



This paper is taken from

*The Experience of Citizenship
Proceedings of the sixth Conference of the Children's
Identity and Citizenship in Europe Thematic Network*

London: CiCe 2004

edited by Alistair Ross, published in London by CiCe, ISBN 1 85377 378 6

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Wolodzko, E. (2004) Autonomy as a teacher trainee competence, in Ross, A. (ed) The Experience of Citizenship. London: CiCe, pp 391 - 398

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This paper does not necessarily represent the views of the CiCe Network.



This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained herein.

Acknowledgements:

This is taken from the book that is a collection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- Cass Mitchell-Riddle, head of the CiCe Coordination Unit
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication

The SOCRATES programme and the personnel of the Department of Education and Culture of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

Autonomy as a teacher trainee competence

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Introduction

In the process of building identity each individual has the possibility to define her/his borders, rights, life aims, values and to create his/her existence, independent of external control. Without these possibilities the individual can suffer unhappiness, a poor quality of life, and a lack of openness and freedom in their personal development (Sack and Kurzydłowska, 2000).

The process of becoming an autonomous person is connected with a growing consciousness of the self as a distinct individual, valuable in his/her differences, equipped with internal powers of self-governance and a belief in the ability to act and develop. In this respect personal autonomy is connected with self-acceptance and an internal locus of control which leads to self-cognition, self-comprehension and to harmonious co-existence in social relations.

Thus autonomy is a complex competence which is related to many spheres of personality - behavioural, cognitive, emotional and social. It can also be seen as indicative of the person who is able to interiorise moral principles, to choose, accept and live according to them independently of social influence. The autonomous person is able to present willingness to take a moral and legal responsibility and to act according to moral law (Nowak-Juchacz, 2002). Autonomy as a psychological phenomenon connected to self-direction, self-governance and self-responsibility is an element of the contemporary understanding of peoples' activity in many areas: education, therapy, management, and participation in political and social life. In a democratic society autonomy is perceived as a necessary condition for achieving political status and the possibility of active participation in social life in local, national and global dimensions. Autonomy is necessary especially for teacher education (Gołębniak 1998) whose task is to build student teachers' awareness of their responsibility and of autonomy as a competence necessary for playing an active role as a citizen of a democratic country.

Teachers' consciousness and moral autonomy become elements of their professional education, preparing them to inspire students' psychological potential, empowerment, and autonomy not only in a range of a learning processes but also in other spheres of activity, including citizenship. The Polish education system is being reformed to take account of this, a reform which is necessary in the light of such worrying social phenomena as exclusion, prejudice, lack of engagement in local problems, apathy, learned helplessness, low levels of political awareness and the understanding of citizens' rights.

The study

The investigations reported here are part of an action research which has been taking place in a Teachers' College in Szczytno (a small city near Olsztyn) since 2002. The aim was to build students' awareness of their possibility to become self-directed, self-responsible, autonomous persons defining the dimensions of their early adulthood, from the perspective of their study process and their participation in a social life.

Action research is a qualitative methodological orientation of a pedagogical investigation that aims to explore and improve pedagogical practice (Skulicz 1998). During their work teachers have many opportunities to test pedagogical theories in practice, collect their experiences, reflect upon them and finally to build personal theories for application in their schools. In this way teachers become researchers, creative thinkers, innovators and agents of change, able to improve the organisation of a pedagogical process and direct their and the students' personal development.

The study sample was a group of fourteen student teachers, all aged 21 years (twelve female and two male). All were in the second year of pedagogy, specialising in elementary education with an additional course in English language. The study was undertaken as part of a course entitled 'The base of pedagogy', which has been taught by the author since 2002. The course has a three-hour session once a week. The author thus played two roles: those of teacher and researcher. This was intentional: the ethnographic character of the investigations demanded the researcher's permanent presence and the necessity of a participative observation. The author paid a special attention to building a close and friendly relationship and supportive communication within the group, providing suitable psychological conditions for the open presentation of students' behaviour, opinions, thoughts and the materials gathered in their portfolios.

A cycle of workshops was prepared. Workshops are a very important and useful method of supporting and inspiring students' and teachers' individual development. The educational process which takes place during workshops concerns learning through experience, acting, exchanging ideas with other members of the group, and reflecting (Lutomski, 1994). This method was chosen to raise students' awareness of their citizenship and their possibilities of active participation in school and local society. The aim was to encourage them to appreciate the necessity of acting autonomously and to identify areas of their lives in which they notice a need for engagement. The students were also asked to reflect (as future teachers) how to formulate children's understanding of citizenship. The part of the investigation which is presented here lasted three hours.

The first part of the workshop program consisted of tasks, exercises and psychological games which inspired students to reflect on what autonomy and autonomous acting is. The students were then divided into three groups and asked to define what it meant to be autonomous. After a discussion they tried to build up a list of the characteristics of an autonomous person. The students thought that the most representative feature of

autonomy was independence. This feature was indicated as the most important by two of the groups, while the third group put it in second place. The students described independence as an ability to think and estimate independently, as having the courage and openness to present opinions, as a feeling of freedom in defining life aims, values, principles and in making decisions concerning these. Another feature indicated by all the students was freedom from external influences, from a social pressure to give up individuality, which was located by one of the groups as the 'key' feature for understanding autonomy.

The next trait was interdependence. Students from two groups emphasised this because, as one of them said, 'You must not only protect yourself from the influences but also to act on your own'. The students also mentioned uniqueness, or rather an awareness of the fact that each of us is unrepeatably in the world and this is a reason for us to be proud of and accept our diversity. The students said that a self-confident and positive self-estimation are connected with uniqueness. These statements provoked a longer discussion about internal harmony and the consequences of too high a level of self-confidence:

This is not an autonomy when you ignore some people because they are poorer and have worse cloths than you (female)

You must think what you do, think if it is good for you and the others (male)

But if someone has too low self-confidence, he will not want to do anything, because he is afraid (female)

The students agreed that to become an autonomous person one needed to have a real level of self-esteem, to be in a contact with him/herself, and to achieve a balance between internal and external opinions about him/herself. In the students' opinions autonomy was also related to activity, by which they meant a high level of engagement in one's tasks, not only these we are personally obliged to do but also in problems regarding life environments. An autonomous person, then, is a person who perceives these problems as important for his/her life and is ready to offer help in resolving them. The representatives of one of the groups also mentioned resourcefulness as a feature which is characteristic of active individuals.

The students expressed an opinion that an autonomous person 'in social relations causes many conflicts' and is 'someone who risks relations with other people'. They said that autonomy sometimes means to protest, not to agree with the majority, to choose 'like a cat' to go their own way. The autonomous person is honest towards him/herself and lives in accordance with internal values and principles, even if this means losing peoples' sympathy. Being autonomous is also being 'non-addicted', being able to deny smoking, drinking and taking drugs.

In accordance with the main aim of the workshop, the students were next offered a task. They were given a large number of newspapers and asked to make a poster presenting an activity they would like to be engaged in. They worked in three groups for 30 minutes and then each group presented its poster to the whole group. During the presentations the students described their chosen activities and the reasons they decided to be engaged in them.

The first group prepared the poster with the slogan 'Here is my home'. These students paid attention to homeless, unemployment and suffering people. They said they would like to be engaged in organising better conditions of life for such people and also in protecting the environment. 'Clean water, homes, job for everyone' they said. They also wanted 'to play the music till the end of the world', to make all people happy. One male chose a picture of a car and said 'I would like to drive a car, a very fast one, live in the mountains and have a dog, but comparing it to these very serious problems I could see how stupid it was'.

Students from the second group indicated at first a problem of 'the loneliness of mothers' who together with their children needed help. They underlined the value of the family they wanted to build and the love they needed to experience. A male student said that he would like to be engaged in the tasks involving competition, to have the possibility to test himself. Other activities for this group were visiting other countries, recognising other cultures and presenting the Polish culture, especially that of their own region of Warmia.

The third group chose to engage in a protest against authority's privileges ('Why do the members of the local administration pay less for parking places?'). The students also discussed the problem of ineffective law and of too lenient – in their opinion - punishment for criminals. They indicated a necessity to make many changes in local society's life, to make people's existence easier and better organised; they would like to limit the number of cars parked in narrow streets, to control the owners of shops with regard to raising prices, to organise winter holidays for children and young people at a time suitable for their families. A female student said 'I care about these problems because I live here'.

During a discussion after the presentations students were asked to propose the ways in which they would like to accomplish their chosen activity. The students were confused: one male said '*We would like to do all this but it is very hard to undertake it*'. After some thought they proposed

- work as volunteers
- the establishment of some non-profit organisations (or the joining of existing ones)
- to present these values as a teacher
- to work in local administration
- to promote the values of our culture
- to set up a family and to build a home, to be a good mother or father

- to set up a house for the children of the streets
- to organise students' societies
- to write a petition to newspapers, government or a local authority
- to organise ourselves, to talk to people, to look together for solutions, ideas.

'It is too much, we have to concentrate on one area, for example working for children' said one female. The students started to talk about the possibilities of accomplishing their ideas: 'It is difficult to believe we can manage with this, we need to find some people, who will help' (male), 'and how to arrange money, but if someone has a lot of strength, he can ask to get it, for example from foundations, enterprises' (female). The students said they did not have the self-belief, determination, courage, smartness 'to do the first step instead of sitting and dreaming to start something'. They also felt a lack of creativity, of organisational and leadership competences, faith, will, and persistence. They said they needed acceptance from other persons, 'what for are we to be engaged if nobody appreciates it?'

I asked them to define then what it means to be a citizen, to be an autonomous citizen. They answered: to have empathy to people with problems, to react to law-breaking, to be engaged in my district's, my neighbourhood's problems, to respect other people and the principles of co-existence, to be a patriot, not to be ashamed of an own nationality, to take part in the governing of the state, to participate actively in elections ('you can't complain about the authority if you didn't vote for your candidates'), to express your opinions, to take part in the activity of students' authority.

During discussion about school problems they began to discuss a problem they had with the diploma they would receive at the end of their studies. They protested that the diploma would not be annotated to show that they were not only be prepared for elementary education but would also be teachers of English. They did not know yet how to solve this problem. 'Let's organise ourselves and do something' said one of the females. Some of the students agreed willingly to start acting together.

The last subject for discussion was 'how will you as young teachers promote the idea of citizenship'? They thought silently for a while before answering: to be an example for the children, to be a good teacher, to work conscientiously. One male said : I don't know yet what I will do as a teacher but I am now aware these matters are important'.

Conclusions

The research presented here was, for the students, an occasion for self-cognition and reflection about their autonomous participation in social life. There was some initial experience of awareness-building about the possibilities of becoming a citizen. The students formulated their understanding of the notion of autonomy, indicating constitutive - for this notion - features, but the opinions they formulated and the way they acted indicated a large difference between having a knowledge of autonomy and acting autonomously.

Trying to define the areas of their engagement, the students presented mostly social sensitivity and a will to make some interventions to support their understanding of social justice. Some expressed their personal reasons for activity, such as having a family, travelling, learning about other cultures, taking competitive tasks. However, the students saw no possibility of engagement in their professional development and in creative and economic activities.

The students had 'no belief in personal possibilities to act and develop'. They identified many problems but felt without resources to address them and also a lack of the personal potential to begin acting autonomously. This helplessness was reflected in a very close and important problem for them, concerning their diploma. They were not convinced that they could have an influence on the way the problem would be settled, but a decision to organise themselves together and solve the problem was taken during the workshop.

The level of the students' consciousness of their citizenship was rather low. The only active form of a participation in political life mentioned by them was voting in elections, and for some even this was not necessary. They did not know what would be their role as future teachers in educating children to become citizens. This suggests that teacher education should be more oriented on students' personal development, building an awareness of their autonomy and responsibility in the process of becoming citizens of a democratic country.

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