

## **European Education Policy: A Historical and Critical Approach to Understanding the Impact of Neoliberalism in Europe**

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### **Abstract**

*Education constitutes an essential core of the political strategies adopted in the European Union. From the Treaty of Paris in 1951, educational policy in Europe has been consolidated through a combination of programs in different levels and contexts. However, a neoliberal economic model has guided the implementation and development of these policies. For members of the European Union, education has been, and continues to be, understood as a way of professional training to produce a profit. After almost six decades of educational progress, it is necessary to reflect on how educational policy has been implemented by policymakers in Europe. A retrospective and critical analysis presents relevant points on political decisions in education that have had an impact on the social context of the European Union. The aim of this paper is to analyse, from a historical, social and critical perspective, how educational policies have been undertaken by the European Union, from its beginning to the present Europe 2020 Strategy. Particular attention will be paid to the influence it has had, and still has, with regard to neo-liberal ideology.*

**Keywords:** *Educational policy, European Union, European policy, European Higher education, Neoliberalism, European educational programs*

### **Introduction**

Presently, the European Union constitutes a geopolitical entity comprised of 27 nations. Since 1951, its commitment has been to endorse and promote a supranational system involving economic, political, and cultural dimensions in order to strengthen the standards of living for European Union citizenry. Education and specifically, educational policy driven by the European Union has played a role in promoting exchange and unity between countries that historically have had tense relations. European political representatives have attempted to create an image of a united Europe, able to grow together economically and

socially through the efforts of all countries. However, social inequalities persist between European Union countries. The current economic crisis has accentuated the weaknesses of the European Union, and countries such as Greece, Portugal, and Spain are in extreme economic situations compared with countries such as France and Germany. In difficult times like these, the European Union seems like an institution focused exclusively on its own economic benefits rather than on the welfare of its citizens. The historical precedent of the European Union was the European Economic Community. This institution defined a common economic market between France, Italy, Germany, and Benelux to promote the economic development of all countries after World War II (Commission of the European Communities, 1951). Thus, the origin of the European Union was driven purely by economic determinism based on a neoliberal model. Only when economic growth was a reality did the European Union begin to promote education policies, social cohesion, and sustainability among its member countries.

Higher education presently constitutes an essential element within European Union policy. A clear example is the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), a strategy of harmonizing European systems of higher education. It is important to consider why the European Union created the EHEA. One possible answer is to solve the problem of the recognition of professional qualifications between member countries (Commission of the European Communities, 2000). But why does the EHEA currently have 47 members/countries involved? The answer is directly related to the neoliberal economic model of European policies. Europe built an educational model recognized by 47 countries not only to solve the problem of the recognition of professional graduates, but also to define a competitive higher-education model that can compete globally.

Starting from the idea that European education policy depends on economic conditions and is influenced by the neoliberal model, this paper analyses and reflects critically on how education policy has been conducted in Europe during the past six decades. The main purpose of this text is to expound upon an historical and critical retrospective of European education policy by showing evidences of neoliberal values that underlie these political

decisions. This argument will be developed in five parts: (1) The Genesis of European Policies, (2) Institutionalization and the Sectorial Programs, (3) Legal Recognition and the Integrated Programs, (4) The Lisbon Strategy, the Integrated Plan, and the European Higher Education Area, and (5) The Europe 2020 Strategy. These five points form a socio-historical analysis of education policy in Europe to date. Only by reflecting on past political decisions is possible to understand the current educational policy of the European Union.

### **The Genesis of European Policies**

The origin of European Union policy has its starting point at the end of the Second World War. Under a devastating scene marked by poverty and hunger, the politicians of Europe faced a policy decision with far-reaching consequences for its citizens: the choice between a capitalist or communist economic model. The Cold War divided Europe into two blocs. However, European political leaders believed in the union of European countries as a means to address the poor living conditions and supply problems of European citizens. Winston Churchill made a speech in 1946 that historically had an impact on the creation of the European Union. In this address he called for peace and economic growth by creating a United States of Europe. With these words, Churchill showed support for the American economic model, considering it the only option for rebuilding Europe.

British politicians showed interest in Churchill's proposed model for economic growth. European economies were not growing, however, and high rates of unemployment and food shortages led to strikes and riots among many populations. Two years after the end of the war, economic recovery to prewar levels did not seem possible. Agricultural production was 83% of what it had been in 1938; industrial production was 88%, and exports only 59% (Milward, 1984).

Initially, "the U.S. Congress and, especially, the conservative bloc were unwilling to give much aid to Germany" (Judt, 2001, p.4). However, the spread of communism in countries like Germany, France, and Italy was increasing, and U.S. president Harry Truman decided to undertake a package of urgent measures for reconstruction and to curb the spread of

communism. The plan to revive the European economy was officially called the European Recovery Program (popularly known as the Marshall Plan). The plan was a multiyear commitment from 1948 to 1951 with a budget of U.S. \$13.2 billion in economic and technical assistance.

“In its first year, half of all Marshall Aid was devoted to food. Overall, 60% was spent on primary products and intermediate inputs: food, feed, fertilizers, industrial materials, and semi-finished products, divided evenly between agricultural goods and industrial inputs. One-sixth was spent on fuel. Another one-sixth was spent on machinery, vehicles, and other commodities” (Bradford & Eichengreen, 1991, p. 14).

Historically, a requirement that was influential in the genesis of current European policy was the establishment of the Organization for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC), which was the forerunner of the OECD. The United States demanded the creation of a European central institution to group all the countries involved. The main objectives of the OEEC were redistributing aid to European countries by facilitating trade, granting credit, and promoting the liberalization of capital. The OEEC was undoubtedly a precursor to current European educational policy, not only because it was the first institution that housed a number of countries in need, but also because it accepted the rules of the capitalist model of production. The United States exported not only a model of economic production to rebuild Europe, but also a way of understanding the world; a world where competitiveness, free trade, and financial transactions between countries produced mutual benefits. In other words, the United States helped rebuild Europe for humanitarian reasons, but the Marshall Plan also helped strengthen the U.S. economy through the export of goods, products, and services. It is an economic aid that implicitly requires the submission and acceptance of the economic liberalism values.

“From 1948 to 1952, Europe experienced the highest growth period in its history. Industrial production increased by 35%, and agriculture strongly exceeded prewar levels” (Grogin, 2001, p. 118). The poverty and hunger of the early postwar years disappeared, and Western Europe experienced two decades of unprecedented growth with dramatic increases in living

standards. The United States simultaneously benefitted from exports of industrial machinery to Europe. “The post-World War II period witnessed with dismaying regularity an obscene concentration and centralization of social, political, and economic power in the hands of a small number of oligopolies” (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2012, p. 347). Under the liberal ideology, the capitalist production model created a scenario where Europe managed to recover from the devastation of World War II while the United States was able to extend and consolidate its production model. Noam Chomsky (2002) has argued “the Marshall Plan set the stage for large amounts of private U.S. investment in Europe, establishing the basis for modern transnational corporations” (p. 9).

As a broad concept: “Liberalism is the historical and ideological germ of the current policies promoted by the European Union. The two central aspects of contemporary liberalism are (a) state economic freedom and (b) political individualism” (Brown, 2005, p.898). Liberal ideas were radicalized by Milton Friedman, Von Hayek and Schwartz at the Chicago School of Economics. According to these theorists’ neoliberal approaches, non-intervention on the part of the state is the mechanism that ensures full equality opportunity for all individuals by establishing a framework of fair competition without restrictions or manipulations. In connection with this point of view, the privatization of public services, labour flexibility, and the deregulation of trade were mechanisms for generating efficiency, productivity, and private sector profits (Friedman, 1962). From a political standpoint, “for neoliberals there is one form of rationality that is more powerful than any other—economic rationality. Efficiency and an “ethic” of cost-benefit analysis are the dominant norms” (Apple, 1998, p.183). These rules transcend all social structures. With regard to policies that are important to citizens such as education, health, and social services neoliberalism values competition and excellence over equal rights and social cohesion.

Continuing the historical sequence described thus far, economic growth in Europe caused the first political unification among European Union countries. A significant precedent occurred on May 7, 1948, at the Hague Congress, which brought together 20 European countries with the aim of developing European political cooperation. This first meeting set the stage to raise a joint economic policy of the European countries. Three years later,

Robert Schuman spearheaded the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) to regulate the production of coal and steel in the middle of Europe.

In summary, the OECD and the ECSC were both pioneering institutions in European politics. Economic growth and the free market form the ideological foundation of European politics. It is important to note, however, that liberalism, or neoliberalism, has not only influenced the economic sector, but has been the mainstay for designing all kinds of policies. “Neoliberalism produces particular views of the world and then mobilizes an array of pedagogical practices in a variety of sites in order to legitimize their related modes of governance” (Giroux, 2008, p. 58). Capitalism helped alleviate the misery in Europe, but the price Europe had to pay was to accept economic liberalism as the main element of its joint policy. This acceptance is materialised in the promotion of neoliberal education policies that are designed to promote practicality, competitiveness and economic benefit within the labor market. These policy decisions contribute to consolidate what Althusser (1970) called “ideological apparatus” within a culture, in this case, the emerging European culture.

### **Institutionalization and the Sectorial Programs**

After the Congress of The Hague, the European Economic Community was established by the Council of Europe to continue designing European politics. In these early years, education was not part of the priority policies. Jean Monnet, one of the founders of the EEC, said, “First organize the economy, and politics will follow!” (Commission of the European Communities, 2006, p. 54). This sentence is another example of the liberal values that define politics in Europe. The important point is economic growth based on the free market to benefit individual countries. Milward (1992) argues that “the institutions and collective policies of the member states can be explained purely by fact that the European Union served the interests of the nations with different countries drawing different benefits at various times” (as cited in West, 2012, p.3).

The first historical reference to educational policies is related to vocational training; it appears in Article 128 of the EEC treaty:

The Council shall, acting on a proposal from the Commission and after consulting the Economic and Social Committee [of the social partners] lay down general principles for implementing a common vocational training policy capable of contributing to the harmonious development both of the national economies and of the common market. (Commission of the European Communities, 1957)

Following the liberal approach discussed so far, the first educational policy of the European countries was aimed at providing vocational training to enhance economic development. Each explicit policy decision was guided by principles that favor economic growth over any other social value. Thus, even though the terms of the EEC treaty would later support the development of community actions in the field of education, the objectives pursued were initially economic. “The first period in the buildup of the EEC, from 1957 to 1969, was characterized by an unwritten but decidedly official taboo on discussion of education policy” (Commission of the European Communities, 2006, p. 54).

Given these precedents, it is extremely difficult to determine the historical starting point of the education policies in Europe. Authors such as Etxebarria (2000) and López-Baraja (2000) have pointed out that educational decisions began in the early 1970s, specifically on November 16, 1971, with the Resolution of the Meeting of Ministers of Education of Europe. The signed agreement of collaboration among European nations led four years later to the creation of the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP). Nevertheless, education occupied a secondary position at the time in favor of economic policies based on a free market. As Paricio (2005) mentioned, “The integration of educational policies was initially very slow in the European Economic Community (EEC)” (p. 253). On the other hand, eclectic viewpoint is that education, as a broad concept, had been included since the foundational treaties of the European Union (Valle, 2006). In any case, Paricio’s and Valle’s perspectives consider the Resolution of the Meeting of Ministers

of Education (1971) as a significant cooperative agreement that definitely boosted education in the European context.

In terms of the sociological context, there are two major factors that have significantly influenced the educational advancement of the European Union. The most significant has been the necessity of implementing vocational training and the learning of specialized skills as ways to create economic benefits. Secondly, and from an empirical perspective, educational reports from UNESCO disclosed a negative image of education in the world, especially in Europe. *The World Educational Crisis: A Systems Analysis* by P. H. Coombs (1968) is among the best publications that have explained these circumstances.

Facing this delicate situation, members of the European Economic Community (EEC) promoted periodic reports on the education question. The *Faure Report* (1972) and the *Janne Report* (1973) were two important reference points in the reformulation of European educational policies. A number of innovative proposals were adopted, such as lifelong learning, vocational training, educational cooperation, language learning, and mobility. As pointed out by Trilla (2004), “The intention was defined a technocratic and reformist discourse of an education model in crisis” (p. 20).

Based on these recommendations, the Ministry of Education and the European Council established on February 9, 1976, the first action program in the field of education. It recommended professional training, educational cooperation, and the integration of European dimensions in an educative framework. Besides this report, the European Union also endorsed the foundation of several educational institutions—such as the European University Institute in 1976 and the Information Network on Education in Europe (known as Eurydice) in 1980—oriented toward the promotion and study of educational systems in European countries. Thus, as mentioned by Valle (2006), “The educational policy in Europe was progressively real and tangible, moving away from the theoretical proposals” (p. 56).



Economic growth allowed European authorities to continue designing educational policies that maintained liberal and free market ideologies. In 1983 the Resolution of the European Council approved a set of educational procedures, called by Valle as, the Sectorial Programs (Valle, 2006). The PETRA program (vocational training) and the EUROTECNET program (adaptation of new technologies) are significant examples that applied to all European Union countries. The EEC also promoted programs with smaller budgets such as HANDINET and HELIOS that focused on the inclusion of people with disabilities. An interesting project that still endures is YOUTH FOR EUROPE, which was designed to respond to the growing interest of young people in European cultures.

	PROGRAMS	AREA
<b>The Sectorial Programs</b>	PETRA	Vocational training
	EUROTECNET	Adaptation of new technologies
	HANDINET	Adaptation of people with disabilities
	HELIOS	Adaptation of people with disabilities
	YOUTH FOR EUROPE	Development of the European culture

Valle, J. (2006). *La Unión Europea y su política educativa*. Madrid: CIDE-MEC

In summary, from 1971 until the end of the 1980s, European educational policy was characterized by an approach based primarily on economic growth. In this first period, educational policies were designed to promote vocational training among European countries to achieve higher rates of economic growth through professional qualifications. During this time, Europe regarded education as a means to an economic end rather than a way to rebuild the image of countries opposed to each other during World War II. Economic growth improved the quality of life for people; it did not, however, heal the wounds, resentments, and stereotypes of the countries involved, and this is where education plays a key role. How can we build a united European Union if educational policies are primarily driven by economic concerns? How to strengthen the European Culture, if only European policies dealing with the economic dimension of the member states? This problem persists even today in European educational policy.

### **Legal Recognition and the Integrated Programs**

At the same level as the resolution of 1971, another historical moment for European education policy came with the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. This agreement confirmed and extended the educational actions that preceded it, affirming the importance of developing the European dimension of education. The Maastricht Treaty, however, was a continuation of the economic policy that had been carried out thus far. Article 3.A.3 states that “activities of the Member States and the Community shall entail compliance with the following guiding principles: stable prices, sound public finances and monetary conditions and a sustainable balance of payments” (Commission of the European Communities, 1992).

With regard to vocational training, European policy not only invested in training through the LEONARDO DA VINCI program, but also went further. Article 8 of the Maastricht Treaty promotes the free movement of citizens to work in any of the countries of the EEC. There are several possible readings of this action. On the one hand, it could be understood that the EEC proposed exchange between countries to promote European culture and improve relationships between citizens. On the other hand, it could be seen as a way to boost the competitiveness of European countries. That is, it prompted a broader labor market, but higher demands can ultimately generate higher degrees of social inequality.

During the 1990s, the educational policy of the European Union was substantially redefined through the strategic recommendations of educational studies such as *Teaching and Learning: Towards the Learning Society* (1995) and the Delors report (1996). The overlapping effect caused by the Sectorial Programs was the impetus for boosting the Integrated Programs (Valle, 2006), which emphasized the following areas: education (SOCRATES I), vocational training (LEONARDO DA VINCI), and culture (YOUTH). The average duration of these programs was five years (1995-1999) with the possibility of ratification in the future.

	PROGRAMS	AREA
The Integrated Programs	SOCRATES	EDUCATION
	LEONARDO DA VINCI	VOCATIONAL TRAINING
	YOUTH	CULTURE

Valle, J. (2006). *La Unión Europea y su política educativa*. Madrid: CIDE-MEC

It is important to note that SOCRATES had the highest budget with 920 million ecus (pre-euro), which included the costs of the ERASMUS, LINGUA, and COMENIUS projects. The program’s educational commitments were strictly adopted according to the directions explicit in Article 126 of the Maastricht Treaty:

The Community shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organization of education systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity. (Commission of the European Communities, 1992)

The LEONARDO DA VINCI program was closely linked to vocational training, an educational element endorsed and defined in Article 127 of the Maastricht Treaty. LEONARDO’s budget was smaller than that of the SOCRATES program with 620 million ecus. However, it had an unquestioned role, especially in teaching technological skills and applying innovative tools in the work context (Eurydice, 2001).

Finally, the European Council approved the YOUTH program on March 14, 1995, in reference to Article 128 of the Maastricht Treaty. This program applied to people aged 15 to 25 and concerned two main areas: European exchanges and the European Voluntary Service (EVS). It sought to develop a European culture and mutual understanding and tolerance among young people, thus reinforcing social cohesion in the European Union and promoting active citizenship among young people.

This was a period where education moved from theory to action as a mechanism to promote European culture. Recall that Europe had been the battlefield of World War II; now its

citizens experienced improved living standards, but they did not feel they were a part of the economic union. In other words, the European Union used education as a tool for shaping a European culture. The implicit goal was to create a sense of belonging for all citizens in Europe. In this regard, Foucault (1991) suggests that the institution of modern schooling acts in part as an apparatus of governance for the state, conveying the most acceptable forms of behavior. Pierre Bourdieu understands schooling as a central means by which “the state can influence strongly held cultural beliefs and practices that implicate our capacity to participate in the political realm” (as cited in Kennelly y Llewellyn, 2012, p. 899).

It is noteworthy that the Integrated Programs included interdependent actions, which resolved overlapping problems. This period was characterized by significant support from the European authorities. A clear example occurred when the European Union declared the European Year of Lifelong Learning in 1996. The exponential growth in knowledge available through modern technology led to a new action plan called Schooling and Learning in an Information Society that was also included in the Integrated Programs and promoted the use of new technology.

### **The Bologna Process and the Lisbon Strategy (changed the order)**

One of the most important policies undertaken by the European Union to date has been the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). This initiative became effective on June 19, 1999, when the ministers of education from 29 European countries met in Bologna, Italy, to debate and endorse an important strategy related to higher education. Their document, known as the Bologna Declaration, initiated an important and irreversible process of harmonizing the various European systems of higher education. The original Bologna Declaration agreed to biennial ministerial follow-up meetings to discuss strategies to solve convergence problems. The host countries thus far have been Prague (2001), Berlin (2003), Bergen (2005), London (2007), Leuven (2009), Budapest-Vienna (2010), and Leuven (2012). The European Higher Education Area came into force in 2010 according to the following six action lines:

- Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees (grade/post grade)
- Adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles: undergraduate and graduate
- Establishment of a system of credits (European Credit Transfer System—ECTS)
- Promotion of mobility with particular attention to students, teachers, researchers, and administrative staff
- Promotion of European cooperation in quality assurance
- Promotion of the necessary European dimension in higher education

The Bologna Declaration was preceded by a significant debate on the role of the university in Europe. According to Amendment 25 of the Lisbon Strategy, education should adapt to the demands of the knowledge society. For scholars, “this political decision relegates colleges to institutions that produce qualified professionals according to labor market demands, thus forgetting the traditional role of universities in producing, creating, and transmitting scientific knowledge” (La Fuente *et al.*, 2008, p.88). “The EHEA emerged from a process known as the “corporatization of the university” where knowledge is weighed according to its market value” (Sanz, 2006, p.6). Thus the university becomes a producer of professionals, working to the detriment of scientific knowledge. The economic, social, and educational conditions in the European Union of the 21st century are oriented toward a model focused on specialization, subject to the demands of the labor market.

The basic commitment of the European Higher Education Area involves a set of profound changes that directly affect national higher educational policies. The harmonization process in the current 47 countries implies a significant shift towards a homogeneous higher education system, which boosts important elements such as mobility, cooperation, and international recognition. From the critical position, however, I consider the real purpose of the EHEA is a combination of factors that go beyond the challenges of the knowledge society. First, the EHEA intends to solve the problem of the professional recognition of graduates. The Maastricht Treaty (1992) allowed for the free movement of citizens throughout the European Union, but in order for there to be an effective exchange of

workers, members had to recognize the degree of their studies in the country of origin. Second, the EHEA arose in response to the deficit situation facing European universities. This assertion is supported by reports and research carried out by the European Union since the 1970s and by the rankings of European schools among the world's most distinguished universities. Lastly, despite the tightening of visas (Giroux, 2008), the EHEA tries to solve the loss of intellectual capital (commonly called "brain drain").

From a strictly reductionist point of view, the EHEA would only be necessary as a means of "producing" high-level professionals. This finding ties in with the last question: Why has the EHEA expanded its borders regarding non-European Union countries? The Berlin Communiqué (2003) emphasized the need to strengthen the system of alliances in education. The creation of the EHEA answered the need for a large, competitive, high-quality university structure to address the leadership of the U.S. university system, which is considered number one today. The unification of university systems with states outside the European Union, the incentive grants to third-world countries, and the alliance with Latin America and the Caribbean (EU-LAC) are elements that match a "macrostrategic" neoliberal scheme to capture a greater demand for students, teachers, and researchers. European political authorities think this alliance system will significantly improve the EHEA's positioning in the world of higher education, especially considering the apparent drop in enrollment in U.S. colleges in recent years, largely due to hardened security measures and visa restrictions following the attacks of September 11, 2001 (Wyckoff and Schaaper, 2006).

Following the historical sequence, the beginning of the 21st century presented new challenges for European education policy. Following the optimistic results of *ex post* evaluations of the SOCRATES, LEONARDO DA VINCI, and YOUTH programs, the European Union ratified a Six-Year Plan (2000-2006) continuing these programs. In implementing strategic planning, the binomial "reflection-action" constituted the essential core, developing an efficient educational policy in the European Union. Taking into consideration feedback received from internal/external evaluations and reports such as

*Accomplishing Europe through Education and Training* (1997) and *The Globalization of Education and Training* (2000), the European Union progressively assumed a central role in the global education design.

One of the most controversial initiatives in the European policy, one that directly affects European education, is the Lisbon Strategy. The Council of the European Union (2000) defined the Lisbon Strategy (also known as the Lisbon Agenda) in March 2000 as a development plan designed to build up “the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion, and respect for the environment by 2010” (p.1). Here, the policy of the European Union explicitly turns toward a more pronounced neoliberal economic model where the important thing is to generate a free and competitive market to increase economic profits. The Lisbon Strategy had a tremendous impact on European educational policy. As Michael Apple (1998) mentioned in his critique of the neoliberal model, “Resources are made available for ‘reforms’ and policies that further connect the education system to the project of making our economy more competitive” (p. 186). This idea is made explicit in the Amendment 25 of the Lisbon Strategy:

Europe’s education and training systems need to adapt both to the demands of the knowledge society and to the need for an improved level and quality of employment. They will have to offer learning and training opportunities tailored to target groups at different stages of their lives: young people, unemployed adults and those in employment who are at risk of seeing their skills overtaken by rapid change. This new approach should have three main components: the development of local learning centers, the promotion of new basic skills, in particular in the information technologies, and increased transparency of qualifications (Council of the European Union, 2000).

For detractors, the Lisbon Strategy constituted an irreversible turn toward the reductionist economic perspective based on the competitive models of efficiency and growth. As Giroux (2008) points out:

“Throughout the globe, the forces of neoliberalism are on the march, dismantling the historically guaranteed social provisions provided by the welfare state, defining profit-making as the essence of democracy, imposing rapacious free-trade agreements, saturating non-economic spheres with market rationalities and equating freedom with the unrestricted ability of markets to “govern economic relations free of government regulation.” (p. 57; Aronowitz, 2003, 101).

After tense debates, the Lisbon Strategy was ratified at the Stockholm Summit in 2001. The European Union, and especially the European Commission, adopted by consensus a set of benchmarks to measure and compare educational development among European countries. The results are reported annually to European authorities and published in the *Lisbon Objectives in Education and Training* series. This source of information was useful for redefining the SOCRATES, LEONARDO DA VINCI, and YOUTH programs, which ended in 2006. The Integrated Programs then gave way to the current Integrated Plan (2007-2013), or The Lifelong Learning Program, whose primary objectives are to develop and foster interchange, cooperation, and mobility among education systems so that they become a world-quality reference in accordance with the Lisbon Strategy. The new program has substantially increased with regard to its initial conditions and involves the COMENIUS (primary and secondary education), ERASMUS (higher education), LEONARDO DA VINCI (vocational training), GRUNDTVIG (adult education), and JEAN MONNET (European integration in the academic world) programs.

	PROGRAMS	AREA
The Integrated Plan	COMENIUS	EDUCATION
	LEONARDO DA VINCI	VOCATIONAL TRAINING
	JEAN MONNET	CULTURE
	ERASMUS	HIGHER EDUCATION
	GRUNDTVIG	ADULT EDUCATION

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The Lisbon Strategy in essence lays the foundation for building a more competitive and uniform educational system with a set of measurable objectives.



## **The Europe 2020 Strategy**

The current economic crisis has forced the European Union to redefine its policies. The serious problems in the financial sector have limited credit, causing a decline in consumer spending. This decline in consumption has negatively affected business productivity, contributing to rising unemployment rates in Europe. In addition, there is demographic pressure on the social protection system; that is, Europe now has a higher number of older people who need assistance and health care. Faced with this scenario of budget cuts and social needs, the European Union launched the Europe 2020 Strategy.

The Europe 2020 Strategy—like its predecessor, the 2000 Lisbon Strategy—preserves the neoliberal ideology that the free market and consumption are central to economic recovery and the well-being of citizens. The short-term priority is a successful exit from the crisis (Council of the European Union, 2010, 2), but how do we accomplish this? For politicians, the solution to the crisis is to generate new jobs. With new jobs, people will have money to spend in the market, companies will benefit, and the social protection system will be strengthened by the contributions of workers. This approach is based on the current ideological capitalist system (i.e., create new jobs to accumulate wealth, and then spend the money in a competitive market). However, the realities that the European Union has to overcome are significant. The average unemployment rate is 10.7%, and in countries such as Spain and Greece it is as high as 26.6% and 26%, respectively (Eurostat, 2012). How can consumption be encouraged when a large number of people are out of work? How can consumption be encouraged when there is a greater tax burden and a continuous rise in direct and indirect taxes? The economic austerity measures have not improved the economic situation of the member states, but they have increased social inequalities.

The Europe 2020 Strategy has resulted in three models of growth: (a) smart growth based on knowledge and technological innovation, (b) sustainable growth through the efficient use of alternative energy resources, and (c) inclusive growth with high employment and social cohesion (Council of the European Union, 2010, 3). According to the Europe 2020 Strategy, the role of European educational policy is merely reproductive. Education is

understood as a way to legitimize the neoliberal economic model based on production, free trade, and consumption. The current European Union policy conceives of education as a means to produce graduates capable of producing business benefits in an increasingly competitive market. The objective is to consolidate and legitimize economic neoliberalism rather than promote democratic social values that are critical and participatory.

The educational policy of the Europe 2020 Strategy is focused on training workers and encouraging entrepreneurship. One of the priority actions is “to promote knowledge partnerships and strengthen links between education, business, research and innovation, including through the EIT, and to promote entrepreneurship by supporting young innovative Companies” (Council of the European Union, 2010, p.11). In this sense, the European Union continues to stress the need to establish a qualifications framework and design an educational model based on the needs of the labor market. Specifically, the Europe 2020 Strategy highlights the need “to enhance the openness and relevance of education systems by building national qualification frameworks and better gearing learning outcomes towards labor market needs” (Council of the European Union, 2010, p.11). But should education exclusively serve market demands? Many people undoubtedly acquire knowledge to implement it in the labor market. We also understand that employment is necessary for economic recovery; however, the average unemployment rate among European Union youth is 21%, and in Spain it stands at 52.3% (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2012). The current crisis has broken the myth of training as a means to an economic and social renaissance. Increasingly, young Europeans no longer believe in the promise of going to college to get a good job. In summary, the current educational policy of the European Union is subject to the conditions of the economic crisis. The priority areas in education are aimed at training future employees and promoting entrepreneurship. Education serves a reductionist purpose insofar as training is a means to produce economic benefits rather than a tool to promote a more critical, democratic, and participatory society. The economic freedom that is leading the liberal values should also promote another kind of freedom: a social freedom. This can only be achieved through an educational policy that moves away from purely economic indoctrination and bets on the critical- and

transformative-thinking citizens. Citizens' individual thinking must be understood from a broader perspective in which critical capacity and empowerment are the essential core of change towards a model of a more democratic, participatory society.

## **Conclusions**

Over the past six decades, the design of European educational policy has been guided by the binomial reflection-action. Research and technical reports commissioned by the Council of Europe, the European Commission, and the European Parliament have contributed to proposals for a political model of growth based on neoliberal ideology and the free market. It is important to note that the emphasis on marketization is not an exclusive package of European educational policy; as Apple (2011) says, "this is a world-wide phenomenon" (p. 22) affecting all political models of the European Union.

Regarding this paper's goal to analyse, from a historical and critical perspective, the European education policies, it is important to conclude that the actions taken so far are directly related to the neoliberal policy promoted by the European Union in other spheres since its inception. Historically, there were several important moments that influenced and determined the current situation in European education. First, the *institutionalization* period (1971-1982) began with the Resolution of the Meeting of Ministers of Education in 1971, which constituted the starting point of European education policy. Second, the *instrumentalization* period (1983-2000) involved the implementation of a set of programs in vocational training, global education, and nonformal education (SOCRATES, LEONARDO DA VINCI, and YOUTH). Third, the *Lisbon Strategy* period (2001-2010) implied a transcendental shift in European education toward quality, excellence, and competitive models. Finally, taking into account the current financial crisis, the Europe 2020 Strategy proposes concrete measures of austerity, efficiency, and competitiveness for economic recovery. In each of these four periods, education was understood as a means to create skilled workers to produce benefits in the labor market. However, education should not be seen only as a means for economic growth, but as an opportunity to develop critical and participatory citizens. The current economic crisis fuels increasing social inequality.

Paraphrasing Zizek (2009), Giroux (2011) points out that “when it comes to the neoliberal-driven crisis, the social and economic problem that must be addressed forcefully is the growing gap and antagonism between the included and the excluded” (p. 595). The current problems of European educational policy are related to the ideological values embedded in its official documents. It is clear that employment is the engine of the economy and that Europe needs to increase its productivity to recover from the crisis. However, the current educational policies of the European Union insist on promoting competitiveness and the free market, which are the main factors causing social inequality.

European educational policy has also provided many benefits during this time. Vocational training and recognition mechanisms have opened a wide range of work opportunities within the European countries. These elements have supplied a high grade of specialization in the European market, which has positively affected the European economy, and consequently the European welfare state. However, the reductionist perspective ignores, at least in part, the fact that education is essential to building the supra-cultural dimension that European policymakers seek. In the knowledge society, quality, excellence, and competitiveness are indispensable factors to economic progress; however, it is equally important to define European educational policy in terms of multiculturalism, pluralism, and interdependence. The aim of the European dimension is to create feelings of belonging in the European Union through education. The current European educational design is a grand idea; however, it is impossible for it to be effective with an education model rooted solely in an economic and neoliberal perspective. Education intrinsically involves more dimensions than economic integration. Education is a means to transfer to citizens important and meaningful cultural elements such as language, values, and traditions. In essence, the Europe 2020 Strategy “must be” a reference for the prosperity of the European Union. Nevertheless, it would be a huge mistake to simplify European education as a mechanism of economic market service (Lafuente et al., 2007, 88). We must overcome the current economic perspective and define the future European education policy by considering the melting pot of European culture. Only through education, awareness and

critical thinking shall we build a mature society that addresses the identity challenge of creating a truly European culture that leaves behind the tensions and conflicts of the past.

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