

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS IN EUROPEAN EDUCATION

**APOSTOLOS KARAOULAS**

Laboratory Teaching Staff, University of Ioannina, School of Education Sciences,  
Department of Early Childhood Education

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### ABSTRACT

Education in Europe has a long historical tradition as a tool for social structuring and cultural progress. Over the centuries, the skills cultivated in schools have continuously adapted to the prevailing cultural, economic, and technological needs. From the ancient societies of Greece and Rome to the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution, the skills integrated into education have reflected the demands of each era. However, modern Europe faces new challenges, such as digital transformation, climate change, and social inequalities, which shape the strategic direction of the European Union's (EU) education policies.

The EU recognizes the importance of education as a driver of development, not only in terms of professional adaptation but also in fostering active citizens capable of participating in society and advancing democratic processes. Education policies focus on strengthening fundamental skills, such as communication and critical thinking, while also emphasizing new, contemporary skills, such as digital and environmental competencies, to meet the demands of the 21st century. The Digital Compass 2030 initiative serves as a key tool in preparing citizens for emerging technological challenges, while the Sustainable Development Strategy promotes environmental awareness and sustainability.

This study aims to examine the evolution of knowledge and skills in European education, emphasizing how modern educational strategies integrate technological and social challenges. Specifically, it highlights the significance of school years as a foundation for developing skills that foster collaboration, critical thinking, and social responsibility. This study adopts a multidimensional approach that encompasses social, economic, and environmental dimensions, identifying the role of skills in preparing students for the challenges of the future.

**Keywords:** Educational skills, education in Europe, democratic participation, Digital Compass, lifelong learning, sustainable development

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Education in Europe has a long historical tradition as a tool for social structuring and cultural progress. The concept of skills in education is deeply rooted in the historical evolution of societies, reflecting the cultural, economic, and technological needs of each era. In Ancient Greece, skills focused on rhetoric, philosophy, and physical education, aiming to shape citizens capable of actively participating in the polis (city-state). Similarly, Rome emphasized practical skills such as legal reasoning and administration to serve the needs of its empire. During the

Middle Ages, skills were centered around religious and agricultural activities, while the Renaissance revived interest in classical education and the development of artistic and scientific capabilities.

The Industrial Revolution highlighted the need for technical and mechanical skills to meet the demands of factories and mass production. In the 20th century, skills expanded into complex fields such as technology, sciences, and intercultural collaboration, laying the foundation for modern educational policy.

Education is one of the primary mechanisms for social formation and economic development, emphasizing its strategic importance on both a global and European scale. At the core of the European Union's (EU) educational policy is the cultivation of skills that respond to contemporary challenges. Amidst digital transformation, environmental crises, and social inequalities, preparing citizens for life and work is closely linked to the development of transversal, technical, and social skills (European Commission, 2020). The development of these skills extends beyond the labor market to the formation of active citizens who enhance social cohesion and the democratic functioning of societies.

Since the 1990s, the EU has recognized the need for a unified educational strategy tailored to the new conditions of globalization and technological progress. The White Paper on Education and Training (1995) was a landmark document that highlighted the importance of fundamental and cross-cutting skills, such as communication, intercultural understanding, and critical thinking, to enhance competitiveness and sustainable development (European Commission, 1995). This emphasis reflects a shift from traditional knowledge-based teaching to an interdisciplinary and participatory approach that promotes lifelong learning.

The integration of these approaches into European educational systems has progressed steadily but at a slow pace, primarily through initiatives such as Skills Labs. Educational innovation aims to develop both fundamental and modern skills in students from the early stages of education. In particular, the early school years play a crucial role, as they lay the foundation for cultivating social and emotional skills, such as self-regulation, collaboration, and creativity. The early years of schooling serve as a preparatory phase for developing adaptability in an ever-changing environment (Institute for Educational Policy, 2021).

The discussion on education and skills within the EU framework is based on a dual objective. On the one hand, it seeks to empower individuals with skills that ensure professional integration and adaptability in the labor market. On the other hand, it promotes the role of the active citizen, encouraging participation in decision-making processes and democratic life (Biesta, 2011). The balance between individual development and collective responsibility reflects the broader social and political values of the EU, particularly through the Sustainable Development Strategy (European Commission, 2019).

Preparing for the era of artificial intelligence, the green economy, and intercultural coexistence requires a reassessment of traditional educational models. The emphasis on digital skills, such as coding and data analysis, is combined with the cultivation of sustainability skills and environmental awareness. The European Green Deal, along with the Digital Compass 2030, incorporates educational actions that prepare students for these new challenges (European Commission, 2021).

The importance of active citizenship is also linked to the skills cultivated at all levels of education, starting from early childhood education. The early school years incorporate approaches that foster curiosity, creativity, and problem-solving, laying the foundation for students' future participation as responsible citizens. Research has shown that early educational interventions have long-term effects on individuals' attitudes and skills (Heckman, 2006), reinforcing the importance of investment in early stages of education.

The discussion on skills in education falls within a multidimensional framework, encompassing social, economic, and environmental goals. The EU and European education systems, through strategies such as Skills Labs and early childhood education programs, aim to align educational policy with the needs of the 21st century. The early school years, as the first stage of lifelong learning, serve as the ideal environment for cultivating skills that strengthen both individual growth and collective responsibility.

## **2.0 EUROPEAN CULTURE AND EDUCATIONAL REALITY: EVOLUTION OF CONCEPTS AND VALUES**

The historical overview of European culture and its educational system is a subject of systematic study and interpretation, highlighting the ongoing interaction between philosophical, social, and political factors. Throughout this evolution, concepts such as education (paideia), the value of knowledge, ethics, and democracy have been redefined and incorporated into new contexts, forming the foundation of modern European educational reality. This analysis is not limited to a linear presentation of historical events but aims at a thoughtful interpretation of the structural relationships that connect the evolution of education with the formation of European identity. It underscores the role of education as a driving force for skill development and social and cultural transformation.

Ancient Greek civilization serves as the cornerstone for understanding not only European culture but also the very concept of education as a tool for intellectual, moral, and political formation. In ancient Greece, education (paideia) did not have the modern meaning of formal schooling but represented the comprehensive cultivation of the human personality, integrating knowledge with virtue. According to Jaeger (1945), Greek education (paideia) aimed at shaping the individual, not only through the exercise of intellectual capacity but also through the cultivation of moral values, essential for participation in the social and political life of the city-state (polis).

Classical philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle laid down fundamental ideas that continue to permeate modern educational philosophy. Plato, through works like "The Republic", defined education as a means of recognizing "the idea of the good," emphasizing its significance for the harmonious functioning of society (Plato, The Republic). Aristotle, in his work Politics, focused on the connection between education and practical virtue, arguing that education should cultivate citizens capable of contributing to collective well-being and democratic participation (Politics, 1253a). Their ideas linked education to active citizenship, laying groundwork for the future integration of education with democracy, social cohesion, and the development of political and social responsibility skills.

However, the limitations of ancient Greek education reveal the complex relationship between educational ideals and social inequalities. Access to education was a privilege of free men from

the upper classes, excluding women, slaves, and other socially marginalized groups (Finley, 1981). This social dimension highlights the long-standing dialectic between education and social justice, a central issue in contemporary educational debates. Moreover, the unequal access to skills, such as critical thinking and political competence, underscores the importance of ensuring equal educational opportunities in the modern era.

Beyond its philosophical dimension, Greek education influenced the arts, literature, and sciences, representing the first example of an interdisciplinary approach to learning. The principles of rhetoric, logic, and mathematical reasoning introduced by pre-Socratic philosophers, along with later contributions from Euclid and Archimedes, demonstrated the unity of scientific and humanistic studies. This unity serves as a precursor to contemporary education programs that aim to cultivate skills such as creative thinking, data analysis, and problem-solving (Lloyd, 1991).

The enduring legacy of Greek education is further highlighted by its transformation during the Greco-Roman period. The Romans, adopting and adapting the Greek model, developed an educational system that laid the foundation for the classical heritage of the West. Emphasis was placed on rhetoric and justice, concepts that influenced Roman law, which in turn became the basis of modern legal studies in Europe (Marrou, 1956). This emphasis on communication and reasoning skills remains a core element of contemporary educational curricula.

It is evident that the ancient Greek roots of education are not merely of historical significance but continue to shape European cultural and educational landscapes. Through philosophy, science, and the arts, they formed a universal character that incorporates values such as critical thinking, social justice, and intellectual freedom. These values remain foundational principles for education, shaping curricula that emphasize skill development, creativity, collaboration, and the ability to tackle complex challenges.

## **2.1 Roman Law and Cultural Diffusion**

Roman Law stands as one of the most significant institutional legacies that Rome bequeathed to modern Europe, shaping its legal, cultural, and educational identity. Reflecting the principles of justice, equality, and rationality, Roman Law laid the foundation for the development of legal systems, the cultivation of social skills such as critical thinking and problem-solving, and the preservation of social cohesion. During the Roman Empire, the diffusion of this legal framework acquired a universal character, as it was applied throughout the empire, connecting peoples and cultures through a common legal language (Buckland, 1932).

The principles of *lex naturalis* (natural law) and *lex civilis* (civil law), which gradually evolved during the Roman Empire through the writings of the legal philosopher Cicero (106-43 BC) and other prominent lawmakers and philosophers, became fundamental elements of Roman legal thought. These principles contributed to the development of a unified legal system that profoundly influenced the evolution of the Rule of Law in the Western world, leaving an enduring legacy in legal traditions. The Justinian Code (*Codex Justinianus*), compiled under the direction of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian I in the late 6th century, sought to systematically organize and harmonize the existing legal texts and laws of the Roman Empire. This codification was of critical importance, as it provided the basis for the legislative traditions

of Medieval and Renaissance Europe while also fostering skills in legal analysis and interpretation of complex legal texts (Kaser, 1965).

It is worth noting that Roman Law was not merely a legal code but also a vehicle for cultural assimilation. Through its legal system, the Romans successfully integrated diverse cultures under Roman rule, creating a network of shared values and practices. The concepts of *res publica* (republic) and *aequitas* (equity) laid the groundwork for the establishment of political and social structures that persist to this day while also fostering social skills such as cooperation, intercultural understanding, and cross-cultural communication (Honoré, 1978).

The influence of Roman Law on European culture extended beyond the legal domain, impacting philosophy, politics, and education. Cicero, for example, emphasized the concept of *natura iuris* (natural law), linking ethics with legal reasoning. Since natural law is considered immutable and eternal, it transcends the shifting human legislation. The connection between ethics and legal reasoning through the principle of natural law profoundly influenced Roman legislation and later philosophical and legal traditions of the Western world, shaping ethical decision-making and judgment skills. Furthermore, it was instrumental in the Renaissance, when humanists revisited Roman Law as a tool for formulating a new framework of rights and freedoms (McCormick, 2010).

The role of Roman Law in education was crucial. Medieval European universities, such as the University of Bologna, built their legal education curriculum around the study of Roman Law as a cornerstone of legal scholarship. Students were trained in concepts such as *ratio* (reasoning) and *auctoritas* (authority), developing critical thinking, argumentation, and analytical skills. These competencies shaped the intellectual and professional identity of the first legal scholars in Europe and influenced the evolution of education as a means of skill development beyond the legal field (Abulafia & Rackham, 2021).

The cultural diffusion of Roman Law played a decisive role in the formation of a shared European identity, as it provided the foundation for the creation of national legal traditions. Maintaining a supranational character, Roman Law facilitated cooperation and communication among different peoples. The adoption and adaptation of these legal principles by various European nations ensured unity and peace during periods of political and social upheaval, providing stability and cohesion. At the same time, this legal foundation fostered skills in mediation, negotiation, and conflict resolution, which remain vital in contemporary European society (Mancini, 2000).

Today, the legacy of Roman Law remains alive within European values. Institutions of the European Union, such as the European Court of Justice, operate based on legal principles that trace their origins to Roman Law, ensuring legality and equality among member states. Moreover, the principles of social justice and human dignity, developed within the Roman legal tradition, form an integral part of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU. The application of these principles cultivates leadership, responsibility, and the ability to manage complexity (Hilpold, 2021).

Roman Law is not merely a legal framework but also a philosophical and cultural heritage. By integrating elements from Greek philosophy and local traditions, it managed to create a timeless framework of principles that continues to inspire modern Europe. The values of

equality, justice, and rational thought lie at the heart of European identity, while the skills derived from these values guide society toward a future based on cooperation, sustainability, and social cohesion.

## **2.2 The Middle Ages: The Church as an Educational Institution**

The Middle Ages, though often perceived as a period of cultural regression in Europe, were crucial for shaping the institutions and values that continue to guide the continent today. The Church, with its dominant position in society and influence in political life, was the central institution of education and contributed to the preservation and dissemination of knowledge, which it managed in a particular social and political context.

Education in the Middle Ages, though primarily restricted to the clergy, was directly linked to the intellectual and social structure of the time. The Church recognized the importance of education not only as a means of spiritual guidance but also as a tool for maintaining social order and cultural heritage. Monastic schools and the early universities, despite their religious focus, were also the first academic centers for the development and dissemination of scientific skills and knowledge (Haskins, 1927).

Monks and clergy, who received extensive training in Latin and religious texts, cultivated skills related to the analysis and interpretation of ancient writings, including the works of Plato and Aristotle. These skills were essential for the advancement of philosophical and theological thought while serving the Church's mission to expand religious and philosophical teachings (Southern, 1990). Specifically, monastic schools developed as centers for preserving classical literature and scientific texts, through which clergy acquired fundamental intellectual skills such as logical reasoning, critical analysis, and the interpretation of philosophical and theological texts (Huizinga, 1924).

The expansion of monastic schools was instrumental in fostering skills in mathematics, medicine, and philosophy. Simultaneously, the dissemination of classical works and the deepening of knowledge in philosophy, medicine, and mathematics laid the foundation for the scientific developments of the Renaissance. The skills developed in monastery schools and early universities were diverse and directly connected to the needs of the time, including religious and administrative training as well as maintaining social order (Mayr-Harting, 1991).

The establishment of the first universities, such as the University of Bologna in 1088 and the University of Paris, was a major milestone in the spread of academic skills. While universities of that period were primarily religious institutions, they also provided the groundwork for the development of the first scientific and philosophical faculties. The creation of new teaching methods, emphasizing the analysis and study of ancient texts, promoted the dissemination of skills related to philosophy, logic, mathematics, and theology (Crombie, 1994).

The contribution of monastic schools and early universities to skill development was critical in preparing the ground for the transformative changes of the Renaissance. However, it is essential to note that this education remained largely limited to specific social groups, mainly clergy and the aristocracy, thereby reinforcing social inequalities. Nevertheless, the Church was a key factor in preserving and disseminating knowledge throughout Europe (Russell, 1996).

Education during the Middle Ages was fundamental in the development of Western sciences and philosophy. Although major education reform movements emerged during the Renaissance, the foundation for the organization of the European educational system was established in the Middle Ages, primarily through the Church. The Church's contribution to shaping the educational landscape is undeniable, and its role was pivotal in preparing the ground for the scientific and cultural flourishing that followed during the Renaissance.

### **2.3 The Renaissance, The Enlightenment, And The Knowledge Revolution**

The Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the subsequent knowledge revolution represent crucial stages in the intellectual, social, and scientific transformation of Europe. These historical periods were defined by a continuous effort to transcend the limitations of the past and rethink fundamental ideas regarding nature, society, and humanity's place in the world.

The Renaissance (14th-17th century) was a transitional period that acted as a catalyst for the renewal of European thought. It emphasized a human-centered approach, reviving the values and ideals of ancient Greece and Rome. During the Renaissance, the arts, sciences, and philosophy engaged in a dynamic dialogue that transformed the intellectual climate of the era (Burke et al., 2017). Humanism, as an intellectual movement, underscored the importance of human capacity for understanding and shaping the world, with figures such as Petrarch and Boccaccio playing a key role in preserving and disseminating classical texts. These scholars paved the way for a deeper exploration of humanism, promoting the study of human nature, creativity, and the cultivation of critical thinking skills (Grafton & Jardine, 1986).

The arts of the Renaissance, through figures such as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, placed the human form at the center of artistic expression, highlighting humanity's potential to overcome both material and intellectual limitations (Burke et al., 2017). The ideal of virtue, linked to personal excellence, became a central aspiration of the era, fostering a desire for both individual and collective progress.

Education during the Renaissance served as a primary tool for intellectual and social transformation. Schools and academies, such as the Platonic Academy of Florence, developed curricula that incorporated rhetoric, philosophy, and the sciences. The goal was not merely the acquisition of knowledge but also the cultivation of critical thinking and aesthetic judgment, which were considered essential for shaping an ethically and socially responsible citizen (Grafton & Jardine, 1986).

A key factor in spreading Renaissance ideas was the invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg in 1440. The ability to mass-produce books accelerated the dissemination of classical texts and new ideas, making them accessible to a broader audience. Books became a tool for social change, enhancing participation in cultural and scientific discussions (Eisenstein, 1983). Printing also revolutionized science and technology, facilitating a gradual departure from traditional authorities and encouraging the adoption of empirical observation and experimentation.

The Enlightenment (17th-18th century), as a continuation and evolution of the Renaissance, focused on strengthening human reason and recognizing the scientific method as the primary tool for understanding the world. During the Enlightenment, education was seen as a

fundamental right and an instrument of social emancipation. Philosophers such as Kant, Locke, Rousseau, and Voltaire emphasized the necessity of education as a prerequisite for social progress and freedom (Israel, 2001). The establishment of secular education, free from religious constraints, allowed for the development of a new educational model centered on critical thinking and scientific inquiry.

The advancement of science and technology was a defining characteristic of the Enlightenment. The founding of universities and research institutions, such as the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge, contributed to the formation of scientific theories that radically changed perceptions of nature and humanity's place in the world (Guyer, 1993).

## 2.4 Scientific Progress

The Scientific Revolution of the 17th and 18th centuries was a pivotal moment in the development of scientific thought and technological advancement in Europe. During this period, thinkers such as Galileo, Newton, and Descartes emphasized the importance of critical thinking, the scientific method, and analytical skills, laying the foundations for modern science and education.

Galileo was a pioneer in developing empirical observation and experimental methods, based on the belief that science should be grounded in observation and proof-based documentation. His research on planetary motion and the use of the telescope contributed to the cultivation of critical analysis and systematic observation- skills that are fundamental to contemporary scientific research (Shapin, 1996).

Isaac Newton, on the other hand, developed mathematical skills and analytical reasoning, which allowed him to formulate the laws of motion and gravity. His ability to combine mathematical models with physical phenomena helped establish systematic thinking, highlighting the importance of mathematical analysis in understanding the natural world. His work had a profound influence on the scientific community and became the foundation for the later development of physical sciences (Westfall, 1980).

The social dimension of the Knowledge Revolution was reinforced by the philosophy of René Descartes, who advocated reflective thinking and the method of systematic doubt. His famous statement, "Cogito, ergo sum" ("I think, therefore I am"), underscored the importance of self-awareness and personal critical reasoning in the discovery of truth. The skill of metacognitive thinking- the ability to question one's own assumptions and perceptions- was crucial in shaping the evolution of philosophy and education (Descartes, 1637).

One of the most influential intellectual movements of the time, the Enlightenment, promoted education as an essential means of enhancing social and political participation. Thinkers such as John Locke laid the theoretical foundations for social emancipation through education, emphasizing the fundamental importance of individual freedom and personal development. Locke's concept of the human mind as a "tabula rasa" reinforced the idea that learning and experiences are critical to shaping personal identity and social awareness. His principles became the starting point for the promotion of education as not merely a means of acquiring knowledge but as a vital tool for building a free and just society (Locke, 1690).



At the same time, the promotion of knowledge was strengthened through the creation of encyclopedias by Diderot and d'Alembert, which demonstrated expertise in organizing and classifying information. Through these works, knowledge became more accessible to wider segments of society, encouraging active citizen participation in social and political processes. Encyclopedias played a catalytic role in the development of social thought and the cultivation of a critical approach to the values and ideas of the time (Darnton, 1979).

The expansion of knowledge and the emergence of new methods of thought contributed to a more systematic and critical approach to understanding the world. The ideas of the great thinkers of this period, along with the growing recognition of education as a tool for social change, shaped modern educational and social structures, highlighting the need for the continuous pursuit and evolution of knowledge.

## **2.5 The Transition to the Industrial Revolution**

The shaping of European identity during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment marked a decisive turning point in the continent's historical trajectory, establishing fundamental principles that continue to define modern Europe. The emergence of rationalism and the strengthening of critical thinking were not confined to the theoretical exploration of abstract ideas but were integrated into institutional changes that shaped both the field of education and broader social structures. Education became a mechanism for developing not only individual cognitive skills but also collective capabilities, reshaping access to knowledge and its role as a driver of social mobility. The gradual incorporation of pedagogical approaches that did not focus solely on the transmission of traditional knowledge but emphasized the cultivation of citizens capable of adapting to the demands of a changing society reflects a broader shift in how education is linked to social and cultural developments (Brown & Lauder, 1991).

The importance of lifelong learning, although not yet institutionalized to the extent it is today, began to be recognized as a necessity for adapting to the rapid scientific and technological advances of the time. The emergence and development of a pedagogical model that did not merely focus on the accumulation of knowledge but also on the cultivation of broader skills, such as social judgment, emotional intelligence, and ethical responsibility, reflected the deeper connection between education and social progress. This shift was not confined to pedagogical theory but took on a practical dimension, significantly influencing the priorities of educational systems and shaping perceptions of the role of the educated citizen in a dynamically evolving environment (Gardner, 1993).

The Industrial Revolution brought about profound social, political, and economic changes, reshaping the structures of European society. The rapid industrial development necessitated the specialization of the workforce, requiring new skills such as understanding mechanical processes, adhering to production standards, and adapting to new technological tools. The dissemination of these skills could no longer rely solely on apprenticeships or informal experiential learning but required the organization of a systematic educational framework capable of preparing large population groups for the needs of industrial production. The existing education system, which was based on religious and agrarian models, proved inadequate for the demands of the new economic reality. The technological advancements and expansion of urban centers made it essential to adapt education to respond to changing social and productive conditions (Hobsbawm, 1992).

The need for education was no longer limited to the elite but expanded to take on a mass character to meet the demands of industrial production and technological advancement. In Britain, for example, the passing of the Education Act of 1870 established compulsory education, while in France, the reforms of Jules Ferry in the late 19th century secured free and secular education, ensuring broader social access to knowledge (Brown & Lauder, 1991).

This transition was crucial, as education was no longer confined to the cultivation of traditional values but expanded to include the dissemination of essential skills required for the smooth functioning of industrial society. Skills such as literacy, numeracy, and basic technical knowledge became central, as they were necessary for factory operations and the utilization of new technologies. The objective of education shifted to prepare citizens not only for professional integration but also for understanding and utilizing scientific and technological advancements, incorporating new knowledge and skills into the school curriculum (Green, 1991).

Moreover, the development of science and technology during the Industrial Revolution reinforced the importance of empirical knowledge and the scientific method in education. New theories, such as advancements in biology and chemistry, including those by Darwin and Pasteur, were integrated into school curricula, highlighting the significance of natural sciences in understanding the world (Mayr, 1982). Scientific discoveries strengthened the basic skills required by the workforce and contributed to the development of technical schools and university programs.

This transformation in education had significant social implications, as compulsory schooling became a fundamental means of social leveling, providing more people, regardless of social background, with the opportunity to access knowledge. Education was now recognized as a public good and played a crucial role in strengthening social cohesion and fostering national identity. Despite these positive developments, inequalities persisted, particularly in rural areas and concerning gender, as access to education for women remained limited (Green, 1991).

The legacy of the Industrial Revolution remains pivotal for modern education, as the skills that emerged during this period, such as literacy, numeracy, and basic technical knowledge, continue to form the foundation of educational policies in Europe. Education continues to function as a key driver of social mobility while adapting to the ever-changing needs of society and technology, maintaining its enduring value as a tool for social progress and the enhancement of both individual and collective capabilities (Mayr, 1982).

## **2.6 The 20th and 21st Century: From Homogenization to Diversity**

The evolution of education in the 20th and 21st centuries has been shaped by a fundamental paradigm shift, reflecting broader societal transformations and educational system developments. In the early decades of the 20th century, homogenization dominated as an educational value, but this gradually gave way to the recognition of cultural diversity. Rapid social modernization, scientific progress, geopolitical shifts, and mass migration contributed to reshaping educational realities, positioning education as both a vehicle for social integration and a means of preserving cultural or national identity.

The historical trajectory of European education in the 20th century and the social and political changes that took place illustrate the transition from national identity formation to the acknowledgment of cultural diversity and the strengthening of social cohesion. At the beginning of the 20th century, educational policies in Europe focused on the idea of homogenization and national unity. Reforms aimed at promoting common values and reinforcing national cohesion, with education functioning as a mechanism for social stability. In France, for instance, the education system was used to spread the French language and culture in remote and rural areas where exposure to the French tradition was limited (Green, 1990). Similarly, in Germany, the education system was closely linked to discipline and military needs, preparing young people for industrial and military advancement (Anderson, 2016).

The expansion of mass education in the 20th century, though initially intended to reduce illiteracy and enhance social mobility, faced significant challenges in meeting the needs of minority groups. Despite the education system's goal of integrating different social groups, oftentimes, education highlighted new forms of social marginalization, particularly in colonial territories. There, education was used to impose the cultural values of colonial powers, restricting local communities' ability to maintain and develop their cultural identity. Edward Said (1978) emphasizes that education in colonies reinforced the dominance of Western cultural tradition, strengthening the position of colonial powers while limiting the recognition of local cultures. Understanding these historical phenomena is essential for analyzing the contradictions that persist in global education today, as it allows for identifying the structures and challenges that continue to shape contemporary educational systems.

The very nature of education evolved significantly as social, political, and economic conditions imposed the need for new forms of knowledge and skills. From the late 19th century to the early 20th century, the concept of skills became increasingly embedded in educational policies, transforming schools from instruments of national ideology promotion into tools for developing the competencies required in modern society. The Industrial Revolution played a decisive role in this shift, as it transformed the nature of work and introduced new demands for education that continued to evolve in the post-industrial era. Specifically, changes in the labor market, linked to technological advancements and industrial processes, compelled educational systems to adapt by providing skills that ensured individual competitiveness and social stability (Hobsbawm, 1992).

Thus, education transitioned from being a means of shaping national identity to a system focused on teaching practical knowledge and skills. The shift from knowledge acquisition to applied skills development was one of the most significant and defining changes in educational history, especially with the rise of industrial and post-industrial societies. Today, many European education systems continue to incorporate the concept of "skills-based education," recognizing the necessity for continuous learning and adaptation to rapidly changing technological and economic conditions. In the 20th century, education increasingly embraced the concept of skills as crucial for societal stability and competitiveness. Initially, the emphasis was on acquiring technical knowledge and specialized abilities, but with the advancement of industrial and technological reforms, the education system adapted to meet the growing demands of new social and economic conditions (Anderson, 2016).

The development of new technologies and the demand for a specialized workforce capable of handling technological and production processes led to the integration of these skills into education. As technology and the economy progressed, the need for new skills increased, encompassing not only fundamental technical competencies but also more complex abilities such as critical thinking, teamwork, and leadership. Beyond technical skills, the growing need for soft skills, such as problem-solving and interpersonal communication, became evident and was gradually incorporated into educational curricula (Biesta, 2009).

The specialization of skills was a defining factor in the evolution of the 20th-century education system, reflecting the needs of industrial and post-industrial societies. New labor market demands, coupled with rapid advancements in technology and science, pushed education systems to adjust both their content and methodologies. Traditional approaches focusing on general knowledge acquisition were gradually replaced by educational programs emphasizing specialized skills, designed to meet the challenges of a rapidly evolving world where technology and innovation played a central role (Green, 1990).

Consequently, education was transformed from a tool for knowledge transmission into a mechanism for developing skills essential for social and economic integration. The transition from general knowledge to specialized competencies became the foundation of modern European education policies, which acknowledge the importance of education as a means for fostering capabilities that enable social mobility and participation in a globalized world (Biesta, 2009).

After World War II, Europe witnessed profound social and political changes that required immediate adjustments in education policies. The need for reconstruction and the pursuit of peaceful cooperation among nations led to the establishment of organizations like the European Union, which promoted multiculturalism and solidarity as key values in inter-state relations (Delors, 1996). Education was redefined to respond to these evolving demands, with a focus on preparing students for the challenges of a globalized and multicultural world. International programs like the International Baccalaureate and the promotion of multilingual skills became essential tools for equipping young people with the necessary competencies to thrive in an interconnected world (European Commission, 2001).

The transition from technical skills to "general skills" was one of the most defining developments in educational policy of the post-war period. Education increasingly focused on strengthening social cohesion, political participation, and personal development, aiming to prepare young people for the challenges of globalization and continuously evolving professional and social conditions (Giddens, 2000). The need to develop "soft skills", such as critical thinking, communication, collaboration and problem-solving, was highlighted as societies faced the challenges of globalization and the rapid evolution of professional and social conditions (OECD, 2018).

The importance of these soft skills became more pronounced as education systems recognized the necessity of equipping students with abilities that would enable them to collaborate effectively, navigate diverse cultural and social settings, and adapt flexibly to shifting professional landscapes. Consequently, educational philosophies evolved to emphasize these competencies, which are crucial for successful participation in the globalized world (Schleicher, 2018).

The 1960s and 1970s in Europe, marked by increasing migration from Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean, presented significant educational challenges. Migrants and refugees faced numerous difficulties in integrating into the education system due to cultural, linguistic, and social barriers. Often, these groups were marginalized, and their access to education remained limited, exacerbating inequalities and exclusion (Castles & Miller, 2003). European countries were compelled to respond to these challenges by implementing policies that promoted social inclusion and addressed educational disparities.

To facilitate the integration of migrant populations, intercultural education programs were developed to foster cultural understanding and acceptance. The principle of "inclusive education" became a key strategy for promoting equal opportunities, ensuring that education systems were accessible to all social groups regardless of origin or socioeconomic status (Banks, 1993). Recognizing the value of cultural diversity in education, as emphasized by UNESCO, played a crucial role in fostering acceptance and social progress through education (UNESCO, 2004). The integration of these principles into educational policies has laid the foundation for the evolution of European education systems, aiming to create a socially cohesive and multicultural environment. This shift in educational approaches was not confined to theoretical discussions but was also implemented in practice through the development of educational programs that strengthened multicultural education and its integration into school settings, providing an opportunity for the advancement of a more inclusive society. Within this framework, new educational policies began to shape the future of European societies, emphasizing the preservation and reinforcement of social cohesion and mutual acceptance.

Entering the 21st century, education has undergone significant changes, driven by globalization, rapid technological advancements, and the digital revolution. The rise of artificial intelligence offers new opportunities for personalized learning, allowing adaptive tools to cater to students' individual needs (Selwyn, 2019). These changes necessitate the reevaluation of traditional teaching methods, shifting the focus from rote memorization to the development of critical thinking, creativity, and information analysis skills.

The ongoing evolution of technology, particularly in computing, data management, and artificial intelligence, has become a cornerstone of modern education. Their integration into educational programs is of vital importance for preparing students in the digital age, making them essential at every stage of education. The European Union highlights the need to integrate digital skills into educational programs to prepare students for an increasingly technology-driven world (European Commission, 2020).

However, these developments are accompanied by the need to address social inequalities, climate crises, and social polarization. Education is called upon to play a more active role in social inclusion and the cultivation of responsible citizens with a global sense of responsibility. In the modern educational framework, technology should not only serve as a tool for acquiring technical skills but also as a means of promoting social justice, solidarity, and environmental awareness (Biesta, 2009). Educational policy must incorporate these values to ensure social cohesion and promote equality, even in times of social and environmental crises.

The continuous evolution of the skills landscape and the need for lifelong learning integrate the concept of lifelong education as a fundamental principle for social and professional progress. The rapid technological advancement and social transformations make it essential to

upgrade and develop skills at every stage of life so that citizens remain competitive and adapt to the changes of the digital era (OECD, 2018). European programs support personal and professional development by focusing on individuals' ability to meet contemporary challenges and actively participate in an ever-changing world.

The development of skills demonstrates a significant shift from an individual focus to a social and collective dimension. In the modern educational model, the cultivation of ethical responsibility, social awareness, and emotional intelligence is considered just as important as traditional skills. Education is no longer confined to the acquisition of knowledge; rather, it is recognized as a tool for shaping well-rounded citizens who can actively engage in society and contribute to solving global challenges such as climate change and social inequality (Andriani, 2024; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Educational policies acknowledge the necessity of an approach that combines knowledge with social values, enhancing students' ability to adapt and participate in resolving complex issues faced by modern society.

The evolution of education in Europe, from the early stages of homogenization and the integration of common cultural values to the recognition of cultural diversity and social cohesion, highlights the dynamic adaptability of education systems to the historical, social, and political developments of the continent. The ongoing adaptation to the demands of the modern world has led European education to incorporate skills as a central element of educational planning, strengthening students' and citizens' ability to navigate a complex, globalized environment where continuous learning and skill renewal are fundamental factors in enhancing social cohesion and well-being (European Commission, 2018; OECD, 2018). Education is being redefined not only as a means of acquiring knowledge and technical skills but also as a tool for developing personal and social values such as ethical responsibility, social awareness, and emotional intelligence. The need for continuous innovation in educational methods and content to address contemporary challenges makes education crucial for maintaining social cohesion, prosperity, and sustainability in the context of modern global reality. European educational policies, recognizing the complex and multidimensional nature of contemporary social issues, emphasize the importance of social responsibility and environmental awareness, promoting the transition from individual development to collective action for addressing global challenges (United Nations, 2015).

### **3.0 GOALS FOR THE FUTURE: ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES**

The evolution of education in Europe reflects the continuous effort to adapt to changing social, economic, and environmental conditions. Educational planning no longer focuses solely on developing technical skills but integrates social cohesion, sustainability, and active citizenship as core pillars (European Commission, 2021). Within the European framework, educational strategy is shaped by policies that promote lifelong learning and prepare citizens for a globalized and interdependent world. Enhancing digital literacy, fostering social responsibility, and emphasizing the development of global citizens are critical components of an educational strategy that extends beyond the mere transmission of knowledge. Instead, it seeks to shape individuals capable of responding to the challenges of the future (Andriani, 2024). The acquisition of technical skills, alongside the cultivation of active civic engagement, highlights education's transformative power in shaping social and political structures. Despite institutional efforts, the effective implementation of these strategies requires targeted

interventions that address inequalities in education access, rapid social changes, and the need for policies that promote inclusion and equity. Only through such an approach can education meet the social and economic challenges of the future.

Strengthening digital literacy and preparing citizens to meet future challenges also requires developing the ethical dimension of technology. Digital transformation, despite its vast potential, raises critical ethical and social questions, such as privacy, algorithmic bias, and the concentration of power within technological monopolies. Educational policies must create a framework that does not merely focus on acquiring technical skills but also fosters the development of digital ethics and critical thinking. The European Union, through the Digital Compass 2030, aims to enhance technological education with social and ethical criteria, emphasizing values such as transparency and fairness (European Commission, 2021). However, the effectiveness of these policies depends on the degree to which they are integrated into curricula and connected with broader social and educational strategies.

Cultural diversity is becoming a central axis of educational planning, particularly in an era where demographic changes and continuous migration flows are shaping new social realities. Modern educational policies must address the challenge of integrating migrant and refugee children into schools, ensuring their cultural inclusion and equal access to education. Strengthening intercultural education, as well as fostering tolerance, empathy, and respect for diversity, are crucial prerequisites for an educational system that promotes cohesion and justice (Hoskins & Crick, 2010). At the same time, schools must enhance intercultural cooperation through practices that encourage collaborative learning and interaction between students of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

Life skills, such as psychological resilience and adaptability, are becoming fundamental elements of educational planning. Students today face increasing challenges, such as rising anxiety, insecurity, and uncertainty about the future, making it essential to develop skills that support their mental well-being. Integrating activities that focus on cultivating emotional intelligence and promoting mindfulness can help students manage stress effectively and adapt to changing conditions. The educational process is not limited to transmitting knowledge but also requires supporting the development of a strong and balanced personality capable of coping with the challenges of modern life (Gyekye-Ampofo, Opoku-Asare, & Andoh, 2023).

Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) represents another key area for developing skills directly linked to labor market needs. In a world where the economy increasingly relies on specialization, educational systems must equip students with the practical skills necessary to be competitive. The European Union's strategy for the development of TVET includes strengthening partnerships between schools, businesses, and local communities, as well as creating training programs aligned with the needs of emerging fields such as green energy and artificial intelligence (European Commission, 2020).

Collaboration with private and public stakeholders is also crucial for effectively implementing educational objectives. Schools do not operate in isolation but are part of a broader social and economic system. This collaboration may include joint initiatives for upgrading infrastructure and creating internship programs for students. A successful example is the Erasmus+ programs, which promote cooperation and mobility of students and educators across Europe, enhancing knowledge exchange and experiences (Hoskins & Crick, 2010).

Monitoring and evaluating the progress of educational policies are fundamental tools for ensuring their effectiveness. Performance indicators, such as student success, the inclusion of marginalized groups, and the alignment of skills with labor market needs, require systematic tracking to identify areas that need improvement. These mechanisms contribute to enhancing the transparency and accountability of educational systems, ensuring the proper allocation of resources and the fulfillment of established objectives (Andriani, 2024).

The strategy for the future of education in Europe demands a comprehensive approach that combines innovation, cultural sensitivity, and international collaboration. The educational landscape cannot remain static but must continuously adapt to evolving social needs. The success of this strategy depends on the ability of governments, schools, and local communities to collaborate in developing an educational system that will prepare future citizens to face challenges with confidence, skills, and responsibility (European Commission, 2021).

#### **4.0 CRITICAL REFLECTION - CONCLUSIONS**

Human history is interwoven with the development of science, the arts, literature, and philosophical thought, as these fields embody and express the deepest needs of the human spirit through social, political, and cultural realities. Europe, as the cradle of these phenomena, continues to be influenced by the values shaped in the early stages of Western civilization, through Greek philosophy and Roman law, as well as the humanistic principles that emerged during the Renaissance.

Greek philosophy, with its emphasis on critical thinking and the constant pursuit of truth, laid the foundation for Europe's intellectual and social processes. The thoughts of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle remain essential for understanding human nature and virtue. Even today, education is considered necessary for the holistic development of individuals. At the same time, Roman law, with its emphasis on justice and equality, established the basis for political and legal organization, creating a framework for governance and social relations in Europe. These traditions have shaped Europe's political and cultural landscape, fostering a continuous dialogue between the past and the present. The values that emerged from Greek philosophy and Roman law continue to influence contemporary European thought as the continent faces new challenges and opportunities in an era of globalization and technological advancement.

In modern times, the values that shaped European thought and society emerge as foundations for the promotion of human rights, social justice and democracy. However, European society is challenged to redefine its identity, preserving its historical heritage while incorporating new values that arise from the needs of a globalized and technologically advanced era. The evolution of knowledge and skills in Europe's educational journey reflects its historical trajectory and the contemporary challenges that shape new dimensions for the future. Today, knowledge and skills are not only determined by educational systems or national governments but are also heavily influenced by international organizations, global markets, and the demands of an interconnected world. Education is no longer merely a mechanism for cultivating values and knowledge but is transforming into a tool that adapts and competes with the needs of the global economy and technological landscape.

The recognition of the need for skills that meet the demands of the labor market highlights the transition to a new reality, where national governments are not able to exclusively determine



the values and skills required for the future. The challenge of maintaining European identity in a globalized world highlights the necessity for a strong educational strategy that extends beyond technical and vocational skills, incorporating an awareness of the social, ethical, and political implications of education. It is not enough to analyze these dimensions historically; it is essential to understand how these values are being redefined and applied in the modern world, particularly through the institution of education.

Education remains the cornerstone of social progress and the foundation for a sustainable future. The development of skills relevant to both present and future needs is not merely a technical matter but a deeply ethical, political, and philosophical issue. In a complex and evolving world, Europe must integrate its historical roots with contemporary challenges, embedding innovation, sustainability, and social cohesion as central elements of its strategy.

Moreover, the revolution in science, technology, and artificial intelligence opens new horizons while also raising existential and ethical questions. Scientific innovations provide limitless possibilities but simultaneously pose moral dilemmas regarding their use and application. Artificial intelligence, for instance, brings concerns related to privacy, equal access, and human-machine relations. Education in this context should not be limited to technical training. Instead, it must aim to cultivate critical consciousness, enabling citizens to participate actively and responsibly in social processes.

Art and literature also retain a central role in shaping European identity. The ability of individuals to express ideas, emotions, and values through creativity differentiates culture from mere survival. In a world increasingly dominated by efficiency and productivity, art serves as a reminder that humans are not solely rational beings but also aesthetic, ethical, and social individuals.

Education is the primary mechanism for ensuring social cohesion and democratic participation. The formation of active citizens is essential for the survival of democracy, especially in an era where political and social challenges, such as the rise of populism and migration, test the resilience of European societies. From the earliest years of schooling, education plays a crucial role in this process by laying the foundations for developing social and emotional skills. Empathy, collaboration, and critical thinking begin in early childhood and significantly influence the shaping of an individual's identity as an engaged citizen. Educational systems must integrate these principles at all levels to ensure that every student can develop the necessary competencies for participation in a democratic society.

The need for sustainable development and addressing climate change presents major challenges for European society. Education must take a leading role in this effort, promoting environmental awareness and a sense of responsibility toward the natural world. The integration of sustainability into educational curricula should go beyond the teaching of environmental issues and extend to fostering values that encourage cooperation and solidarity. As emphasized by UNESCO (2017), education for sustainable development requires incorporating intercultural and environmental dimensions into learning processes to promote social, economic, and environmental justice.

At the same time, innovation in education is essential for adapting to the needs of an ever-changing labor market. Technology offers new possibilities for teaching and learning, but its

effective integration requires the cultivation of digital skills and critical thinking. The European Union has prioritized lifelong learning and innovation to enhance competitiveness and social cohesion, while member states are called to collaborate in achieving these objectives.

The future of Europe depends on its ability to preserve its values and principles while adapting to the demands of the modern world. Education, as a driving force of change, plays a central role in this process. By fostering skills, promoting social cohesion, and strengthening democratic participation, education can contribute to creating a society that is resilient to challenges and open to the possibilities of the future.

European identity, as shaped through education, incorporates its historical roots, humanistic values, and a commitment to social justice. In a rapidly changing world, Europe has the opportunity to lead the global community by highlighting the importance of education and critical thinking as fundamental pillars for ensuring a sustainable and just future.

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