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CiCe
Institute for Policy Studies in Education
London Metropolitan University
166 – 220 Holloway Road
London N7 8DB
UK

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Training the teachers of tomorrow: European identity and Hungarian and Romanian students' attitudes towards the European Union

Éva Szabó,¹ János Lőrinczi¹ and Monica Secui²

¹University of Szeged (Hungary); ²University of Oradea (Romania)

Abstract

The European Union (EU) was established based on several “group beliefs”, including that of a new sense of the self (Chrysochoou, 2000), its principles being, among others, to deepen the unity between countries and to establish a common citizenship. Within this context the EU could represent for its members a super-ordinate category, a more inclusive aggregate, transcending national identities. The future construction of the EU is based on the next generations' representations and beliefs, and professionals from the field of education play a major role in the development of children's attitudes toward EU in this regard. This paper focuses on the topic of European identity and the attitudes toward EU membership exhibited by students enrolled on teacher training programs in two universities from Hungary and Romania. The 132 participants were all nationals of their respective country and had both parents of the same origin and nationality. The emotional aspect of attitudes concerning European and national membership were investigated using the Semantic Selection Test (D'Escury, 2008; Szabó, 2010) and the cognitive and behavioural components of these attitudes were explored by using a questionnaire that focused on the perceived consequences of their country's European integration. The questionnaire was designed by the authors based on the results of previous studies in the field (Bruter, 2005), but also encompasses items referring to the teachers' role in citizenship education of the pupils and in shaping their European and national identities. Our findings suggest a positive relation between the attitudes toward the EU of future teachers and their beliefs regarding the active role they take in preparing their pupils for the process of EU integration.

Keywords: *European identity, attitudes toward European Union integration, teachers' training, prospective teachers' attitudes*

Introduction

In the course of the process of self-concept development, each person needs to emphasize her/his interpersonal differentiation and the sense of being unique, but at the same time one needs to feel similar to others, to belong to meaningful relations and groups. Social identity, derived from the person's awareness regarding the perceived membership to certain groups, starts to develop early in life, as a consequence of social categorization. This process consists in the persons' tendency to divide the social world into categories/ groups, based on the perceived similarities among them (Tajfel, 1981). The need to maintain and increase the value of the in-group through the enhancement of the positive distinctiveness between the in-group and out-groups (the in-group bias)

stems as a consequence of the internalized group membership. The positive in-group-out-group differentiation helps the person to achieve an enhanced social identity and thus a positive self-evaluation. So, on one hand, the process of social categorization fulfils important functions: it simplifies and gives meaning to the world, defines who persons are and can improve their self-image. On the other hand, social categorization has negative outputs – the emergence of prejudice and discrimination against members of the out-group (Hopkins and Reicher, 2011; Leyens, Yzerbyt and Schadron, 1994). One strategy of improving the perceptions and relations between groups is re-categorization, consisting in creating wider categories which encompass different groups and permit their members to share a common social identity.

The social categorization process is guided by cultural prescriptions. The criteria based on which children start to divide the social world in categories are salient due to the actions of social institutions and agents (family, school, peer-group, mass-media). Thus children become aware of the existence of certain groups, structured based on criteria as gender, ethnicity/ nationality, religion. So, nationality and ethnicity are important for social identity, and in Eastern Europe, persons ‘inherited a long ethnic tradition that had a single aim, to put in place the romantic idea of a single people, a single language and a single state’ (Dragoman, 2008, p. 74). After joining the European Union, the interest of the specialists is focused on the relation between national and European identity. European Union could represent for its members a super-ordinate category, a more inclusive aggregate, transcending beyond the national identity. In fact, the European Union was established based on several “group beliefs”, including the idea of a new sense of the self (Chrysschoou, 2000), its principles being, among others, to deepen the unity between the countries and to establish a common citizenship.

Regarding the construal of national/ ethnic identity an interesting result of an early study showed that whereas children of 6-7 years old have a relatively rudimentary concept of nationality, they manifest a strong preference for their own nation, compared to the attitudes towards other nations (Tajfel et al., 1970). Taking into account this finding, Hewstone, Manstead and Stroebe stated:

If preference for one’s own nationality emerges early, and relatively independently of a concept of nationhood, this suggests that children learn to prefer their own nationality not as a result of knowing what it means to be French, German, Dutch or any other, but because they are exposed in the course of socialization to attitudes that are more favourable to their own nationality than other nationalities. (Hewstone, Manstead and Stroebe, 1997, p. 31)

Nesdale et al (2005) and Kiesner et al (2003), in an overview of the most important studies on the development of children’s ethnic attitudes, emphasised the influence of socialization agents: children are assumed to acquire their ethnic attitudes based on the reinforcements they get, through verbal instruction and by observing the behaviour of others. Hello, Scheepers and Gijssberts (2002) concluded that the differences between nations examined in terms of education effect on ethnic prejudice are determined by the variances in the transmission of tolerant values.

The aspects tackled by the above mentioned specialists emphasize the role played by the significant others within the process of children's and adolescents' identity development. It is widely acknowledged that there are several ways people can learn about themselves. From the social and psychological point of view they can look inward and examine their feelings, attitudes and motives (introspection). Also they observe and analyze their behaviour in the context where it occurs and draw an appropriate inference (self-perception and attributions). But one of the most important sources of self-knowledge is social comparison, along with reflected appraisals. When we try to understand who we are and what we are like, we compare ourselves with others and with social standards, and also we incorporate within the self-concept the opinions of others toward us (Brown, 1998).

The day-to-day interactions between adolescents and significant others contribute most meaningfully to identity development over time, and schools provide a context for the exploration of self. Particularly teachers can be agents of identity formation, shaping students' experiences and environment in accordance to identity goals (Harrell-Levy and Kerpelman, 2010). According to Stanberry and Azria-Evans (2001) there are three main pedagogical positions which are used by teachers: transmission, transaction, and transformation. The transmission style consists in presenting to the students a set of facts, events and beliefs. The transaction process is based on active thinking and problem-solving techniques. Transformative pedagogy refers to the way of teaching that emphasizes the mutual learning between educator and student, in which the educators reflect the experiences of students, their subjective analysis of the discussed topic (Harrell-Levy and Kerpelman, 2010). The future of the European Union is based on the children's attitudes and emotions toward it. They will be the next generation of citizens. The teachers, respectively the future teachers of the European Union have a very important role in the European citizenship education. Therefore it is important to explore their attitudes, their cognitions and emotions toward EU, because they can be active identity agents, who may pass on their own ideas and attitudes to students, who can reflect the students' experiences and reinforce their critical analysis.

According to this point of view we used a complex survey method to explore future teachers' attitudes toward EU, and toward their own country, and some aspects of their identity construction. Furthermore, we explored their opinion about the teachers' role in students' identity formation. The aim of our research is mostly exploratory, but we stated some hypotheses based on our previous study (Szabó, Lőrinczi, Secui, 2011).

Our hypotheses were:

1. The positive emotions are stronger associated to the home country than to the European Union.
2. The global attitude toward EU integration of the home country is more positive than negative.
3. The national identity is stronger than EU identity.
4. Most of the future teachers define themselves by mixed identity (national and European identity).
5. The future teachers believe they should be able to form their students' identity.

Sample

We investigated in our research 132 university students, from the University of Oradea (N=75) and the University of Szeged (N=55), who are involved in a teacher training program. Their average age was 23.95 years (SD: 5.3). There were no significant differences between the two groups (Romanians and Hungarians students) regarding the age of the participants. Most of them were studying at the Faculty of Arts (89%). According to this fact it is not surprising that most of them were females (84%), and only 16% were males. The 33% of the sample were studying on BA level, and 67% were on MA level. So, we can say that we basically talk about the viewpoint of a group of Romanian and Hungarian girls who are involved in the teacher training program at the Faculty of Arts, University of Oradea and University of Szeged.

Method

We used a complex survey method. We administrated a structured questionnaire designed by the authors, based on the results of previous studies in the field, (Bruter, 2005; Eurobarometer; Szabó, Lőrinczi, Secui, 2011). The self-report questionnaires were administrated in classroom situation at the University. The students filled out the survey freely and anonymously.

Our survey had two different parts. The first referred to the emotional aspect of attitudes toward their home country and toward the EU. In this part we used a semi-projective method, namely the Semantic Selection test (D'Escury, 2008; Szabó, 2010; Szabó, Lőrinczi and Secui, 2011). In this test the participants have to choose eight pictures out of 16 little simple pictures which they feel most related to a given concept (word). The strength of semantic correspondence between the two words is counted from the cases when the subjects choose the same picture related to two different words. In this study we used two target words: Home Country: Hungary/Romania (HC) and European Union (EU) and five reference words (emotions): freedom, love, security, happiness and fear.

In the second part of the survey we administrated a structured questionnaire designed by the authors, based on the results of previous studies in the field (Bruter, 2005; Eurobarometer). The first section of the questionnaire was related to their beliefs about the benefit and consequences of their countries' EU integration. The second section was focused on their identity and their opinion about teachers' role in identity formation.

Results

We used SPSS 15.0 as statistical program for analyzing the data. We present the results according to our hypothesis and according to the different parts of the questionnaire.

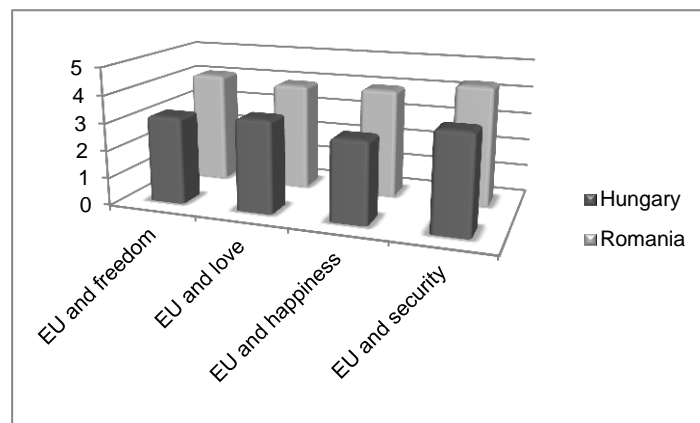
Emotions about Home Country (HC) and European Union

The semantic correspondence between Home Country (hereinafter is HC) and EU was moderate (4.34). Comparing the two samples we found significant differences between the two groups. There was a stronger correspondence between HC and EU for the Romanian sample, than within Hungarians ($t_{(129)} = -2.319$; $p < .05$). As Figure 1 shows, the semantic correspondence between the positive emotions and HC is stronger comparing to the correspondence between positive emotions and EU. In the case of fear we can see a stronger correspondence between this emotion and EU than between it and HC, which is not surprising.

Figure 1. Semantic correspondence between the emotion word and target words (N=131)



Figure 2. Emotions about EU in the two groups (N=131)



We compared the answers of the two national groups regarding the correspondence between HC and different words and there were no significant differences between the

two groups in this aspect. But regarding EU and various emotions we found significant differences between the two groups in every case, except the correspondence between EU and fear (Figure 2). According to the results of independent sample t-test (see t-scores, and sig. values in Appendix 1) Romanian students have shown higher correspondence between the EU and positive emotions.

The cognitive components of attitudes – opinions about EU integration

Global opinion about integration

We asked the students: Generally, do you think that the entering of Romania/Hungary into the European Union was: a good thing, neither good nor bad, a bad thing? As Figure 3 shows, almost half of the students think that the EU integration of their country was a good thing.

Figure 3. Global opinion about EU integration (N=131)

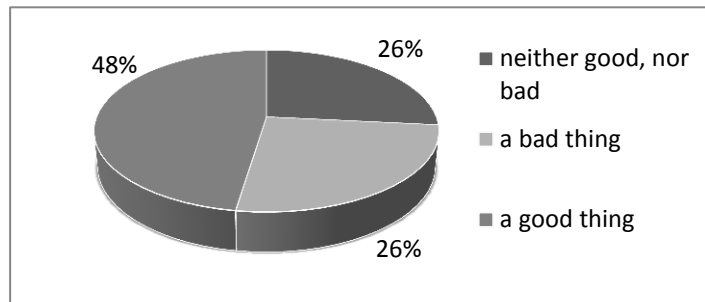
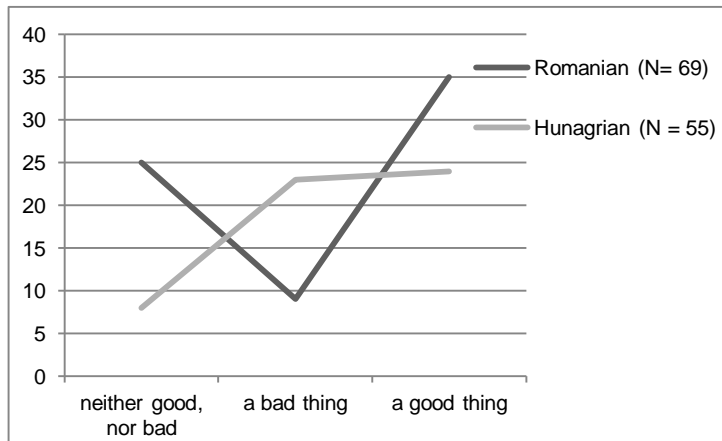


Figure 4. Global attitude toward EU integration (N=124)



The personal meanings of EU

In this part of the structured questionnaire we asked the students: “What does The European Union mean to you personally?” We offered positive, negative and neutral (“Cultural diversity”) concepts to participants (see Table 1). They had to choose among the following answers: Yes, No or I don’t know. These answers referred to their personal meanings of the EU. The percentage of the yes answers is listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Personal meanings of EU, ordered by the size of “Yes” answers’ percentages (N=131)

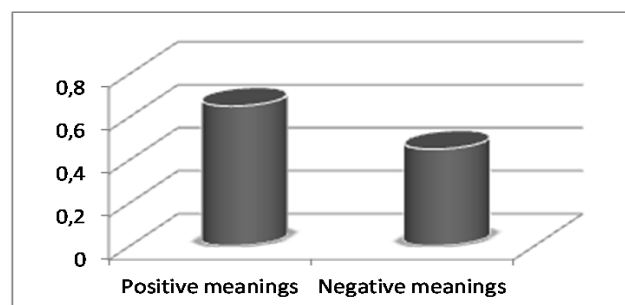
Items	% of YES
The freedom to travel, study and work anywhere in the E.U.	97
Cultural diversity	90
Advantages for foreign companies in detriment of Romanian/Hungarian ones	74
Bureaucracy	68
Democracy	66
Social protection	64
Peace	59
Economical prosperity	52
Waste of money	41
A greater importance of Romania/ Hungary	38
Unemployment	38
Insufficient control at external frontiers	36
The loss of our cultural identity	22

The most frequent meaning of the EU was the “*freedom to travel, study and work anywhere in the E.U*” and the “*cultural diversity*”. The students don’t think that EU integration means the loss of cultural identity for them. Only 22 percentages of them answered “Yes” to this item.

We categorized the variables into two groups: items with positive meaning and items with negative meaning. The cultural diversity could be both positive and negative, depending on the participants’ ideas, therefore we left it out.

Figure 5 shows that the participants considerably associated more positive than negative meanings to the EU ($t_{(39)} = 2.837$; $p = .05$).

Figure 5. Comparison of the positive and negative meanings (N=131)



Students' identities and their opinion about identity formation

We asked the participants about the relevance of their national and EU identity. Five items referred to the importance of national identity and two were for EU identity. They need to indicate their answers on a four points Likert scale.

The national identity scale contains five items. The items and the descriptive statistics are depicted in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the questions relevant for national identity (N=131)

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
It is very important for me, that I am Hungarian/Romanian.	2.88	.877
I like to sing the national anthem in national celebrations.	2.89	1.057
To participate in the national election is really important for me.	2.45	1.076
When I am abroad as a tourist I am happy when I meet other Hungarians/Romanians.	3.03	.885
Sometime I feel shame about my nationality. (-)	1.50	.738

The alpha Cronbach value of this scale was .68 .

The EU identity scale contains two items. The items and the descriptive statistics are depicted in Table 3.

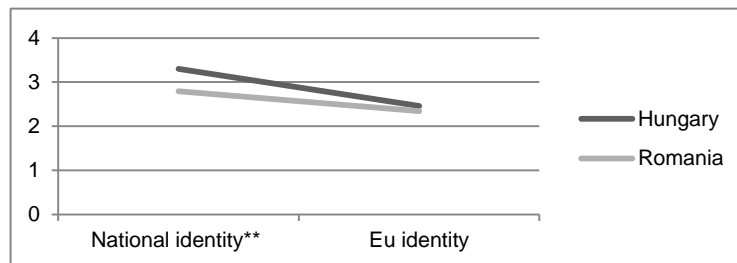
Table 3. Descriptive statistics of the questions relevant for EU identity (N=131)

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
I am proud of being a member of European Union.	2.17	.786
It is not really important for me to participate in the European parliamentary election (-)	2.39	.949

The alpha Cronbach of this scale was only .61, and it could be a consequence of Romanians' scepticism about EU election.

We computed new variables by summarizing items regarding the importance of national identity and of EU identity, and compared the means of the two groups. As Figure 6 shows, the national identity index is higher than EU identity index, and there is no significant difference between the two groups regarding the EU identity.

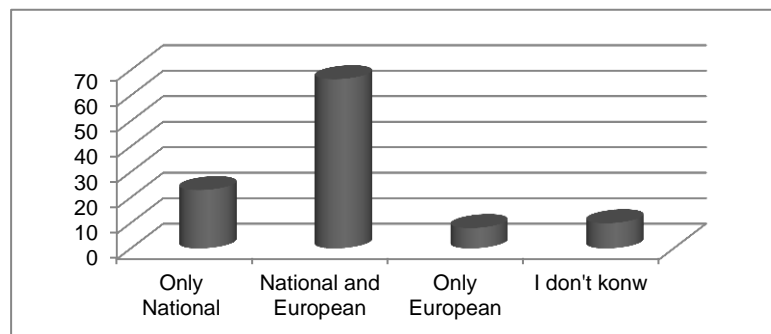
Figure 6. Identity indexes depending of nationality (N=129)



However, the value of the independent sample t-test showed that Hungarians have a significantly higher score in national identity index than Romanians ($t_{(129)} = 5.953$; $p < .001$). We also found a moderate, but significant positive correlation between the two types of identity index. (Pearson coefficient of .395, $p = .001$)

In next part of the questionnaire we asked them about how they identify themselves in the near future.

Figure 7. Identity definitions in the near future (N=131)



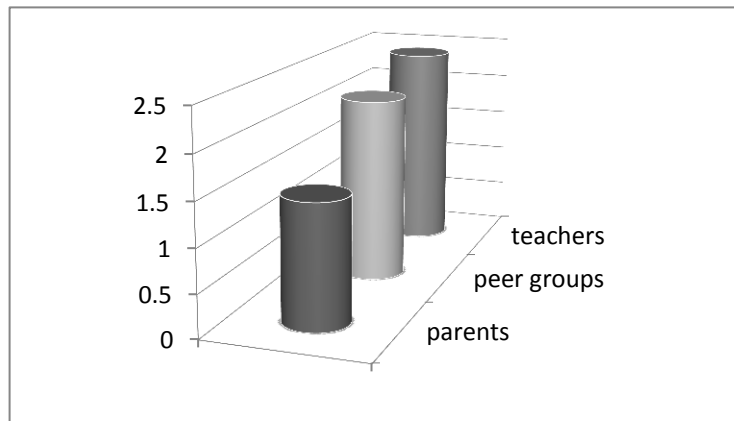
According to our former study (Szabó, Lőrinczi and Secui, 2011), we found that most students define themselves as a mixed identity in the near future. We didn't find any significant differences depending on the nationality of participants.

Opinions about identity formation and the role of teachers

We offered to respondents three social agents categories - parents, teachers, peers - and we asked them "Please indicate how important is, in your opinion, the role of the three social agents in shaping the adolescents' identity". They indicated the relevant order/hierarchy of the three agents. The most important was the first position, the next is the second one, and the less important is the third position. It is clear, that they think that

the most important category is the parents, the second one was peer groups, and only the third one is the teachers' category (see Figure 8)

Figure 8. The rank order of different socialization agents in identity formation (N=130)

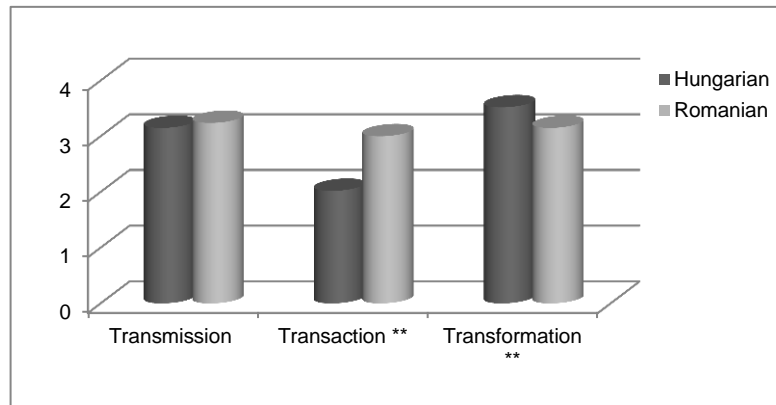


At the same time they think that they will be able to have a powerful impact on their further students' identity formation, as teachers. We asked them to indicate on a seven point scale, how strong they think they will be able to form their students' identity. The result suggests that they have a strong belief in it, because the mean was almost five ($M=4.99$; $SD = 1.018$). We didn't find any significant differences between the two groups.

What kind of method do they think is useful in identity formation at school?

We offered them three different methods which can be useful for identity formation according to Stanberry and Azria-Evans (2001) and asked them how useful they think the methods are in their opinion. The respondents need to indicate their opinion on a four points Likert scale, ranging from disagreement to complete agreement. The results of these questions suggest that they think all methods are more or less useful for identity formation, but they think the transaction (problem solving method) is less useful than the others. The differences were significant according to paired sample t-tests ($t_{(129)} = -7.982$; $p = .001$).

Figure 9. Differences between the two groups regarding the opinion about the method of identity formation (N=130)



Comparing the two sample we found that Hungarians agreed less than Romanians with the statement that the problem solving method is useful ($t_{(129)} = -7.299$; $p = .001$) and in the case of elaboration method the situation was the opposite ($t_{(129)} = 3.940$; $p = .001$).

Conclusions

The future teachers' role in the identity formation of the next generation is undeniable. In our opinion the quality of how they can fulfil this role depends on their identity definitions and their attitudes toward their home country and EU too. Therefore we explore these aspects in the case of two groups of students enrolled in a teacher training programme in two different countries.

According to our hypotheses we found, for both groups of students, that there are very strong semantic correspondences between home country and positive concepts like: freedom, love, happiness and security. They also have positive emotions toward EU, and this category is more or less independent of the feelings regarding their emotions about their home countries. These results show similarities with our former research findings, when we explored the adolescents' identity on the same dimensions (Szabó, Lőrinczi and Secui, 2011).

The attitudes have not only emotional, but cognitive components as well, and these elements are closely related (Mayo and Haddock, 2009). As a consequence we attempted an exploration of the cognitive aspects behind the emotional components of the future teachers' attitudes. Our findings confirm the hypothesis that the positive emotions are basically associated to positive meanings of the attitude objects, namely the participants associated more positive than negative meanings to EU.

We consider that the second important factor of their potential identity formation demonstrates that the participants are able to be authentic model for students. Become a

good model of this area requires from teachers to have strong national and positive European identity.

The results show that the participants have a strong national identity and they define themselves not only based on the national category, but on European category too. These findings suggest that they can be an authentic model for students in the near future in this aspect, and their identity forming role will be congruent to their self definition, which is an important condition for a teacher in order to be a relevant model for the students (Gordon and Bruch, 2003).

Finally we explored the way they think about their potential importance on their future students' identity formation, and which pedagogical method they think is the most appropriate to facilitate this process. According to our findings we can say that they have ambivalent attitudes toward their role within the pupils' identity formation. This result is not surprising because they are in the process of their professional education, in different levels (BA and MA), and it is comprehensible that they have no well developed professional identities and role concepts.

They think that the identity formation mostly depends on the influence of family and peer groups. At the same time they think they will be able to have a powerful impact on shaping the identity of their future students. The participants consider that transmission and transformation are more useful methods than transaction (Stanberry and Azria-Evans, 2011).

Comparing the two groups of students we found some significant differences between the Romanians and Hungarians. It seems that the Romanians have a more positive attitude toward EU, and a less strong national identity than Hungarians. The meaning of EU is more diverse in the Hungarian sample, than within Romanian group. It seems that Hungarians have more definite opinion about EU integration. Almost half of them think that it is a bad thing, and the other half think it is a good thing. These differences can be explained by the actual political situation in Hungary and the historical-cultural features of the two countries. The political situation in Hungary related to EU is very complicated at this period of the time. The Hungarians are divided about EU suggestions and requirements, depending on their political and economical beliefs. We think that this diversity is reflected in our findings. On the other hand, historically, Romania has more simple and positive connections to the western European countries than Hungary. Taking into consideration that the personal and social identity is rooted in the history of our country, this could be a possible explanation of the differences between the two groups. At the same time our results have to be interpreted with caution, having in view the limitations of our research, due to the small number of participants, opportunistic samples and omission of certain variables - our samples were not balanced by sex and age. So, our conclusions are valid only for these special groups which were involved in the study.

But our findings can constitute a starting point for approaching the topic of teachers' identity and its relation to their beliefs regarding their role within the process of pupils' self-concept development, especially that the method used seems to be appropriate in order to explore the different aspects of the attitudes in this area.

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Appendix

Appendix1: The independent sample t-test values regarding Hungarians and Romanians emotional attitudes toward EU

Items	t value	p value
EU and freedom	-2.938	.004
EU and love	-1.786	.076
EU and happiness	-3.160	.002
EU and security	-2.598	.010
EU and fear	.745	.458