communication, debate and participation in the decision making. The project is also intended to create a community of youth concerned with the problems of the education system on the model of British educational projects.

The Student Voice project has been implemented in Romania by British Council in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and Research and with the participation of students and teachers from several high-schools from Romania and UK:

- National Banat College, Timișoara
- "Vasile Alecsandri" General High-School, Iași
- "Nicolae Bălcescu" General High-School, Cluj-Napoca
- "Mihai Viteazul" National College, Bucharest
- "Grigore Moisil" General High-School, Bucharest
- Tadcaster Grammar School (UK)
- Gryffe High School (UK)
- Blackpool 6th Form College (UK)

A few educational institutions have been selected and invited to contribute to the fulfilment of the project objectives, namely:

- The CODECS Foundation for Leadership
- The Institute for Education Sciences
- The EUROED Foundation
- The Intercultural Institute of Timișoara
- TEHNE – Centre for Development and Innovation in Education
- Intuitive Media (UK)

The Student Voice Romania platform, available online on www.studentvoiceromania.org, is therefore an area of partnership for education; more than 700 users were already participating in the project after only 8 months from the launching:

Institution	Number of users
Vasile Alecsandri High-School, Iași	175
National Banat College, Timișoara	93
Nicolae Bălcescu High-School, Cluj-Napoca	63
Mihai Viteazul National College, Bucharest	117
Grigore Moisil High-School, Bucharest	171
Tadcaster Grammar School (UK)	12
Gryffe High School (UK)	33
Blackpool 6th Form College (UK)	24
Ministry of Education and Research (Romania)	5
Institute of Education Sciences (Romania)	1
TEHNE – Centre for Development and Innovation in Education	1
CODECS (Romania)	1
Intuitive Media (UK)	7
Bedfordshire SV Project	2
Visitors and Guests	5
British Council Romania	12
Total number of users (on 18 April 2006):	715

This report is a description of the activities carried out and the topics debated by students, guests and moderators on the Student Voice forum (www.studentvoiceromania.org) in the period September 2005 - April 2006. At the same time, the report is intended to give a picture of the added value of the project to the main target group – the young people involved in an exchange of ideas on the online platform – in other words, what contribution has Student Voice Romania made to the development of critical thinking, the development of attitudes towards different aspects of the education system and process, the awareness of the citizens' roles in a democratic society.

3. Student Voice Romania – a learning community

The impact of the project may be analysed at multiple levels, both at the students' level and on the teachers involved and the decision-makers who participated in the project. The Student Voice e-learning platform is to some extent a replica of the relations and actors specific to the students' environment: mediators/teachers, leaders, circle of friends, non-governmental organisations, Ministry of Education, other educational institutions from Romania and other countries. All participants go through a learning process and one can talk both of the development of individual competences and institutional development and preparedness for the current changing context when the entire educational community is called to participate in education.

As regards the pupils, besides the development of knowledge and representation of the education process and system they are involved in, the Student Voice project aims to develop some civic skills/ competences and specific attitudes:

Competences:

- active communication – ability to listen to different points of view, to defend one’s personal position and the others’ position;
- critical thinking - obtaining relevant information, critical evaluation of experiences, recognizing different forms of manipulation, making reasonable decisions;
- participation in and organisation of social activities;
- cooperation, interaction and peaceful solutions to conflicts.

Attitudes and values:

- responsibility for one’s own actions, concern with personal development and social change;
- curiosity, acceptance and appreciation of diversity;
- empathy and solidarity with the others, and desire to support those whose rights are threatened;
- feeling of personal value and others’ value.

In a context where school is promoted as a democratic and intercultural institution, a report of the Council of Europe on education for democratic citizenship recommends new dimensions for the general competences of educators and decision makers in the education systems, and these are competences which the Student Voice project also comes to meet:

- approaching problems from the student’s point of view;
- respecting students’ rights and showing openness towards their needs and interests;
- solving problems and settling ambiguous, complex situations which arise in the classroom or in school;
- capacity to see oneself, and the students too, as active members of the local, national and global community;
- ability to integrate one’s own priorities in a common framework of problems and values, and to act based on students’ decisions;
- capacity to recognise one’s mistakes in front of a group and to draw on their consequences from an educative point of view;
- capacity to debate aspects of the hidden curriculum.

At the same time, a process of institutional learning takes place through the participation of schools and institutions having a role of support and decision-making in the education system. New ways have been developed for the use of the IT laboratories implemented in schools by the Ministry of Education and Research through the national programme IT-Based Education System. Horizontal and vertical links between schools (from different geographic areas) have been created, and between schools and other educational institutions, facilitating the transfer of successful experiences in the education system (Screenshot 1).



Student Voice Romania. Screenshot 1

4. Formative aspects of SVR

Relying on volunteering, the non-formal activities are receptive to the educational needs of all students. Learning through experience and learning by doing – promoted by Student Voice Romania – encourage students in a new continuous and effective learning process and foster the development of competences for life: civic participation competences, competences for the use of new communication technologies, organisational competences and cooperation and interpersonal relationship competences. Moreover, students can practice a series of functional competences, such as: organisational skills, self-management abilities, time management, critical thinking, decision making, information processing and contextual use of information, the ability to identify and solve problems.









Civic participation competences

Due to the peculiarities of the activity, the students have a series of opportunities to develop competences specific to civic participation, experiencing participation as power based on the possibility to exert social or political influence, to take part in the decision making, to accept responsibilities.

The students' civic participation aimed at more than their involvement in the decision making, being intended to propose a model of democratic life, based on the responsible participation of the members of the school community, on the equal exertion of specific rights and



responsibilities. The basis for this difficult undertaking was the assumption that civic participation can be learned through daily experiences and different learning situations rather than through imitation or out of obligation.

 DanielO Loc: Iasi	<p style="text-align: right;">[Edit Topic] [Delete Topic] [Reply] 14 Dec 05 08:56</p> <p>Do you think that there is at least one person from the Ministry to read our opinions?</p> <p>Yes </p> <p>No </p> <p style="text-align: right;">Percent 66.7% 33.3%</p>
 AncaT1 Loc: Iasi	<p style="text-align: right;">[Edit Post] [Delete Post] [Reply] 06 Apr 06 10:39</p> <p>I think that they listen to us but for the moment they don't have what to do but when they'll be able to change the rules I'm sure that they will keep in count our opinions...</p>
 SophieR Loc: Blackpool	<p style="text-align: right;">[Edit Post] [Delete Post] [Reply] 15 Apr 06 22:45</p> <p>I think we are listened to on some items and our opinions are valued, but I still think there are issues which students need to be listened to. There are so many important things that we have opinions and views on to do with our education and the way it is delivered. I think it is the serious issues such as these that we should have more of an input. We are all smart and imaginative people to some extent and I think it is important for students to work together on improving the student voice in schools, colleges, sixth forms etc.</p>
 AndraS Loc: Timisoara	<p style="text-align: right;">[Edit Post] [Delete Post] [Reply] 17 Apr 06 00:19</p> <p>for example in my school one way of making us heard is the students council. we have a president who represents us in front of the teachers. the best part of this thing is that this council is not made just to be made. students really get involved.</p>
 IonutV Loc: Bucuresti	<p style="text-align: right;">[Edit Post] [Delete Post] [Reply] 17 Apr 06 12:40</p> <p>I hope our posts will help them in resolving many issues...which are increasing fast 😊 There should be a group which has the duty to read our posts, selecting the interesting ones. 😊</p>
 AlinaC Loc: Bucuresti	<p style="text-align: right;">[Edit Post] [Delete Post] [Reply] 17 Apr 06 21:43</p> <p>Our opinions would be read AFTER we had written them! I strongly believe that that's the principle we all (the SVR team) should believe in!</p>

Student Voice Romania. Screenshot 2

The students can initiate opinion polls on the Student Voice e-learning platform (Screenshot 2), whose formulation and watching have a double formative role: (a) practicing these democratic tools by excellence allowing them to collect their colleagues' opinions on matters of interest for the school community, and (b) practising aspects of exploratory research of a phenomenal type by focusing on a phenomenon of interest, showing its signification off, formulating the tool of the surveying, drawing up conclusions etc.

Virtual communication competences

The SVR project asks the students to become partners with students from other schools, communicating with each other by means of the new technologies – the Internet forum. The new communication situations develop specific competences: ICT use and virtual communication – writing messages, receiving and interpreting messages, etc. Virtual communication is done mainly through words (written), but it also includes a set of icons or specific symbols (signs with particular signification, already cross-cultural).

Remote communication is part of a set of functional competences and an indispensable tool in nowadays society.

Developing organisational competences

Non-formal activities have impact on students' organisational abilities: arranging meetings to organise activities, setting rules, gathering information on different topics, assigning tasks, time management, etc. In this context, the young people learn to work together with the

others – adults or school colleagues – to accept responsibility to their team, to make decisions in consultation with their team members.

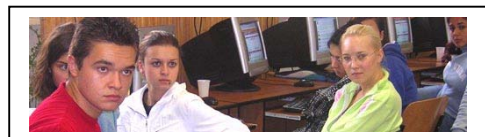
Developing competences for interpersonal relationing

The project is based on the willingness of students and coordinator teachers to participate, which already shows their common characteristic, which is readiness for learning, dialogue and involvement. As the activities are carried out, the students develop skills for cooperation, dialogue, expressing their own ideas and sustaining them with sound arguments. These abilities are practised while communicating with their peers or the adults. The communication with the adults is, in this context, different from the formal communication taking place in the classroom, as the communication rules are more flexible. In some situations, the students interact during the non-formal activities with their teachers. Generally, the students think they communicate better with their teachers in a non-formal context. "Better" means a closer, "warmer" way of communicating and, unlike formal situations, communication comes equally from students and from teachers. The students feel they are important conversation partners in non-formal situations, and this boosts their initiative, self-image and self-reliance.

Discussions with students from a pilot school showed that non-formal learning improves their responsibility. They say so in spite of the fact that there is a common preconception according to which only the formal, rigid and strict learning environment increases the students' responsibility. Their message may also be extended to other desirable competences, expressed both in the educational aims of the Student Voice Romania project, and in the student formative profile described by the formal curriculum.

5. Local Voices – Global Visions: Student Voice Forum

The topics discussed by students on the Student Voice forum reflect, on the one hand, their interest in cooperating with their peers from other high-schools in order to provide realistic solutions to concrete problems encountered in their daily school activities,



and on the other hand, their desire to accept challenges initiated by representatives of other institutions, decision-makers or supporters of the education system: British Council, Ministry of Education and Research, Institute of Education Sciences, NGOs acting in the field of education. In this sense, the debates on the forum came as answers to two types of invitations to dialogue: some from the students, more or less formalised or "academic", and other proposed by the project staff – administrators and moderators, collaborators of British Council or representatives of partner institutions.

The question "***What do you want your school to look like in the future?***", launched by the state secretary for pre-university education at the common meeting in the first stage of the project, gradually generated a range of subordinated topics and discussions, which in conclusion made the students' image of a model school as an education institution that meets their different needs, corresponds to their vision of a proper training environment, helps them develop skills and competences for life and become personalities according to their aspirations.

The students' attention was directed every week to particular topics – included by moderators under the emblem “Burning Issues” – through periodical invitations to contribution on the “Featured Forum”.

The large number of messages – 34 distinct forums, making 140 topics for discussion with 2,585 messages written by students (until 18 April 2006) – suggests an intense exchange of ideas and shows the students' openness for debate and dialogue on education and school environment topics, their individual need to share opinions and make their voice heard in an environment which represents a channel for communication with other high-school students, with teachers and people who can influence decision-making. In time, the focus of interest glided from topics related to school management to subjects dealing with computer-assisted learning, from discussions on values promoted in school to career guidance, from participation and involvement in school life to suggestions for curriculum change.

The students think that the school of the future must promote quality education and be centred on values in which they believe, in which they can find themselves, and it has to meet two conditions, fundamental from their point of view: they should like it and it should be effective.

Values promoted in schools

The challenge to a dialogue on values, consistent with the question formulated by the state secretary of the Ministry of Education, started from elements on which “The *Real School*” would be based. The students suggested a series of characteristics of the ideal school, transposed by referring to its actors: students and teachers. Thus, the atmosphere and the relations within the “*real school*” must be based on trust, communication, balance, efficiency, cooperation, responsibility, motivation, fairness, and involvement. Most of the discussions about these values are found on separate forums, where they are debated one by one, from different points of view. Trust, for example, is considered through the dimension of the student – teacher relation (The forum *If there is not trust ... there is not anything*). The students think that along with mutual respect, trust may be the basis for “a very pleasant” relation between them and the teachers. On one hand, trust in the teacher's methods and knowledge is under discussion – if students were confident about the efficiency of the methods used in the classroom, their school performance would be better. Radical opinions arise in the effervescent exchange of ideas: “*If you don't trust your teacher... why go to school then?*”, then they are watered-down with more general statements: “*Students themselves sometimes feel the need for emotional involvement of the teachers...*” On the other hand, the young people consider that the teachers also should respect their opinions, they should trust more the students' capacities, and give more importance to their problems. Several voices establish communication as the necessary premise of mutual trust between teacher and students, especially considering that “*they play an important role in each other's life*”.

Teachers are regarded as the main determinants in forming values: “*Amen! The student is like a piece of clay that teachers can shape*”, but one should not disregard the active role of students in developing a system of authentic values in accordance with their vision of life: “*It depends on the teacher [...] I am lucky to have some extraordinary teachers, the one in a million type. I don't want to generalise – there are also exceptions – but I know who to listen to and who not. And if you know how to filter out what you see and hear from them, you really have something to learn.*” (The forum *Do you believe that teachers can help us develop a system of values? How?*)

The students also consider that their parents have a decisive influence on the development of their personality, but: “*They should let us too to express our points of view and be responsible for our decisions. As a matter of fact, they should sometimes let us fall down, so that we see that not everything is rosy and good, and become more aware when we make future decisions.*” (The forum *Listen to your parents, they want you to be well!*). Next, the influences exerted by significant adults are brought under discussion in an integrated

perspective, the young people considering that the axiologic bases of their personality are developed through multiple influences: *“Your behaviour and actions outside the school reflect what you learn in school and the other way...”*

Another discussion about values considers the level of participation and its importance to the gradual development of personality: *“Involvement => personality development => aptitude developemnt => individual evolution”*, and a conclusion takes shape at the end: *“I believe that it is very important that the school makes us get more involved and be concerned with what happens around us. Taking into account that we are the future, we should involve in everything that may concern us or those around us.”*

School – freedom of expression and appearance

One of the most debated topics on the Student Voice forums is students’ freedom of expression, which often becomes operational with the topic referring to the obligation of wearing a school uniform. Being in many cases seen as a limitation of creativity and freedom of expression, the uniform becomes a symbol of the obstacles brought by “the system” to the affirmation of youth’s identity. No consensus has been reached on this matter, but we must mention that the “anti-uniform” speeches are better argued. Anyway, the speeches in defence or against uniforms contain challenges for discussion addressed to the representatives of the Ministry of Education, saying that students’ opinions should be considered when the school rules are formulated (the necessity to consult the students is otherwise a consensus reached on more forums).

The debates on the physical appearance are initiated while casting a doubt on the equivalence between the conservative dress, common to all students in a school, and decency of attitude and behaviour. They think that developing a responsible attitude with young people, as a premise for a desirable living style, cannot be done by imposing a rigid set of rules, but, on the contrary, by offering a freedom of choice. In this way students would have to develop their own identity and to (re)place themselves, naturally, in a continuum between “decency” and “indecenty”, between “common sense” and “vulgarity”. In an argumentative approach with impeccable logic, a student’s speech on uniforms is based on one’s own definition of decency – *“adopting an appearance which suits one’s character and figure; when limits are crossed, the vulgarity extreme is reached”*. This is why, somebody else says, being decent does not mean *“wearing white blouses, wearing trousers of certain materials, etc.”* – this is only a pattern, external to the individual.

School climate

Generally, young people say they are satisfied with the atmosphere in their school, on one hand “relaxed”, on the other “competitive”, with some exeptions when some students complain about their “colegues who smoke and this bothers them”, and this is why they tried to make them give up smoking. The majority said they are in favour of a more severe attitude against smoking in schools. (The forum *Are you satisfied with the atmosphere in your high-school?*)

The theme of violence in schools was suggested to the students participating in the project and against the background of the debates who took place in the Romanian mass-media in the school year 2006-2007, raised different discussions on the Student Voice platform: *What influences violence in school?, Different forms of bullying, Killing me softly..., The incident in the Central School, Media vs. violence, What about the ignorance?, Bullying – what are your views.*

What influences violence in school? [Edit Topic] [Delete Topic] [Reply] 15 Dec 05 07:03

IoanaS2 Loc: Iasi

What do you think is the main reason which influences violence among youth?

- TV
- Friends
- Computer games
- Family situation
- School

EduardB Loc: Iasi

I think that it is about family situation, because the child starts to create a violent personality before reaching school or contacting other pupils, and because the child acts as he sees at his parents and if his parents acts violently than the child too will have this feature.

MihaelaC Loc: Bucharest

Personaly i believe that all of the above reasons are bad. they all influence us in a negative way. children become violent because all of the things that surround them: family, friends, media, etc. and all of them put together destroy the child` s good personality, turning us into monsters of the 21st century

LucyC Loc: Yorkshire

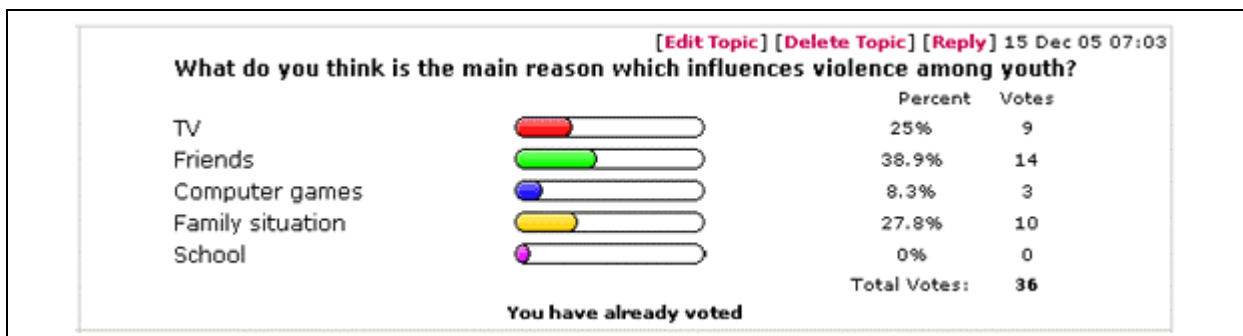
I think the media definately has some affect upon children. however i also believe that their parents have a role to play, especially in the way that the child is brought up. It is them who decide how children live their lives and give them that start in life. I feel that in Britain violence is sometimes the result of children rebelling against their parents because they disagree with something they are saying. What do you think? 😊

18 Feb 06 13:15

I think in Romania violence is enhanced by friend groups. I'm not familiar with your lifestyle in England, but in Romania children grow up surrounded by friends. When they become teenagers,

Student Voice Romania. Screenshot 3

One of those who suggested these topics has done also an opinion poll to see what are the possible main causes of violence among youth, in her colleagues' opinion: family situation, school environment, computer games, the circle of friends, the TV programmes. Out of the 36 participants who voted, the majority thought that the group of friends has a determinant role in this regard – and the comments consolidate the idea of “pressure by peers” as an important factor in the birth of conflict-oriented behaviour, both in Romania and in the UK.



Student Voice Romania. Screenshot 4

One noticeable fact is that there was no participant who considered school an environment which encourages aggressive behaviour. On the contrary, towards the end of the debates, they said there is a reverse proportionality between violence and education acquired at school or at home.

Another discussion about the atmosphere in schools was related to the idea of conflict, including “bullying” of younger students by older ones. First, the participants in the discussions analysed the ways boys and girls approach a conflict. The males are more prone to a direct approach of the conflict, reaching sometimes an open conflict and physical violence, while girls tend to maintain possible arguments through “gossips and talking behind the other’s back”. Anyway, the conflict is “a difficult situation for both genders, when pupils

have not learned to manage a conflict situation". (The forum *Boys or girls when it comes to bullying*)

The rejection of a student by the rest and his/her exclusion for various reasons has also been considered aggressive behaviour. (Forumul *Violence in schools*)

As to the solutions suggested for the settlement of these kind of problems – aggression, verbal and physical violence, drug consumption, etc. – the students considered a series of proposals, among which the specific pedagogical training of the teachers or collaboration between education institutions and mass-media, thinking that this would be a proper time for someone to accept responsibility in order to initiate a series of efficient and proactive prevention actions, such as presentations on the TV channels of long-term consequences of deviant behaviour during teenage years. (The forumul *What influences violence in school?*)

On the other hand, some students show that mass-media is greatly shaping a distorted image of school climate, through an exaggerate presentation of aggressive behaviour in some schools thus contributing to the creation of a (media-based) model of the rebellious-student. (The forum *Violence in school*)

What is certain is that we cannot deny the existence of some degree of violence in (some) schools. At the same time, "we cannot forbid aggression, as this is part of human nature" – the students who act aggressively do it because they "do not succeed in finding another way to express their convictions" or "because they are frustrated" – but what is important is "how we externalise it" and especially "what we do, how we educate ourselves to become less aggressive". (The forum *What influences violence in school?*)

About teachers

There are teachers whose purpose seems to be "to make students not to understand a thing of a particular subject, but only to write down the lesson in their notebooks", so as "they can teach private lessons". This point of view has little support among the students of other high-schools, although the latter too declare that they "have heard of such cases, especially in the reputable high-schools". Anyway, students say, "two cases of such teachers in a high-school are enough" to determine some interventions of the decision makers. Agreement is reached when it comes to the fact that "there is no teacher who being asked to explain something related to the lesson refuses to do so". And a good teacher is a teacher who "pays attention to all students, not only to the good ones", and who "is passionate about the subject he/she teaches and manages to transfer this passion to his/her students". (The forum *The reality in Romania*)

The experience of a project that took place in a high-school has been shared with the other participants on the forum: the teachers have been evaluated by students according to some standard criteria set in the Students' Council. They considered a "victory" the fact that "the teachers really paid attention to the results of the evaluation", and the students in the other school suggested "to generalise the system at national level, even globally". (The forum *What would you change about teachers?*)

The ideal teacher, described by Student Voice

The discussions on the Student Voice Romania platform also bring to the first plan the attributes of an educator/trainer, as they appear to the students who wanted to express their opinion in the debates on the qualities of teachers. Gradually, a mosaic of elements takes shape, a collective projection, a model teacher. The teacher has to be "flexible", "open to new ideas", "to make his/her subject attractive through projects and games related to the subject", "to know interesting and interactive pedagogical methods", "to know to get students close to him/her", "to inspire them with the desire to be better than him/her", "to be dedicated to the profession", "to be authoritarian when necessary", "to have a sense of humour". (The forum *The ideal teacher*) Without denying the importance of a teacher's academic

competences, the young people say they prefer however a teacher who has moral qualities, who knows how to develop the students' competences and abilities, and is close to students and understands them. (The forum *What do you prefer: a know-all teacher or the teacher which is close to students?*)

The opinion is that most of the qualities attributed to the ideal teacher must be found with the students too, because only together they can create "a pleasant atmosphere in the classroom", which is indispensable to efficient learning activities.

Teachers' strike

This topic has been opened by students and posted up on the forum "*Burning issues*", given the fact that it is a topical issue of interest to them. The discussions approached two perspectives: the effects on students – possible unpleasant effects of this period (October - November 2005) especially for those who have to take examinations, the need for students to use the free time during the strike period – and the teachers' demands (the reason of the strike), considering that there is a low probability for their demands to be satisfied by the government, although the students who participated in this discussion considered they were fully justified. (The forum *The strike – does it really help?*)

Efficient learning

Although there were no forums entitled "The ideal student", many of the messages posted up by the participants in the Student Voice Romania project contain direct or indirect ideas about how a model student or an "educated student" should be.

It is very important to educate students so that they "develop their lateral thinking, creativity and logical thinking", somebody says. (The forum *Learning style*)

Appealing to some ideas of Confucius, another student shows that learning by acting and practising is the best way to sound learning, but "it is possible in Romania [in the Romanian education system]". A student from Great Britain replies with arguments that teachers should know each student's level – this is the only way a teacher can plan appropriate activities for differentiated learning – ending with suggestions for grouping students in classes according to their learning ability. (The forum *Learning style*)

Learning style

Starting from the observation that everyone has a preferred learning style, the students have given examples of situations and conditions which help them retain information. Some declared they prefer the visual style, other said that the auditory style suits them better. They have also mentioned the spatial intelligence which appeals to cognitive maps for structuring information.

Without going too deep into the theories on learning styles and multiple intelligences, some students admitting from the beginning they do not know many things about these ones, the discussions on this forum came under the sign of an appeal-declaration found in the opening message of these debates: "*Every student must know and understand his/her own learning style so as to learn more efficiently*". (The forum *UK-RO Students in Dialogue/ Learning style...*) Perhaps this appeal may be addressed to teachers too; the idea of organising courses at school on such subjects as *learning to learn, learning methods and styles*, etc. may prove to be a very good one to raise school achievement and the quality of the didactic process.

Knowledge versus competences

The discussion about the knowledge transmitted through formal education can start from a debate on the definition of general culture nowadays. Thus, the students admit that acquiring general culture is becoming a real problem, and the level of culture should be higher, “if we want a country with a better future”. They consider that the first four years of secondary education develop only “a culture at an elementary level”, and it is the high-school years that develop general culture. On the other hand, some say that a sound general culture is acquired to a little extent at school. The conclusion would be that *“it is necessary to have as much information as possible, in various fields, which should enable you to face different situations... or least a discussion. [...] It depends on every single student what he/she decides to keep. It depends on his/her system of values, on priorities, on his/her abilities... finally, it depends on many factors”*. *“In order to carry out your school activity, but also the extra-school activity, in an increasing competitive environment, the general culture may be an advantage for some of us.”* (The forum *How much general culture a student should have nowadays?*)

Such a truism as “mechanically memorised knowledge cannot be called competences” is becoming an issue which the students want to point out in the context of the discussions referring to the overload of school disciplines. (The forum *Knowledge versus competences*)

Curriculum

One of the most appreciated topics for discussion was opened under the title *“Killing me softly...”*, aiming at an exchange of opinions on things “that kill us softly”. The ambiguity of the theme resulted in a heterogenous distribution of youth’s answers (and arguments): cigarettes, television, life, computer, love, music, Internet, ambition and books, music, chemistry, stress, computers and junk food, unhappiness, fashion and homework, addiction, etc. Among these, they also mentioned “the useless part of school – subjects that are useful for nothing and teachers who have no idea what it means to raise students’ interest in learning”, an idea which has been immediately taken by the students in the two countries and developed. (The forum *Killing me softly...*)

Messages related to the large amount of information they have to go through and memorise at compulsory subjects appeared also in the discussions about the most appropriate learning style, questioning the usefulness of some contents of the curriculum. It is not the learning style which is the most important for the efficient learning, said some high-school students, but rather how you relate yourself to the knowledge you have to go through – important and significant themes are learned with pleasure and especially in a logical manner, and not mechanically. This is why it is important that the school curriculum be focused on themes which are essential to the development of a balanced general culture, including a minimum level of information in all fields of knowledge, and on themes which are significant to the context and professional development of the learners, especially when [school] learning is considered “a gateway to the rest of life”. (The forum *Learning style...*)

The fact that the disciplines are overloaded and too many is a perfect reason for some students to miss classes – as “the single way to relax” under the conditions of a very demanding programme of “8 hours a day, for which they have to prepare a lot”. (The forum *Presence vs. absence*)

The level of general culture of a high-school graduate is considered “very low in our country”, which is, paradoxically, due to “overloaded disciplines”. *“It’s hard for me to think of how many things I learnt, how many biology, geography and history lessons, hundreds of data which were lost in a few years.”*, a student says. (The forum *How much general culture a student*

should have nowadays?) „Anyway, we will use probably 10% of what we learn at school in our professions”. (The forum *How much of what we learn is useful?*)

The contents of the school subjects are considered by the Romanian students “much too loaded”. Some think that a lot of information is useless and outdated – only 7% is worth learning and studying thoroughly, being really useful in life. “We should study only what we are passionate of”, because “everything has a limit and, unfortunately, this limit has long been exceeded” as regards the information load of school subjects. (The forum *Learning style...*)

 <p>LucyC Loc: Yorkshire Posts: 33</p>	<p>[Edit Post] [Delete Post] [Reply] 16 Mar 06 17:06</p> <p>I think that when you get into year 12 - sixth form then you learn because you want to. You have more independence, and in reply to what somebody else said before yes it is worth it, learning is the gateway to the rest of your life. Similarly lower down the school simply provides you with as many options as you like as to what you want to do in life, then as you get older you can narrow down these options to pinpoint exactly what you want to do. Education is definitely worth it, otherwise you would not be able to go to university and you would lead nowhere in life. As for learning styles, sorry back on topic people learn in their own ways, i think this has most definitely been acknowledged this day in age, and teachers are beginning to cater for different needs of the pupils, using visual aids, hearing aids and general class involvement through action/plays etc. It is up to the students themselves whether they want to participate and get the most out of these lessons.</p>
 <p>Elena Loc: Bucharest Posts: 67</p>	<p>[Edit Post] [Delete Post] [Reply] 16 Mar 06 19:10</p> <p>many of the things we "learn" we forget after just a few days...but i guess no one understands us!!! 😞  012.gif" alt="" border="0" /></p>
 <p>AnaMaria Loc: Bucharest Posts: 6</p>	<p>[Edit Post] [Delete Post] [Reply] 16 Mar 06 20:41</p> <p>i agree with elena ..why do we have to learn something that we don't like , for example:chemistry..why do i have to learn it if i don't like it..if we will learn something that we are interested we will enjoy to go to school..</p>
 <p>Cosming Loc: Bucharest Posts: 7</p>	<p>[Edit Post] [Delete Post] [Reply] 17 Mar 06 16:25</p> <p>In my humble opinion, I think that school in Romania is really, really sad. There is WAY TOO MUCH to learn it all. There is WAY TOO MUCH completely useless and outdated information in every school subject. And now the answer to the topic's question: I usually learn by seeing all the information/data as a movie in my head. But then again, I do that rarely, as I learn only what I like or consider it's important for my life(Which is a very very small amount of info compared to what THEY make us learn. About 7%, actually. This forum won't let me say "f u t u r e", saying that it's a banned word...</p>
 <p>AlexandraT2 Loc: Iasi Posts: 41</p>	<p>[Edit Post] [Delete Post] [Reply] 17 Mar 06 16:33</p> <p>It is good that at school we study music, psychology, but every thing has a limit. Unfortunately, in Romania this limit has been overpassed a long time ago, and this idea...that we can't do anything about it, makes me angry. We should study only what we are passionate of.</p>

Student Voice Romania. Screenshot 5

On the other hand, the Romanian students find out that in Great Britain too there are “unpleasant subjects”... English students also sometimes feel that “they are working for the teacher”. Keeping to their personal opinion, the young people share their school experiences: “chemistry and mathematics are too difficult for me”, “I enjoy working at a subject when I like the teacher”, “I didn’t like junior classes, because there were too many compulsory subjects and I had to go to school” – the Romanian and British education systems look no more so different... (The forum *UK-RO Students in Dialogue/ Learning style...*)

Although they agree that there are too many subjects, the Romanian students admit that “we cannot find a subject that is useless to all of us (and so give it up definitively), but on the other hand, I cannot find any subject in which we are all interested”; this is why the suggested solution is the variant of the intended curriculum: the existence of the possibility of real choice among the subjects they can study in high-school, besides a series of compulsory subjects, “which should not be more than 7”. (The forum *The number of subjects*) The current system of optional subjects provided in the school-based curriculum is criticised by some students who say that “unfortunately, most of times, optional subjects are proposed to ensure the workload of some teachers”. Other optional disciplines represent “additional hours to the compulsory subject, in no way optional”, and “you suddenly see it has been introduced in your timetable”. Similarly, a student’s conclusion opposes the current

actual curriculum: “Optional subjects are splendid... [but they are totally missing]” (The forum *Optional subjects – a solution?*)

New technologies in education

The introduction of computers in schools and their use for teaching and learning purposes are topical issues for students, and the Student Voice forums on these issues are a proof from two points of view: the actual use of an e-learning platform, as well as the central points of some debates relating to computer-assisted training. Some say that the *e-learning* methods are the best in spite of some disadvantages. The majority are supporters of the traditional didactic process. When invited to suggest a new learning way, superior to these two alternatives, the solution they chose was a combination and reciprocal completion of the two methods so as “the new way of learning becomes interactive and educational”. (The forum *Education/ Learning style*)

All the participants in the discussions agree that online education and computers cannot replace teachers and the traditional education system, at least as primary education is concerned, because “interaction with teachers [and with colleagues] is part of social development”. Moreover, “we all would be deprived of some funny moments [in the classroom]”, and the funny moments with teachers are “the best funny moments ever”. (The forum *The role of ICT in Education*)

Computers and the Internet should be used more as investigation tools at the majority of school disciplines, primarily for developing the students’ competences in working with these technologies, “useful and essential competences in the modern world”, although they admit that these are not always the most appropriate solutions to some intellectual tasks. (The forum *Using the Internet for project investigations*). For these reasons, all schools should be connected to the Internet. (The forum *Internet in schools*)

Absenteeism

“If you have not prepared for the lesson it is better to leave than taking a bad mark”. This is how a student begins his intervention on the topic related to presence at school. “Better an absence than a 2”, somebody else completes, but he also says that there should be a limit to this attitude, because “missing a class, we do nothing else but running away of problems”, putting them off. Anyway, a punishment for too many absences is needed, the students agree, because “this is also about respect for school”. Similarly, the youth reach the conclusion that presence at school is “an indicator of the school’s efficiency”, more than school achievement as expressed by the students’ marks in that school. Not taking part in the school programme “cannot be called trauncy”, as it is a student’s option; presence in the classroom is “a choice of the best use of time” and primarily shows “teachers’ capability to attract students in the classroom, to make them consider classes as the most efficient way for spending their time”. (The forum *Presence vs. absence*)

Examination and assessment

As regards the final assessment and the admission to a higher level of education, some high-school students say that taking into consideration the high-school general average mark when calculating the mark for admission to faculty is not opportune, “even if it weights little”. (The forum *What would you change about exams?*) Moreover, the system for admission to faculty based on average marks is not relevant, “there are differences between the average marks of students in the science field and those in humanities, usually unfavourable for the

former". Other more moderate students argue in favour of the idea that "the average marks based system is like [as fair as] that based on thesis (examination)", especially when considering that "an examination can no way be considered a good indicator of a student's real performance". In this regard, there is only one problem left, which is felt like an impediment, namely that "our system changes every year". (The forum *What do you think of the way students are examined?*)

Education: "a gateway to the rest of life"

If some aspects of the education system and process are questioned and considered in an utilitarian perspective or from the point of view of their impact (not always positive or nice) on the learners, the education in general and the school education in particular are given a privileged place; this is "a gateway to the rest of life" and this is why "it is worth" sustained efforts from students. The school offers you "as many options as you may need to do what you want in life; as you grow older, you have the possibility to select exactly those options which are helpful to your career". (The forum *Learning style...*)

Today's students – tomorrow's adults

The aim of school education is brought under discussion in relation to the personal ideals. During the debate, it becomes clear that students "must not cram for getting good marks", and similarly, once they become adults, "must not work for money". Beyond the marks, the value of the knowledge acquired and abilities developed in school must be the basis of learning activities, and fair appraisal, according to students, comes from the self-assessment capability. Enjoying life and doing what you want appears when "a balance is found, when the individual joins together what he must do and what he likes to do". Some students consider that "in the end, everything is reduced to



how honest you are to yourself, how much comfort or image you are ready to sacrifice in order to do what it is really valuable to you". The majority assume their own development, considering that in order to become responsible adults they must first desire this more than "a simple diploma" – the supreme proof of responsibility being both a student who is awarded prizes and an adult "who makes his dreams become real", "the quality man who stands out in society". In this context, teachers are considered to have a decisive role as they transmit and develop, at the same time with the school contents, real competences and "wisdom for life". (The forum *Today's students – tomorrow's adults*)

More concrete themes on the same matters go towards training for a profession, the students suggesting they would need as early as possible of special classes dedicated to career counselling, or even of short practical training periods for different professions. (The forum *Guidance for a future career*) Some students think that people choose their profession while at faculty, but it is important however to learn when you are at school so as to ensure you have every chance to choose what you want to do in life – "you may never know what ideas you have at a later time and it would be a shame if you hadn't a good start". Others have some ideas of the field they are going to work in, analysing their achievements at certain school subjects. Finally, there are young people who say that they have already decided to choose a particular profession, arguing that they have learned from some of their teachers that you have to struggle continuously to obtain what you want from life. (The forum *What job would you like to have when you finish school?*)

6. Personal pages

Every user of the Student Voice Romania platform can have his/her own “personal pages” with texts, pictures, links and audio files – a mini-website accessible within the SVR community. The students who participate in the project initiated and carried out by British Council Romania can therefore practice fundamental competences for carrying out activities in nowadays knowledge-based society: competences of critical analysis, evaluation of information and knowledge and, especially, competences for creating contents.

The students’ personal pages are primarily an area for expression, a digital “visiting card” organised by the students with creativity and filled in with information on themselves, creating their own identity within the SVR educational community, an identity which completes the messages they post up on forums.

Besides information on their favourite activities, hobbies, etc., the majority of students also included short polls in their pages, on the one hand in order to gather opinions on topical matters (most of them educational issues, discussed also on forums) and on the other hand in order to have statistics on the number of visitors of their pages. (Screenshot 6)

The Project Grows!
Student Voice Romania welcomes students to the Project in 2005: Cluj, Iasi, Timisoara and Bucharest, and now in 2006 UK students from Tadcaster, Blackpool & Houston UK bring an international aspect.

Hello Olimpius Istrate

STUDENT VOICE
BRITISH COUNCIL Romania

Who's Online - My Settings - Log Out

Main Page Forums My Site

GabrielaN's Site - Page 1
GabrielaN
Grigore Moisil High School

Edit This Page User Information Delete This Page

Page 1 Page 2 Page 3 Page 4 Page 5

Ce dotari ati vrea sa se adauge liceului vostru?

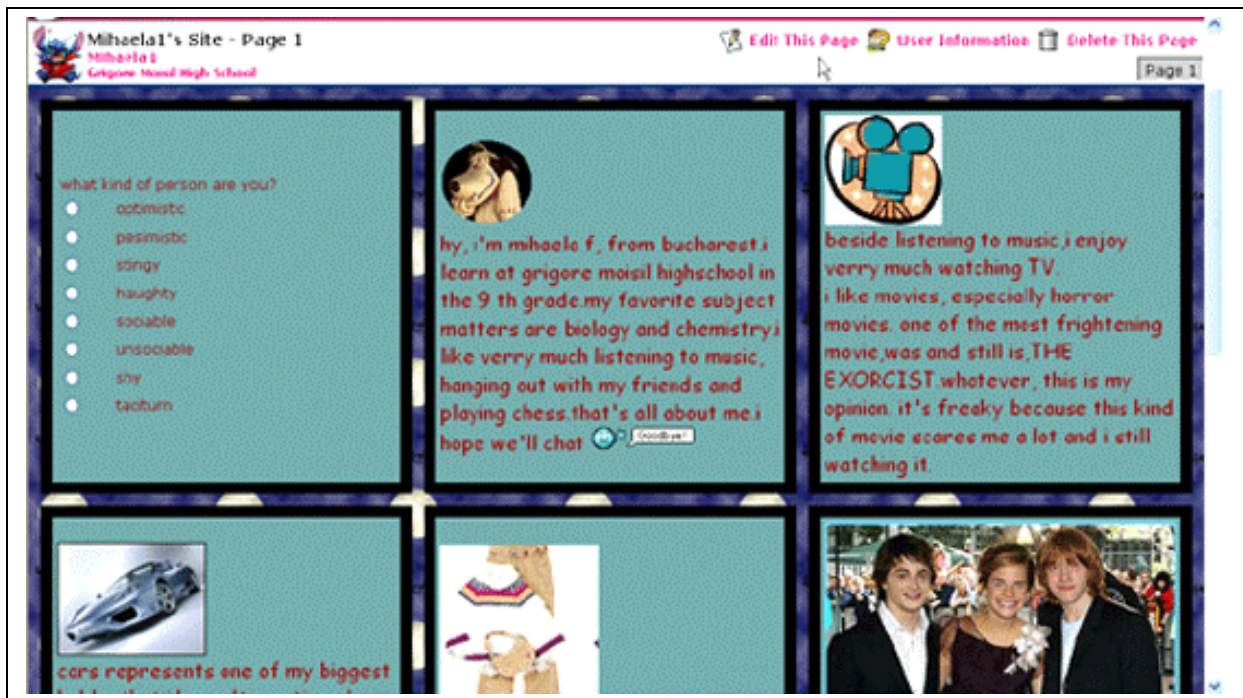
Option	Percent	Votes
termpane	14.5%	9
who cares? Let's burn it!!!	22.6%	14
sala noua de sport	27.4%	17
parcare de biciclete & motociclete	19.4%	12
mai multe calculatoare	14.5%	9
nu-i lipseste nimic	0%	0
mai multe carti	1.6%	1
Total		62

You have already voted

Imi plac foarte mult pisicile. Si cele mari ...

Student Voice Romania. Screenshot 6

The presentations in English done by Romanian students are omnipresent, representing an invitation to dialogue addressed to the British students and indicating the extent to which the young high-school students master the new technologies and the Internet communication at a global level. The Romanian and English students exchange models of behaviour or check their own tastes in an enlarged circle of virtual friends, in a secure training environment, in a perfect area for *social e-learning*. (Screenshot 7)



Student Voice Romania. Screenshot 7

The modern communication tools are or become their every day tools for exchanging information. Expression through images or icons is also a usual mean for concentrating messages and adding expressivity or completing the meaning of textual messages. (Screenshot 8)



Student Voice Romania. Screenshot 8

The tools for creating personal pages, available on the Student Voice Romania platform, are a useful exercise for the participants with a view to the preparation for tomorrow's information

society, a world where the authoring tools and the personalised contents are part of every day activities.

7. Conclusions

The *Student Voice* project is a way of influencing positively the school's organisational culture, the democratic climate and the participative management. It facilitates learning of some aspects specific to democracy through the study, analysis and debate of concrete issues, this helping students to better understand the social reality and fostering civic participation.

The project provides a set of social competences, necessary to every student, as well as opportunities to use the youth's life experiences, in a more flexible and open framework, through a diversification of every day learning environment. It develops the competences necessary in every day life, which are placed by formal education in the second plan of educational aims. Therefore, the project covers an absolutely necessary segment, coming to complete formal education and being a viable alternative for leisure activities as well as a pleasant way of self-development, both for students and teachers as partners-mediators of non-formal education agents.

The contribution of Student Voice Romania consists in:

- intercultural approach of diversity;
- motivating the youth with regard to their active and responsible involvement at the level of local and national education communities;
- transferring good practices in the education field between Romanian and British schools;
- promoting non-formal and formal education, as the parts of a complex process of personality development.

One of the aims of the project is to develop the students' ability of decision-making. For this purpose, the students have to debate, to argue their options, to explore certain situations, to reflect on some situations of general interest – in cooperation with teachers, mediators, decision makers and students from other schools. It can therefore support the education reform while promoting “bottom-up” educational change and motivating teachers to initiate and develop partnership and innovation activities.