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# **Active citizenship education in French everyday school life: issues and challenges**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper focuses on the implementation of citizenship education in French secondary schools. It analyses the brakes and levers that limit or encourage pupils' active participation to school life. It also shows what is at stake with the development of citizenship at school in terms of social construction and promotion of democracy.*

**Keywords:** *school democracy; citizenship education; participation; cross curriculum*

## **Introduction**

Citizenship education seems to have been gradually developed and often promoted in most national contexts, particularly since the adoption of the International Convention on Children's rights in 1989. As a direct consequence, and for the French context, pupils got a set of rights and duties within school in 1991. The objective was to encourage active participation, creativity and initiative, sense of responsibility. Twenty years later, we can question those given rights and wonder what they have really brought. Indeed, what is today the reality of the former political decision? Can we observe some modifications or transformations in everyday school life?

To discuss those issues, I will rely on a theoretical framework based on the sociology of action and on a philosophical approach of school democracy. The analysis also lies on a qualitative research led in six French secondary schools from 1999 to 2008 (including long observation periods and about 160 interviews).

First of all, I would like to lay stress on the French situation concerning pupils' rights and duties. Do official texts and strong principles mean renewed school practice? Then, the paper will focus on young people regards on citizenship education and participation. It will finally show that, despite numerous difficulties to promote citizenship within schools, that form of education is necessary, corresponding to a larger social project towards sustainable democracy.

## **1. Rights and duties: principles and objectives versus implementation**

### ***1.1 The promotion of pupils' expression and participation***

Citizenship education in French secondary schools has been well organised for about 20 years. If civic education was fully developed through a specific course (Galichet, 2005; Verdelhan-Bourgage, Bakhouché, Bouan, Etienne, 2007), pupils also got a set of rights

within secondary school in 1991 and many educative activities have been proposed inside and outside classroom (Condette, 2007).

French pupils' rights indeed focus on active participation. First of all, young people got a right to individual and collective expression, especially through school representatives. They also obtained a right to join for a meeting. Representatives but even any group of students can decide to organise a meeting, after class. They have to inform the school head and staff about the goal and the content of the meeting. Finally, pupils got the right of publication, in compliance with the whole rules belonging to the press ethics. That means pupils cannot write and disseminate anything because they are inside an institutional system which could be wrongly considered as a completely protected place. Those rights are granted if young people respect pluralism and neutrality. In France, they may not publicly discuss political or religious claiming inside schools.

We can make out two major ways of participating. Associative activities (mainly focused on sports, arts, ICT) intend to develop socialisation through friendly relationships, shared interests, collaborative work and acute respect for each other. They often have a strong impact on the quality of learning. Then, political activities aim at introducing to the democratic process and practice, and increasing the feeling of membership within school community. They rest on a pyramidal representation system. The lower level, the one for which all students are voters and eligible, corresponds to the class representatives (two delegates per form are elected by their peers for the whole school year). All the elected representatives constitute the assembly. The assembly of representatives meets at least three times a year, generally on the initiative of the school head. It discusses such issues as school life and work quality and brings proposals to improve the situation.

The representatives can express on a higher level. The assembly votes for three or five representatives who will belong to the school board, and even to the disciplinary committee. Pupils can also apply for the high school council – le conseil de la vie lycéenne (CVL) – created in 2000, which gathers half elected pupils and half adults (school staff and parents); they discuss school issues, and help preparing each school board meeting. The elected pupils can also belong to the health and citizenship education council – le conseil d'éducation à la santé et à la citoyenneté (CESC) – created in 1998, which works on building partnership with justice, police, local associations, in order to help preventing behaviours at risk.

Directly linked to school life, and on the higher level of representation, elected pupils can be candidates for regional and national students' elections, then working with the politicians and the French minister for education.

In fact, there are many ways to involve into – and out of – school life, through a large number of consultative and deliberative councils.

This official participation could be linked to the French recent education reforms laying stress on a progressive access to autonomy. Indeed, the seven pillars in the 2005 curriculum reform intend to develop a common set of knowledge and competence that

every pupil has to reach before the end of compulsory schooling. The stress is especially laid on the promotion of initiative, social and civic skills.

Such official instructions could let us presume that citizenship education is at the core of the French school system. But, in fact, there is a gap between prescription and practice.

### ***1.2 The school staff divided: two opposite conceptions of participation, two opposite conceptions of education***

The official texts in favour of pupils' expression are very ambitious as far as they grant a wide place to political participation, and a possible involvement into school councils. The implementation is not so easy because some adults belonging to the school staff think that the part pupils can play is too important. In other words, pupils' expression could disturb school organisation and would even be a major risk for teachers who could lose authority.

One must acknowledge that the rights granted reveal a number of difficulties as far as their implementation requires beforehand a common analysis on the balance to be reached between a full access to increased ways of expression and the rules inherent to school organisation.

As a matter of fact, the apparent concern to promote and develop citizenship education is not shared by the whole school staff, both for authority reasons but also for philosophical points of view. We can observe tensions between citizenship education promoters and opponents (Condette, 2005). On the one hand, some argue that curricula should only focus on strong useful subjects such as mathematics, economics, history, etc. As a consequence, cross curricular subjects, various ways of expressing, are considered as social matters that have to be learned outside schools because they especially belong to family socialization. Moreover, cross curriculum seems to be very far from the traditional criteria for evaluation. How can teachers assess the mastering of such social skills? Teachers often point out that their training – either initial or in-service – rarely deals with cross curriculum.

That conception of education tends to evacuate pupils' participation. Indeed, participation is then often reduced to answer the right way to the questions teachers ask (Condette, 2005). That French Republican project (Blais, Gauchet, Ottavi, 2008) lays stress on formal citizenship knowledge: the functioning of institutions, the expected role of citizens in society... In fact, that civic education lies on a narrow, restrictive conception of citizenship: "*A judicial and political matter related to one individual who belongs to one given political community*" (Audigier, 2005).

On the other hand, we meet schools defenders of a democratic project (Xypas, 2003; Meirieu, 2002) based on active citizenship education. Those teachers and other members of school staff try to develop active methods of learning (through group activities, peer tutoring...), promote personal initiatives and collective responsibilities. They act in favour of a global education. They often involve in extracurricular activities, such as collective sports, musical groups, school journal, theatre... All these activities reduce the

formal distance between teachers and pupils and tend to build better relationships based on mutual respect and trust. The teachers point out that such activities, far from disturbing authority, create strong social links and can be considered as pedagogical means enabling to give more sense to curricula, especially for young people who resist school norms.

So we can observe that the implementation of citizenship education through educative and political activities narrowly depends on personal deep conceptions of what education is or should be. But it is also linked with pupils' levels of involvement.

## **2. Pupils' regards on citizenship participation: "the happy few" versus "the silent majority"**

### ***2.1 A general weak enthusiasm for school educative activities***

Sociological researches led by François Dubet and Danilo Martuccelli (1996), or still by Patrick Rayou (1998) showed that pupils' involvement in French school life is generally weak. Most young people seem to be not attracted to educative activities because, for them, school remains a place ruling individuals rather than encouraging self-fulfilment. School is mainly considered as a place of learning, of working, and leisure keeps consequently outside. Besides, many pupils have various activities outside school – for example, they belong to sport or music clubs – and they do not need to stay a longer time at school after class.

P. Rayou (1998) also notices the relative failure of the institutional participation offers. According to him, the French secondary school students are hardly interested in participation because they give greater importance to various forms of sociability which can only exist among peers, outside the control of adults.

Moreover, for a few years, we have been observing a transformation in hobbies: traditional hobbies are today fully replaced by new Medias. Indeed, young people spend a lot of time taking part into social networks. That is another way of participating, but it totally excludes the school system with its norms and references. Students talk about teachers, education staff, but outside their control – sometimes, some reach the absolute limit and we can notice that the number of complaints tends to increase.

Participation can also be a risky venture as far as it willingly exposes involved pupils. When they take part to school councils, pupils represent a little number, a minority, and the discussion is often led by the adults. When they ask for a larger and genuine expression, they have sometimes to face to teachers' hostility. All along the interviews we made, pupils' representatives often told about such a bad experience and they explained how uncomfortable they felt during the school board meetings. As a consequence, some did never attend to meetings or chose definitively to give up.

Here we find the fragile core of citizenship implementation: on the one hand, most pupils seem not to be really interested in such forms of participation; on the other hand,

citizenship education exists through official documents but it is implemented in various ways, depending on the legitimacy pupils' expression really conquered.

## **2.2 The characteristics and role of the involved minority**

Despite the reluctant majority, a few pupils get willingly involved in school educative activities.

In fact, the minority accepts to take part to offered extracurricular activities, according to several main criteria which have to be respected:

- 1) The risks of being personally questioned are weak – even in case of bad results in evaluations – no link should be created between personal results, abilities and the level of involvement. Because, in fact, there is not one model idealizing the involved pupil. On the contrary, a great variety exists and it is a symbol of diversity;
- 2) It is necessary to get more free time to dedicate to these extracurricular activities – class generally ends at 4:30 pm and it is certainly too late for most young people who use different means of transport to go home, and who have a lot of homework to do;
- 3) The quality of school climate is very important and when the relationships between pupils and adults are respectful, trustful, young people feel prone to participate actively. Besides, from one year to the next, pupils give precise information on what is possible, what is granted, what can be interesting.

When those minimal conditions are gathered, some pupils accept to get involved into school life.

Often, active pupils identify a whole series of positive aspects which help motivation and maintain personal commitment. Interviews and *in situ* observations show that getting involved in various activities promotes new meetings and improve communication between peers who appreciate to know better each other. That also develops a collaborative experience through shared responsibilities. That encourages solidarity, respect for diversity. Pupils progressively build social competences and succeed in communicating, negotiating with adults, especially teachers. That creates a positive impact on the learning environment.

Participation brings, borrowing here Olson's terminology (1978), *selective goods*. That means young people can obtain symbolic benefits – acquire new skills, get acknowledgement from the majority of school staff – or material advantages – from getting an office for representatives, to a special ticket to have lunch earlier. These benefits only belong to the “happy few”. All those incentives contribute to increase motivation and to go on active participation.

Thus, the features of participation are much contrasted. Material conditions, symbolic benefits, support from the staff bring more value to commitment and increase personal motivation. The involved pupils present also various characteristics but they have yet one common point: they all share confidence in education.

### **3. Participation: an emblematic social issue and an educative challenge**

#### ***3.1 Participation and the continuous building of democracy***

What pupils learn today at school will be certainly used tomorrow in their everyday lives. Citizenship education should be or become a growing concern for all educators. That means that the school system, through curricula, through various educative activities, has an important social responsibility. Of course, school cannot be responsible for all social failures, for economic disorders. But, school contributes to the future of society since it welcomes small children who will stay there for at least ten years. During the schooling period, pupils learn different subjects, go through examination and build little by little a professional project. But they also learn values, experiment rules, and construct themselves not only as future citizens but as human beings capable of making sensible and respectful choices. Education is narrowly linked to culture and inclusion. Pupils will also become tomorrow deciders and it is consequently necessary to include citizenship education through the whole moments of school life: obviously within class practice, but also within various extracurricular educative activities, and in everyday behaviours.

To follow K. Kennedy's analysis (1997), citizenship education is "*an inherently valuable feature of a good education, enabling pupils to make significant contributions to a democratic political culture*".

Citizenship education provides a good framework within which oppositions, conflicts can find negotiated solutions.

#### ***3.2 Participation as an educative challenge***

Because democracy is a potential fragile political system, citizenship education and active participation become a constant peaceful need and a real challenge for our society which is mainly interested in selfish effectiveness and individual progress.

According to Audrey Osley and Hugh Starkey (2005, p. 9), "*Citizenship has three essential and complementary dimensions: it is a status, a feeling and a practice*". The status is often studied at school through an institution and law course. In the French education system, knowledge oversteps experience and practice. Even today and despite some little change, the different subjects taught keep highly intellectualized.

The feeling to belong to a community of citizens sharing values, traditions and hope is really important too, but it has to be more developed, cultivated. Then, practicing citizenship implies that teachers and other educators have to be trained in respect to that purpose.

In France, initial and in-service training is often questioned because either it tends to disregard knowledge or it neglects practice. It seems difficult to find a balance between

those two useful and complementary dimensions. Moreover, the content of knowledge and content of practice could also be more considered and examined because they scarcely deal with cross curriculum and citizenship education. Knowledge and practice remain highly partitioned and problems can only be partly analysed and solved. Yet, the basis for a successful citizenship education implementation is certainly to modify and improve teacher training, towards a systemic approach which could reveal complexity and more diversity.

Besides, inside schools, the principle of democratic participation requires the staff, and especially the head, to examine the inner structures, the general organisation, the political project and the management style.

In fact, citizenship education should be analysed and developed at several decision levels: from the training level to the management and political levels.

### **Conclusion**

Students and pupils' rights to expression and active citizenship imply not only full participation from pupils but also full authorization and help from the adults.

Citizenship education, through educative activities within school, promotes pupils active, significant and aware participation. It also develops their abilities to build projects and to take part to the decision making. But only a minority really seems to feel concerned because participation, citizenship keep formal and weakly profitable on a short term.

In fact, numerous official texts and strong principles do not automatically lead to renewed school practice if the general but fundamental question of what society we would like to build is constantly evacuated. What is at stake is the construction of a society based on an evolutive form of education narrowly linked to more social justice, solidarity, human respect, critical thinking and awareness.

As Edgar Morin points it out, we have to find the right way to protect the future of humanity... and citizenship education can bring a significant contribution to such a project.

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