European identity and citizenship: working on the fundamentals of the European Convention with primary school student teachers

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Introduction

Everyday life and the news disseminated by the mass media frequently offer interesting material on civic and educational aspects for reflection and discussion. The use of such material in education is not as common as it should be, since teachers in training institutions often prefer to introduce discussions on theoretical or well established cases in academic literature. However, real events that happen around us offer an added value; the possibility of reflection on the personal involvement of students, both as citizens and as future professionals in education. The construction of Europe is going through a crucial phase with the enlargement process and the institutional and legal reforms that are under way. The most recent European Summit (December 2003) was expected to approve the principles of the European Convention as the main statutory document for the European Union, but the document presented by the Commission, which had been preparing the document since February 2003, was not approved as some countries, Spain and Poland among them, would not agree with some of its proposals. (More recent changes and events in European politics seem to predict that the Convention will finally be approved in next spring's Summit under the Irish presidency.)

This was particularly relevant in our country and so it was thought that it could be a useful mean of introducing a learning activity aimed at analysing those aspects of the document related to identity and European citizenship. The experience was developed in a course on European Studies addressed to Primary School student teachers.

Education for citizenship: involving students in their own training as citizens

In order to develop a critically and politically aware sense of citizenship students are expected to learn and apply democratic values, to reflect on the global repercussions of their actions and choices and to develop social and political action skills, so they are able to participate in democratic decision-making. If student teachers are to be aware of their role as educators of future citizens they should be trained within this perspective and have the opportunity, in their initial training, to work on issues which will familiarise them with the events which affect citizens' rights and duties.

Teaching institutions should also promote the European dimension as an educational framework for values education - respect and tolerance towards other people, a sense of shared responsibility, a cooperative disposition - and they should also focus on the knowledge of their rights and duties as European citizens. In this respect the European Convention document provided an excellent opportunity to explore essential concepts and to introduce our students to the text which is meant to be the European citizens' main legal framework.

An activity was planned which started from the students' own ideas on identity and citizenship and developed further in two aspects: knowledge of the statements of the document about European citizenship and the selection, analysis and discussion of some controversial issues.

Exploring identities: from the local to the global

The process of globalisation is demonstrating the development of human activities on a planet-wide scale, but in spite of this and of increasing global integration, the identity aspects of territory and place are steadily growing. There is a tension between the global and the local: the territorial identities that are reappearing as defined physical spaces are becoming blurred, and the network concept is substituting for that of the frontier. In modern states citizens had an identity that was secure and usually exclusive (Giddens, 1991). The weakening of nation states poses a new challenge, since globalisation and supranational organisations are taking over some of the state competencies. The loss of a 'secure' national identity is producing an impact not only on feelings of belonging but on the very notion of citizenship (Edye, 2003).

The aim of our exercise was to make a simple exploration of these changing parameters in order to introduce the students to the concepts of identity and citizenship. The characteristics of the territory where they live, Catalonia - a society with some particular features such as bilingualism, cultural coexistence and different feelings of belonging - provided the background for the exercise. A very simple questionnaire, meant to look at their own feelings, was disseminated among 40 students; it had only two questions:

- If somebody asks you where are you from, what would be your answer?
- Could you list your feelings of belonging in order of priority: Europe, Catalonia, Spain, Other?

The answers to the first question were clearly related to the person who asked the questioin. If the question came from someone living nearby, the students identified themselves first with the place where they lived, and successively with the nearest city, the region and lastly with the state. The state was only given in first place if the question was asked by a foreigner from a distant country. When the questioner was a foreigner, Barcelona often appeared as an identity reference; this is of particular interest, because only four of the students were actually living in the city proper - most were living in different towns in the surroundings. In the majority of cases Barcelona replaced the reference to the State; this could be explained by the fact that since the 1992 Olympics, Barcelona is a very well-known city everywhere. Students showed great flexibility in their own identification: their point of view was not exclusive - they were changing the scale on the map by using their own references.

The answers to the second question illustrated a complex reality:
- 50% of the students identified themselves as Catalans, Spanish and Europeans in that order

- 25% of the answers introduced a variation: 12.5% chose the order Europe-Spain-Catalonia and the other 12.5% Catalonia-Europe-Spain
- 10%, identified themselves only as Catalans
- the remaining 15% were answers such as 'I don't identify myself with any of these places' or 'I feel more Spanish than Catalan but not European at all'.

It can be concluded that 75% of the students accepted an inclusive sense of belonging as a normal situation. These results can be related to recent surveys undertaken in Catalonia (Castells, 2003; Estradé, 2002) which shows that 92% of young people define their identity as follows: about 43% identify themselves as Catalan or as more Catalan than Spanish; about 36% as both Catalan and Spanish at the same level, and less than 20% as only Spanish. It seems that the trend among young people is towards a shared identity, and that this situation is accepted without contradiction. Another survey (Orizo and Roque, 2001) which explored the thinking of young people about the requirements to be considered of Catalan identity, found that 61% of the sample thought that 'to be born Catalan' is the basic requirement; but as a second option, feelings of personal ascription such as 'the willingness to be a Catalan' (45%) or 'to live and work in Catalonia' (52%) were the most important.

All this suggests that the creation of territorial identities is not only an individual process. The place of origin confers identity to individuals and to the group; however, in a global world the mass media and ICT, along with migratory waves, are influencing identities and changing the ways in which people identify themselves with a territory. As a result of these multiple interactions, identity should not be considered as a monolithic concept but as an evolving multicultural and heterogeneous construction.

The discussion with the students about inclusive and exclusive identities which closed the first part of the activity made them aware of the fact that shared identities will become the most common situation in Europe and also a characteristic of European citizens.

From identity to European Citizenship

The second part of the activity was aimed at promoting reflection on the political concept of citizenship in order to analyse some aspects of the Convention proposal for a common European citizenship.

The terms citizen and citizenship usually refer to a particular condition which has specific rights and duties: the right to choose where to live and work; the right to elect and be elected; the right to be protected; the right to social assistance; the duty to pay taxes and the duty to serve the country, for instance. From a general point of view, citizenship refers to the legal status of an individual who is part of a country and, in particular, to the relation between the state and the individual. The state defines the necessary conditions to be met by an individual willing to be its citizen, and citizens are subjected to the laws of the state.

The European Union could be said to be the first construction in history that aims to build a common political space via democratic instruments: this process has been one of the most interesting of the last 50 years. The functionalist political approach in response to post- World War II problems succeeded in the search for economic solutions but never pretended (at the time) to the creation of a real political space. Thirty-five years later, the signature of the Union Treaty (1992) took place in a completely different situation: the Europe which had been given birth by two world powers had already disappeared and a new panorama had opened after the fall of the Berlin wall. A new Europe stretching from the Atlantic to the Urals was starting to be seen as a possible horizon, but the increasing process of globalisation which was operating across political borders was demanding new regulations and political responses. After economic and monetary union were completed with the launching of the Euro as the common currency, the need to develop a democratic framework for the common economic space and questions related to its citizens became a priority on the agenda: 'Once Europe is created, let's create the Europeans'.

The 1999 Amsterdam Treaty stated that 'Citizenship of the Union shall complement and not replace national citizenship'. The reality is that, in general, Europeans privilege their national feelings first and their European ones second. The new rights agreed for EU citizens - free movement, residence in EU territory, the right to vote both in local and European elections - have not succeeded in giving Europeans the feeling of belonging to the same community. Why has this feeling of being a European citizen not become general? Why is this citizenship so difficult to assume? It has been argued that Europeans, as citizens, feel distant from the institutions, that there is a lack of democratic legitimacy, that the European Parliament is only marginally representative and its work and decisions are completely ignored by the citizens. The members of the Commission are not elected and parliamentary control over it is very weak; in fact, the European elections are always analysed using an internal approach, leaving the future of Europe as a secondary consideration. This difficulty in feeling a member of the same community exists in spite of the increasing similarity of problems shared between different countries and also in spite of eleven of the Union members sharing the same currency.

Does the European Convention give response to these questions?

Article 5 (Title 2) of the European Convention defines European Union citizenship as follows: 'every national of a member state of the Union will have a double citizenship, the national and the European; both can be freely used, taking into account the rights and duties which are substantial to it'. The Title refers also to all rights attached to European citizenship: residence, circulation, right to elect and be elected in local elections and to the European parliament, diplomatic protection in third countries, right of petition, right to be answered by European Institutions in one's mother tongue. It also

states the principal of non-discrimination against European citizens because of their nationality.

Our students split into groups in order to discuss this article and some possible consequences of its application. They used different materials which included selected newspapers to look for current news about Europe, and were recommended to work from different perspectives. The general discussion which followed showed their findings and conclusions about citizenship, which they defined as a concept that cannot be only passive but which should be active through participation in civic life.

Article 5 clearly says that the only way to accede to European citizenship is through national citizenship of one of the member states. Starting from the Spanish situation, and with the information provided by the newspapers which contained some clarifying examples for different European countries, students discussed and argued that a paradoxical and very unjust situation exists. There can be important differences and various degrees of difficulty in becoming a citizen of the EU. Being a 'foreign person' does not mean the same all over Europe and this has political and social consequences. The term mainly refers to the millions of immigrants who live in the European Union and who constitute an important part of its human landscape and identity but who can be excluded from the basic European citizenship. For instance, Germany denies nationality to a Turkish person whose family has lived in Germany for three generations, but any ethnic German from the former Soviet Union has the right to it, even if he is not able to speak German. In the case of France, the third generation of immigrants has already been given French nationality and therefore European citizenship.

Another interesting example is that of Cyprus. If both the Greek and Turkish sectors vote in favour of joining the EU in the forthcoming referendum, the Turkish sector of the island, which is only recognised as a state by Ankara, could soon become a member of the EU, and its population have the status of European citizens, while Turkey would still be waiting for a date to join. Although it is expected that the North will vote to join the Greek sector and thus the European Union, they will not be able to do so unless the Greeks accept the reunion of the island. If they do not, then only the Greek sector will attain European citizenship and a new exterior frontier of the EU will appear.

Some questions about democratic participation

Title 6 of the European Convention deals with democratic life in the Union. It establishes the principals of equal democracy of the Union citizens, the transparency of the legislative debate and the regulations for democratic participation.

The feeling of being a citizen among our students was not general. Those involved in community activities were more conscious of their citizenship, but it was difficult, for all of them to define a range of responsibilities and rights. For many students, voluntary work and civic participation was linked to 'better' citizenship, making a distinction

between 'good' and 'not so good' ones. Their conclusion was that citizenship should be understood as individuals reciprocal relationships with society.

Working in groups, the students were asked to analyse the chapter of the Convention and to clarify their ideas in order to prepare a general debate about a controversial point. The first point raised for discussion concerned political decisions. The students argued that the fact that decisions are not taken inside each country but 'far from them' brings additional problems in relation to the distance from power, as it increases the lack of interest of citizens in European affairs; in the students' words: 'the more political decisions are taken far from the citizens, the more citizens feel excluded from them'. To overcome this handicap the European Union should articulate debate and information platforms to stimulate participation at all levels. The students found informed articles about these questions in newspapers and made a selection of the most interesting ones. There was a lot of disagreement with the need for establishing a shared European citizenship when the main questions in the political agenda, such as immigration, defence, foreign affairs, are not completely shared and conducted openly.

This activity also raised again the question of immigrants, and their lack of participatory was highlighted. This was a very controversial issue: the students refused to talk about 'democratic participation' when a large proportion of the people living in Europe are excluded, having no rights to vote, to elect or to be elected.

Some final reflections

European citizenship needs the consciousness of a shared European identity, which is to be constructed and which is still both in its early stages and a controversial issue. There is no linguistic or cultural homogeneity, and a European identity cannot be constructed on elements like Christianity, economic identity or ethnic identity.

Many intellectuals have written about the meaning of being European. It has been argued that a common cultural identity that could be the base for a political unity does exist, but it seems evident that this European identity cannot arise from an impossible cultural homogenisation, nor be built against 'the other', with Islam the most likely candidate to be this 'other' (Mondrasse). One of the most interesting ideas on the theme is that of Jurgen Habermas, who argues that in a liberal democracy citizens must be loyal and feel identified not with a cultural identity but with some constitutional principles that guarantee their rights and freedoms. This proposition is particularly attractive as it fights against the ethnic nationalism which could be considered the biggest enemy of peace and freedom in the history of modern Europe.

On the other hand immigration is a complex component of the new European identity and a decisive opportunity for transforming and enriching the conceptual content of democracy. The key question is the spread and guarantee of Human Rights, that is, the right to have rights. Immigration is the dividing line: what is now at stake is our capacity

to overcome the limitations of a model of national citizenship which represents a barrier to the development of an expansive line of legitimacy, of rights. This is not a matter of generosity towards those who do not enjoy the privileges of citizenship but simply coherence with the logic of Human Rights themselves. It is not only a problem of inclusion, since the beneficiaries of this change will be not only, and not even mainly, 'the others', but ourselves.

Our students were well aware of the key role of education: our schools have been and still are fundamental in consolidating national identities, and they should also be active in educating conscious European citizens within the European framework. Education needs to encourage the development of an inclusive rather than exclusive understanding of national identity and citizenship

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