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Best practices and new approaches in citizenship education in Europe

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Civic education and citizenship education in the curricula of European schools: developments and difficulties

In most European countries a process of revising educational systems has been accomplished in the last decade, or is now under way. As Duerr, Ferreira Martins, Spajic-Vrka (2000) point out, 'changes in education are being carried out to strengthen the school's role in: a) promoting economic and social (sustainable) development; b) targeting inequality and exclusion; and c) promoting students' mastering of multiple knowledge levels and skills'.

From this perspective, civic education has progressively acquired, as a consequence, a more relevant and central role. In fact civic education is nowadays widely implemented in Europe in formal education, as a separate school subject or in a cross-curricular form.

According to many experts, civic education should aim at *promoting active and responsible citizenship in modern democracies*. Today most of these experts prefer to call such wider educational perspective 'Education for Citizenship' (EC), or 'Education for Democratic Citizenship' (EDC), or, again, 'Education for European Citizenship' (EEC, when it is framed in a perspective of Identity and Citizenship in the EU context, considered as a unique political entity), in order to distinguish it from the more traditional subject called civic education (Lastrucci, 2003a). EC should be focused on the share of power in society in constitutional and legal provisions, i.e. in the relationship between the rights and responsibilities of citizens and democratic governments. Apart from promoting knowledge on the functioning of democracy and the role of citizens in a democratic society (that is also the traditional aim of civic education), EC/EDC should stress the importance of citizens' active participation in decision-making processes and their responsibilities for the future of civil society.

According to CIVITAS International's 'Statement of Principles of Effective Civic Education', this should include: basic understanding of how democracy and its institutions work; understanding the rule of law and human rights as reflected in international treaties and other agreements; enhancement of participatory skills which empower students to address the problems in their society; extensive use of interactive teaching methods and student-centred learning; and promoting a culture of democracy and peace within the school and all aspects of society.

Similar, but framed in a wider context, is the approach to civic education promoted by UNESCO, defined as 'civic education with an international dimension'.

In Council of Europe documents civic education takes shape in a wide interdisciplinary and multidimensional perspective. In fact, it is defined by four dimensions (human

rights, democracy, development, peace), as well as by several educational principles, such as pluralism, multi-level perspectives, institutional integrity, holistic approach and cultural literacy. In documents and resolutions produced by the Council of Europe (besides those produced in the context of the CiCe network) we find the most relevant and systematic design of a perspective of EC, and more specifically of EEC. This perspective is founded on linking the cultural dimension with citizenship, an approach that is now widely accepted under the term 'multicultural citizenship'.

Nevertheless, in most curricula of European schools, civic education keeps still its more traditional features: its aim, in fact, is often reduced to political literacy, understood in the context of state-based political education.

Best practices of education for citizenship in European countries

As we have seen, most experts agree upon the idea that Education for Citizenship must be focused on *active citizenship*. As a consequence, if they intend to be really effective, programmes for EC must be centred on an approach of *active education*.

A relevant source of knowledge about most advances in educational practices in EDC is given by the *Synopsis* published in 2000 by the Council of Europe (Manzel, Dreher, 2000) as a part of the final report of the Project on EDC (see §4). Some interesting, more specific, experimental approaches to citizenship education are offered in other papers and documents produced in the project. All these approaches are focused on the common pedagogical principle of active learning, and are aimed to the general goal of learning to live together.

The first important group of experiences is based on an approach of experiential learning, in which the learners follow their own curiosity and interest and learn through direct experience (learning by doing). An interesting example is given by the experience of the 'One-day Parliament' realised in Brussels. In January 1998, at the instigation of a mutual insurance company, a fund administered by the King Baudouin Foundation supported a project to counter political and social exclusion of the youth and actively involving the young. A public competition was held and 88 young people aged between 17 and 23, from various backgrounds and with a balance between the sexes, between Wallons and Flemish and between students and workers, were selected and given the task of allocating finance to projects combating social exclusion. Participants in the One-day Parliament were to meet four times to deliberate, run the projects and evaluate them (Kavadias *et al*, 1999).

A second important set of experiences is based on the approach of *collaborative learning*, focused on group processes (teamwork) and oriented to mutual goals and collaborative tasks.

A third trend is the approach of *peer tutoring*. It consists in a process of collaboration, of pooling knowledge in order to solve a problem or complete a task. Peer tutoring includes mutual cognitive and affective support for one another, so that peers often become life-long friends. An example would be to prepare texts and a set of comprehension

questions following the texts. Students have to write answers individually and later in pairs or a group of three compare responses. When responses to any particular question differ, students try to explain why they have answered in that way, aimed to the goal to come to consensus on an appropriate response. (Pticeck, 1999).

Another method useful in EC is *action learning*, consisting in a goal-oriented process organised as a rule in the form of a project with precise outcomes. To carry out the project trainers/teachers have to: formulate learning goals explicitly; support learners to choose their own learning strategies; motivate learners in such a way as to make them assume the responsibility of their own learning; develop a concrete project that can be carried out entirely by learners; encourage a gradual increase of learners independence; let learners understand their own action through reflection (*learning by reflective practice*).

Two interesting applications of this approach have been both realised in Italy.

The first experience concerns a study conduct with learners in the context of the ‘Tirreno Project’. This project was directed to carry out a survey of the cultural, natural and historical environment of the Fiumicino County. In interpreting the various samples and data collected on the field (chemical measurements, ethnographic tapes, archaeological findings, etc.) pupils receive support from specialists in universities, museums, libraries and NGOs. The result is a global view of the Fiumicino human space (Tantucci, 1999).

The second experience was carried out in a network of schools in Rome, in the context of a research project in education led by University of Rome ‘La Sapienza’. The project, called ‘Gli occhi degli altri’ (*The Eyes of Others*), was finalised to test a new model of multi-cultural citizenship education, based on a particular version of action learning method, the approach centred on real task. This consists in a cooperative task shared by learners that leads to a concrete outcome, ie a product realised and then administered by students. In this project products were: an exhibition open to all citizens; a permanent museum inside the school; a space organised for games and sports in a corner of the park around the school; a book of multi-ethnic recipes and a related gastronomic exhibition in which the dishes (prepared by students of several nationalities) presented in the book were tested by guests (Lastrucci, 1996b, 2000c).

Recent and in progress EC programs and projects

In the past few years many educational institutions and agencies, both public and non-governmental, have promoted programs and initiatives in EEC field or, more in general, in the field of EC. This is due, for a significant part, to the increasing of the activity of educational planning at level of single school (often developed through the engagement of external partnerships or the involvement in local or national projects) related to the process of decentralisation of political control to local level and of recognising of more

autonomy to schools, process that has characterised several schooling systems in the European Union context in the last decade.

An interesting and well-informed review of these activities is again offered by Duerr, Ferreira Martins and Spajic-Vrka (2000). This review is divided in different sectors, depending by the school level and by the general topic to which each program is connected. The authors refer to programmes that may be implemented as compulsory or optional school subjects, or as part of existing curricula and/or as extra-curricular or cross-curricular activities.

In the context of *compulsory education*, programs are generally oriented in the traditional perspective of civic education, even if under different titles, such as ‘civics’, ‘understanding society’, ‘man and society’, ‘political education’, etc.

Upper primary and secondary classes have had a particular role in the last eight years, programmes centred on *human rights education*. In fact, after the adoption of the Plan of Action for the UN Decade for Human Rights Education (1995-2004) and the 50th anniversary of the UDHR, there is a tendency to give human rights issues more place in education, either as a separate or a cross-curricula school subject. Their focus is on developing students’ awareness of universal human rights and freedoms and on preparing them to promote and protect these rights through the provisions laid down in a democratic community.

Projects and initiatives oriented to several other topics related to EC – such as *intercultural, anti-racist, peace, tolerance and global education* - have had in past few years a decisive role in enlarging, enriching and strengthening dramatically EC at compulsory education level. The aim of these programmes, generally speaking, is to promote understanding of and respect for cultural diversity more or less explicitly based on the principles of equality, the rule of law, pluralism, solidarity, peace, interconnectedness and inter-dependence. Particular attention is given to the development of skills and competencies in peaceful conflict-resolution, co-operation, negotiation and mediation. Nevertheless, these programmes ‘are rarely introduced as separate subjects. They usually appear as ‘emergency measures’ added to the existing curricula, such as civics. The rise of violence in societies and schools, as well as the impact of globalisation on national education systems, has created a greater need for the implementation of these programmes in cross-curricular or extra-curricular activities, integrated teaching, etc.’ (*ibid*).

In the context of *post-compulsory education and training*, including vocational training in colleges and universities, EC occurs in a number of *pre-service and in-service training programmes and activities*. ‘Recently, new programmes for training various professional groups in human rights, peaceful conflict-resolution techniques, including group mediation and facilitation, have appeared more frequently. Courses, seminars, workshops, conferences, round-tables, action-research projects and other forms of training are organised for lawyers, social workers, professionals working with prisoners, medical staff, managers, police and army officers, as well as for the university students’ (*ibid*).

In the context of *grass-roots activities*, learning for democratic citizenship is prevalent in a rapidly growing number of citizens' programmes, activities and initiatives that challenge traditional understanding of citizenship and democracy. They are redefining the relationships between, both, the individual and society and, the state and the market, by empowering citizens and by preparing the main actors in society for mediation between individuals and the government. Most of the activities are initiated and carried out by non-governmental organisations, community and neighbourhood associations, youth groups, etc. The forms of learning differ: from spontaneous debates and community projects to seminars and workshops.

This brief glance over current developments gives us an idea of the wide array of opportunities offered to students at every educational level (including adult education, vocational training and professional experience) for EDC, suggesting as we must likely identify the most advanced borderline for curricular and extra-curricular developing of EEC in the initiatives promoted at level of independent institutions such as NGOs or of spontaneous forms of organisation such as network of schools and other educational institutions or, again, specific partnerships among institutions of heterogeneous nature but sharing common objectives in EDC and, more in particular, in EEC.

The activity of Council of Europe for democratic education (1997-2002)

In this perspective the Council of Europe, as we have seen, continues to have a primary role, carrying out continuous and advanced work.

In 1997, the Council set up the project 'Education for Democratic Citizenship' (EDC), aimed 'to find out which values and skills individuals require in order to become participating citizens, how they can acquire these skills and how they can learn to pass them on to others' (Birzea, 2000). The Project Group was composed of education ministries representatives, specialists, international institutions and NGOs active in the field of education for democratic citizenship.

The project activities were divided between three sub-groups:

- The first group worked to 'concept definitions', with the aim to work out a framework of concepts for education for democratic citizenship together with the appropriate terminology and to identify the basic skills required for democratic practices in European societies.
- The second group worked to organise 'sites on citizenship'. The aims were to identify, learn from, compare, appraise and encourage the development of citizenship sites (innovative and empowering initiatives in which citizens participate actively in society, especially at the local level). Partnerships between the different actors involved

in education for citizenship (e.g. schools, parents, the media, businesses, local authorities, adult education establishments) were identified and supported.

- The task of the third group was to create ‘training and support systems’, building up a network of multipliers, adult educators, teacher trainers in education for democratic citizenship, to exchange information and experience in the field of EDC.

The many activities carried out between 1997 and 2000 resulted, *inter alia*, in the project’s synthesis report and in three complementary studies presented at the project’s final conference (Strasbourg, 14-16 September 2000): Birzèa (2000), Audigier (2000), Carey and Forrester (2000).

In the context of this project, of particular interest is the initiative of *citizenship sites*, a new and special kind of approach to knowledge and understanding of a specific environment to which the life of a well-delimited community or social group is related.

The notion of ‘site’ is not the notion of ‘location’. It is not the place of the site which is of interest in the Project, but the re-definition of the meaning of place, which is occurring on the basis of new forms of democratic practice... The sites will consist of any initiative... where there is an attempt to give definition to and implement the principles of modern democratic citizenship (Carey and Forrester, 2000).

In the perspective to develop experiences of active education aimed to the objectives of education to citizenship, it would be very useful to spread the experience of citizenship sites and promote the constitution of many other sites in cities and villages in different European countries.

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