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How do elementary teachers connect history and geography with citizenship? Research in historical and territorial consciousness

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In France, history and geography are compulsory subjects for the three last years of elementary school (*Cycle 3*). The curricula are organised by content, and the outcomes are prescribed. Essentially these consist of

- developing the children's personality and abilities
- socialising them
- developing their collective identity
- empowering them as young citizens.

This paper is focussed social and civic outcomes. Using the results of a large enquiry into teaching history and geography in elementary school (Audigier and Tutiaux-Guillon), we¹ have developed in the IUFM of Lyon a specific research project on elementary teachers' attitudes towards these aims and about what initial training would be relevant. Do teachers take account of the social and civic outcomes of history and geography? How? How could new teachers be empowered for such practice?

Elementary teachers in France teach every subject. Most are not graduates but were trained in pedagogic high schools (*Ecoles Normales*); some have been recruited directly (without any initial training); younger teachers, who graduate in any subject taught in elementary school, are trained in the IUFM². In-service training is not compulsory but is frequent; its contents differ from one region to another. Most elementary teachers have little training in history and still less in geography³. This gives rise to another question: how can teachers give professional consideration to the outcomes of history and geography when they have only a general knowledge of such subjects?

Teachers' attitudes towards the outcomes of history / geography teaching

The research directed by Audigier and Tutiaux-Guillon surveyed 859 teachers on their conceptions and practices in history, geography and civics (1997-1998). Only 27% associated geography with geopolitics and history with understanding the present and empowering the citizen. Those 27% included more young graduates trained in the IUFM than others (is this a matter of training or of a generational difference?). In another survey 337 teachers were questioned on the aims they pursued through the pedagogical

¹ N. Tutiaux-Guillon, O. Fauray, A. Ogier, C. Vercueil-Simion. The results of this research will be on-line on the site of the IUFM of Lyon in autumn 2004 (www.lyon.iufm.fr), in French.

² University Institute for teachers training, created only in 1992 to train graduate students who have succeeded in an academic entrance examination in pedagogy. Every teacher trained in these institute is necessarily younger than the average and a graduate.

³ The training in these subjects differs so much from one IUFM to another that it is impossible to give any valid general information ! (Audigier and Tutiaux-Guillon)

supports they used with pupils: they answered ‘developing a sense of humanity’ (in geography 46%, in history, 57%) more than ‘citizenship’ (38% for history, 25% for geography) or ‘democracy’ (39% for history). Taking into account the official intentions, the proportions are lower than should be expected⁴. For the teachers, the main aims of school geography are knowing about France, because the children live there; knowing locality, to know oneself and one’s environment, and knowing the world, because this is knowing ‘others’ – some of whom are moreover present in the classroom. But the problems related to town and country planning are not studied and the teachers do not connect geography with social problems or with the news (Audigier and Tutiaux-Guillon).

In 2002 we interviewed ten voluntary teachers in the region of Lyon, choosing schools in different social environments (urban, suburban and rural areas, with and without acute social problems). We used the same protocol of a semi-structured questionnaire, about the aims that they assumed for history/geography teaching, about their own practices aiming at outcomes, about the abilities of children. We found that it was not easy to find teachers eager to discuss such matters!

Which conceptions of citizenship underpinned the answers? Only two teachers referred to ‘rights’; none evoked public space, the responsibility of the citizen, or political stakes – perhaps because the children seemed ‘too young’. For three of the teachers interviewed, the intended ‘identity’ was only individual, and was synonymous with ‘personality’; for the others, it was collective, sometimes French and rooted in the past. When they asserted that history is important for identity, it was only with regard to migrant children: a way of being socialised as French or European. Every teacher maintained that knowing history is relevant to understanding the present, either because history repeats itself, or because knowing history develops critical abilities. But only three teachers mentioned the effective links between past and present (causality, heritage, memory), and the idea that history is reflected through present questions and stakes was totally lacking⁵. What we received from these teachers was a picture of a largely shared French conception, not at all specific to teachers.

As for a citizen’s responsibility in managing the territory, only two teachers evoked it (but in terms of managing the environment). The territory was not thought as worthy of involvement or of supporting identity. If the locality was often mentioned, it was because of school practices that used local landscapes and places, local resources, and from the relationship with local authorities or parents, especially in rural areas. France had to be known because the children lived or will live there, even more so when they come from abroad. Three teachers insisted upon knowing Europe and the world, but in connection with ‘life’ and not with ‘citizenship’. Conceptions of geography were rather

⁴ Other surveys and interviews show that teachers scarcely refer to official prescriptions for the taught contents, practices or intents; often they even ignore the official texts, and teach what they want. And that’s the French centralised educational organisation! (*ibidem*)

⁵ even though some prescribed contents result explicitly from such questions and stakes (e.g. women’s history, genocide...)

blurred, and often limited to classical objects and methods; this seems an obstacle to identifying the civic outcomes of this subject (cf. Clerc, 2002).

As the teachers' answers and the observation of lessons demonstrate, most history and geography lessons do not take explicit account of civic aims or democratic values. In fact the main preoccupation of most teachers is managing activities for the class and avoiding unruliness. Generally the lesson is devoted to looking for information in documents, partly through a dialogue, partly through individual or group activities. The information is mainly factual, and not really meaningful (Audigier and Tutiaux-Guillon). The same picture emerges from the analysis of recent textbooks. There appears to be a belief that knowledge will, at best, *naturally* produce civic awareness, historical consciousness. But elementary teachers did not often claim even this positivistic attitude. In fact, they had some difficulties in specifying what they really did in the classroom in order to present to us any example of what they taught. Maybe this was because this competence is not required for teaching, or perhaps because we are not only researchers but trainers, and as such thought to be evaluating the practices.

The main obstacles to taking the outcomes into account

We take it for granted that most teachers do not really support the civic and social outcomes of history/geography through their teaching. Which are the main obstacles?

When we chose schools from different social backgrounds, we supposed that those environments would partly explain the teachers' attitudes: the previous survey had indicated that in the area where social problems were acute, citizenship was more understood as 'obeying law and rules', while in well-off districts, it was understood as 'developing a critical mind'. However both aims were connected with civic education (Audigier and Tutiaux-Guillon). The interviews carried out in 2001 about history/geography teaching did not repeat this link with social background, either because identifying and assuming outcomes for history/ geography does not depend on the context, or because there were too few teachers involved. The main parameters in 2001 seemed to be the conception of the subjects and overall the conception of teaching.

Centring school on the pupil is both the core of professional identity for elementary teachers (Lautier, 2000) and an official injunction. This reduces the importance of the civic and social outcomes of history and geography, because it stresses the individual outcomes (developing the children's personality and abilities): the teachers are more aware of the latter, which they translate as developing children's activities and autonomy. This is easy to put into practice, all the more so because it fits the dominant pedagogical model. Only a few innovative teachers championed the social and civic aims strongly, but even they found it difficult to aim at such outcomes, except through fostering a critical approach to documents. Most teachers said that, because history/geography are not as fundamental as reading, writing and counting, such lessons are moments to have fun, or to follow the children's and the teacher's interests. From such a perspective the civic or social aims are very remote, the more so because history and geography are taught without reference to official curricula and texts (see footnotes ⁴ and ⁵).

This attitude is strengthened by an inadequate knowledge of history and geography. The elementary teachers lack sufficient precise knowledge to reflect on the meaning of events or of symbolic places, for example. They are able to select facts that look important, but not always to connect these facts with their social significance, still even less to organise activities which help their pupils to draw the same connections.

One last obstacle is that the children are thought 'too young' to act as citizens. In our IUFM the organisation separates 'didactical training in specific subjects' and 'general pedagogical training'. Work on this obstacle would need cooperation and consensus with other teachers trainers, because all of us only train teachers in didactics.

Subsequent orientations for initial training

Taking into account the obstacles which we have discussed, what initial training, aimed at teaching history/geography for civic and social ends, is possible during the only year of initial training allotted to students⁶?

Our first plan was to use real situations observed in the classrooms. They were lacking, so we elaborated a completely alternative process. From the former analysis we inferred that the best supports for training students to take in account social and civic outcomes as teachers, are historical or geographical situations that they identify as weighted with social/political stakes and/or conflicts. Such situations are not frequently taught in French school, where the general tendency is to neutralise the contents and to avoid questions that raise conflict. But the curricula do offer some topics: for example in geography, stressing the (possible) crisis confronting conflicting town and country planning when studying locality, and in history, studying topics which have an evident involvement, such as colonisation or the Resistance. Such topics can be linked easily with the present, with identity and citizenship. They seem a good introduction to the importance of outcomes in teaching history/geography, after which students would be required to work on how to take these outcomes in account.

Conciliating the trainer's position with the researcher's is not easy. The time devoted to didactical training in history and geography is, for the students who experience the process, limited to 30 hours. In these sessions they must develop the abilities to master the contents and their significance and to select academically and didactically relevant supports and practices – and we are suggesting that the trainer must additionally induce an awareness of outcomes and an ability to manage them. Sometimes the trainer forgets that as a researcher s/he has to test a process and exposes core information on social and civic aims. Sometimes, s/he is so much preoccupied by the lack of time, and the risk of compromising the didactical training, that s/he scruples to devote too much time to the work on outcomes.

⁶ 'Students' as referred to here are graduates recruited to become elementary teachers. The training year associates theoretical and reflexive training in the IUFM with several weeks of training in different schools and different classes. Didactical and general training are partly related to training periods, partly more professional.

Several possible processes have been examined:

- developing a reflexive analysis of a ready-made teaching/learning situation (T/L S), taking into account the outcomes (however, this does not develop the students' competencies to construct a T/L S by themselves)
- encouraging the students to build themselves a T/L S taking in account the outcomes - but the main problem is precisely their lack of sufficient knowledge to do so
- proposing a 'standard' T/L S, that does not take in account any social/civic ends, and urging them to improve it with some pupil work aiming at outcomes: this last process has been retained for experimentation, in order to test its efficiency.

Empirically, we have constructed the following protocol for a training session (a standard session is three hours long).

- The trainer requires the students to have read about the planned topic at least in *some* textbooks (secondary and easy university ones) before the session.
- The trainer announces the theme of the supposed T/L S, and asks the students to write down individually why they are studying it, and which objective they would stress.
- The trainer presents the T/L S and a work-sheet for pupils (three to five documents, a questionnaire limited to factual information, vocabulary and/or method); the positive points are underlined. A collective reflection on the general interest of the topic, and on the possible civic and social aims is developed. Initial trials show that students are spontaneously more critical than laudatory. The main difficulty for the teacher trainer is to avoid too much directive dialogue or practice. The students' proposals for aims are examined and those referring to social/civic aims are retained as relevant for further work.
- Working in groups, the students are asked to improve the T/L S by changing the questionnaire and/or the supports (the trainer proposes other supports if required) in order to aim at one of the former civic/social aims. It is up to the group to chose which aim. A difficulty here is that some groups spend more time looking for new documents than reflecting on pupils' activities and on the aims of the T/L S. In recent experiments, the documentary file given to them as a complementary resource has been reduced a lot. A further problem has been that the students must have enough knowledge of the topics to connect outcomes and supports or activities for pupils, but sometimes they have not, even after reading some short textbooks before the session.
- Once again the students answer individually the questions: 'why are we studying it', and 'which objective would you stress'.
- The answers to these questions and the results of the group work are collected for our researcher. As trainers, we criticise and improve the proposals and during the next session we provide collective feedback on the best professional practices. Such improved teaching/learning situations and feedback could be set on an Internet platform but are not at the moment.

We plan also to ask to the students for a written reflexive statement at the end of the year.

The first trials of the protocol were promising. The topic was: 'The Alps, a European mountain'. The results show that of nineteen students, ten afterwards expressed the social/political aims of the situation clearly (more about environment than about Europe, and most about the importance of developing a citizenship awareness.); two transformed the outcomes in contents; and only seven (but they represent more than one-third) did not allude to outcomes after their group work. It is also interesting to state that eight have demonstrated a professional gain, either by a more exact understanding of what is geography or by discovering a process for organising their management of the curricula.

The proposals from the groups show some attempts to encourage pupils to reflect on possible political choices in regional planning and confronting points of view (for and against). But more questions proposed for pupils remained very traditional and were not obviously connected with outcomes. This may have resulted from the students' lack of information or from a difficulty in translating intentions into classroom activities, and needs to be worked on further.

Suggestions for further work

- It seems promising that teachers experience the fact that taking in account the outcomes empower them to choose precise topics, pedagogical supports and pupils' activities for their classes. But this is easier with new teachers, who know that they lack professional abilities, than with experienced teachers – except when they feel awkward toward history/geography teaching.
- In teacher training, the outcomes must not be separated from work on specific topics. Training sessions on outcomes only, being general and not orientated towards immediate practice, are not efficient, however important. In a parallel research we are constructing some tools to address this issue.
- The main obstacle is probably larger than we can confront in a training session: it is the conception of one's job – either for teachers or for teacher trainers.

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