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Teaching Active Citizenship: a Cross-Sectional Study

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This study identifies specific ways of teaching active citizenship in contemporary Romania. It is based on the analysis of official documents, observations and interviews with a sample of teachers from pre-school, primary, middle and high schools and universities, designed to foreground ways of teaching active citizenship. Our emphasis is on the contents of the activities, how they were carried out and the results. These activities are part either of the national curriculum or of independent projects and alternative activities in schools and universities. We conclude that whilst there are theoretical instruments to implement the teaching of active citizenship, turning these into practice remains inconsistent and this needs polishing and reinforcement.

Like all other post-communist countries, Romania has had to face the difficulties of transition from a totalitarian system to a democracy, a process that has been central to many institutional and functional gaps and omissions that need to be filled to develop the values and responsibilities of which people have been hitherto deprived.

Teaching active citizenship and developing active civic behaviour are included in governmental policy in *Education for Personal Values and Democratic Citizenship* (February 1999), *Adults Education Programme* (June 1999) and *Forms of Lifelong Education* (June 1999), as well as in Romania's multiple involvement in European projects in East Europe (see *ETGAGE – Education and Training for Governance and Active Citizenship in Europe. Analysis of Adult Learning and Design of Formal, Non-Formal and Informal Educational Intervention Strategies – 2000-2002*; also *RE-ETGAGE – Renewing and Training for Governance and Active Citizenship in Europe: A Central and East European Perspective – 2003-2004*) and in participation in regional and local projects.

The aims of active citizenship education in Romania are as those theoretically devised and generally accepted: to help develop a good citizen who is socially conscious, aware of individual and communal rights, civil, political and social rights, and of civic responsibilities towards local values, national and global events and laws. Citizenship should be perceived as a set of relationships determined on the one hand by a body of rights (referred to in the *Declaration of Human Rights* and the *European Declaration of Children's Rights*) and responsibilities, acknowledged and complied with by society and individuals, through daily interaction in a microsystem and the emphasis laid on membership (of a community or nation), and on the other hand, by deliberate civic involvement and participation in the development of the community to reinforce the democratic features of civic society.

In post-communist Romania the real process of democratisation started with the acquisition of theoretical knowledge about the readiness of individuals to perform civic duties, to think critically about society and political realities in the aftermath of totalitarianism, and to create frameworks for civic participation based on responsibility and individual rights and entitlements.

The crystallisation of ideas about the ways these concepts can be taught comes through gaining awareness of social transformation, understanding political and social changes,

and reflecting on the principles of democratic citizenship and on the value and importance of rules and laws, and thus finding educational strategies to reshape the concepts of active citizenship and identity.

Objectives

Our examination aims to foregrounding the specific ways in which teaching active citizenship takes place in our country, matching Romania's contemporary history and events that might shape her future. This will reveal changes that have occurred in the process of developing civic attitudes and behaviour, identifying fundamental issues and the drawbacks of the previous system.

We hypothesise that the process of teaching active citizenship benefits from curricular integration at all levels of formal education; and that non-formal and informal education contributes to knowledge acquisition and skill formation through practices in many specific activities.

Method

Our sample of respondents was 48 teachers, from pre-schools (6 or 12.5%), schools (34 or 70%) and in universities (8 or 16%), of which 15 (31%) are local, regional or European projects coordinators. The procedure of investigation fell into the following stages:

- a content analysis of national curricula, syllabi, textbooks; laws issued by the Ministry of Education;
- the systematic observation of 12 classes / courses / modules and activities at all levels recording the type of activity, the teaching strategy, the students' feedback;
- questionnaires given to the whole sample, the items of which refer to the objectives and content of teaching active citizenship, specific activities, outcomes and competencies:
 - the objectives of teaching the course/module?
 - the activities employed to reach the objectives?
 - the contents?
 - the competencies being developed?
 - potential problems that can appear?
 - suggestions to improve the outcome of teaching?

Results

Our investigation showed that the aims of teaching active citizenship are incorporated in the general formal aims of education in Romania, and are completed through:

- autonomous subject matter, with specific objectives, taught over an academic year;
- themes and chapters included in different subjects;
- particular modules; and

- themes and chapters included in different subjects and modules.

Primary School Citizenship Education

Starting from the academic year 2001-2002, primary school pupils (aged 8 to 10) have been taught Civic Education as a subject included in the national curriculum, described as follows:

Objectives:

- the acquisition and use of language specific to civic values;
- acquisition and respect of children's rights;
- development of a rational behaviour versus group affiliation;
- developing attitudes in favour of decision-making and of expressing personal views

Content:

- the individual as a physical and a psychological entity; moral description of a person; individuals with special needs;
- the individual's relations with objects and beings; relating this to the environment;
- the individual's relationships with other people, team spirit and group affiliation.

Activities (listed by frequency):

- reading and commenting on texts and images related to civic education;
- group discussion;
- role-playing;
- situational drama;
- writing compositions / stories / dialogues related to the topics.

Our respondents suggested that the following *output* might be recorded:

- most pupils acquire the content;
- pupils demonstrate participation and involvement, enthusiasm and initiative in carrying out tasks; and
- pupils are able to identify and use rules and regulations when invigilated.

Seventh and eight grade citizenship education

13 to 14 year-old pupils are taught Civic Culture as part of the national curriculum.

General objectives:

- ability to use the language specific to civic values in a discursive context;
- knowledge of fundamental values of democracy, democratic practices and human rights;

- communication and cooperation skills, acceptance of pluralism and the positive evaluation of differences;
- positive attitudes towards the self and the other;
- interest in participation in social life and the status of a citizen.

Content:

7th grade:

- living in society (related to persons/ families/ groups/ communities in terms of rights and responsibilities); awareness of European integration, globalisation;
- the political system in Romania; constitution; democratic State; political pluralism, legal and administrative institutions;
- citizen-state relationships; the media; the individual; civil society; election system; social inclusion and participation.

8th grade:

- authority; private and the public space; cooperation between civil society and the state;
- freedom and responsibility; freedom and compliance with laws; limits of freedom; individual's involvement in decision making;
- fairness/ justice and in/equality; community and justice; wealth and poverty; equality and competition;
- property; right to property; violation of property, private property and market economy;
- patriotism; national identity and awareness; traditional values and historical assets; patriotism and European integration.

Activities

- commenting texts, identifying concepts;
- debates;
- discussing real/ imaginary cases;
- simulations;
- staging conflict solving (identification of conflict, strategy choice, arguments);
- portfolios;
- interview, survey;
- newsletter, album, film;
- projects;
- cooperation with organisations in civil society.

Through this pupils should have the following *skills* and *abilities*:

- to comment and reflect on texts, facts, situations of civic attitude/ behaviour;
- to identify rights and responsibilities in individual or collective actions;
- to connect discursive theory to democratic values and practices;
- to identify cases of pluralism, to celebrate diversity;
- to be able to take up social roles within a group/ community.

Vocational School citizenship education

Pupils studying in *vocational schools*, aged 15-17, are taught citizenship during their Civic Culture/Entrepreneurial class in their first year, an interdisciplinary, trans-curricular subject-matter intended:

- to stimulate critical reflection, participation, communication, and awareness of socio-professional responsibility and commitment;
- to provide both general and specific competencies:
- to use specific concepts to identify and explain facts/events/processes of real life;
- to work with the acquired knowledge in solving critical situations and in analysing personal development;
- positive cooperation and relationship with the others/groups;
- to develop socially active behaviour and citizenship responsibility to answer the needs of present society;
- to make decision, express views regarding to the issues of the community (including a business project);
- to be aware of the individual's role as a consumer and a producer of goods.

Activities

- writing a memo/ a job application/ a claim/ a mission letter
- submitting a CV, having a job interview
- making projects of innovation and defending them

High School citizenship education

In high schools there are no specific subject-matters to cover active citizenship, but it is included in subjects like history, economics, philosophy and psychology, all of which are compulsory in all high schools, and partially in technological high schools where it is included in subjects as *Law and legislation*, *The Institutions of public administration*, *The Entrepreneurial education*, *Management and environmental education*, highlighting issues related to identifying and assessing local/ regional (historical, economical) values; the individual's affiliation and participation in a group/ community/ nation; and knowledge of topical issues.

Students are invited to reflect on the issues of active citizenship they have acquired previously and connect them to the specific areas they are taught, to expand their view on the interaction between the individual and the society, to gain awareness of their topicality. The modular teaching in vocational schools is structured as general training for employment, professional behaviour and ethics and guidance and suitability in applying for jobs. Active citizenship focuses on teamwork, commitment to assignment, carrying out tasks, and on developing communication skills and organisational abilities.

University level citizenship education

Our investigation at the level of universities shows that teaching active citizenship is incorporated into courses and modules such as intercultural education through humanities (geography, history and cultural studies), theories of education or pedagogy including education for democracy, for citizenship and identity, environmental education. Our survey reveals that the active citizenship concept operates when students are taught:

- types of education (for democracy, for human rights, for peace, for tolerance, for a healthy environment);
- cultural contexts and texts (Romanian cultural models/archetypes and others);
- reflection on the configuration of citizenship and identity within a European and global socio-cultural framework;
- political and economical changes at the individual's level of perception;
- intercultural approaches to issues such as local history /literature/heritage;
- multiculturalism, plurality of the world, globalisation, praising diversity within unity;
- how to employ the notion in terms of rights and responsibilities within communities/nations.

Activities:

- Debates starting from a key-concept, rendering a mind map and using the elements connected to the initial key-concept (e.g. culture, interculturalism, multiculturalism, difference, identity, citizenship, human rights, etc.);
- Presentation of facts and examples that are to be observed, analysed, assessed, turned into account, to make knowledge and information operate in real world;
- Interactive citizenship (conversation, problem-solving, case study, role playing) in order to stimulate creativity and to provide instant evaluation/assessment.

The problems in teaching for active citizenship are:

- teachers lack academic training for teaching for active citizenship;
- there are few opportunities for practising the theoretical knowledge;
- difficulties in evaluating competencies in active citizenship;
- teaching for active citizenship appears to be a discontinuous process.

To meet these, we suggest:

- Providing teaching for active citizenship courses for teacher students (undergraduates) and for teachers during in-service training programmes;
- Allotting more time/hours for practicing theoretical input;
- Granting continuity of the process of teaching for active citizenship within national curriculum;
- Networking teaching for active citizenship factors.

Discussion

Civic education in compulsory and non-compulsory school is provided as set out in specific textbooks devised to cover the acquisition and formation of skills in terms of citizenship and identity, and eventually, to produce a change of attitude and mentality required by the present status of our country. Civic education is taught at most levels in terms of general knowledge about democracy, parliament, presidency, constitution, institutions, laws, financial processes, and citizens' right and responsibilities, as part of the national curriculum and within the framework of formal education. But this represents only the theoretical background of students' education. Citizenship in democracy requires that education for knowledge acquisition should be followed by education for acceptance of shared moral values – equality, respect, solidarity, tolerance, courage and fairness – and the development of skills to operate with in different contexts, such as the ability to relate to critical situation, conflicts and linguistic/cultural differences.

Teaching moral education or decision making should be practised through different opportunities – debates, discussions, role-playing, activities, research work, problem-solving situations, field work, case studies, project works, competitions – which favour the development of creative critical thinking, a critical attitude that further shape one's skills and competencies in coping with real life events in a potential democratic society.

Thus citizenship education taught intramurally has been extended to non-formal or informal training within the paradigm of lifelong learning and learning society in order to reach the aim of active citizenship education, that of developing moral ability, self-esteem, assertiveness, empathy, sympathy, tolerance/acceptance, teamwork spirit, awareness of the needs the community and desire/motivation to improve the life of one's community/nation and to enhance the feeling of one's belonging to a particular community.

Our findings point to a staging of active citizenship education and acquisition in terms of selecting challenging events that require both civic involvement and responsibility (case studies on lack of tolerance, of fairness, of acceptance) and demonstration/proof of capacities to efficiently handle them by displaying ability, knowledge, experience, even expertise of active citizenship.

Non-formal education

The area of non-formal education in active citizenship seems to have played a larger contribution in the last ten years in Romania. Our investigation suggests that many teachers are involved in local/regional/European projects regarding this issue or working on mini-projects developed by teachers themselves.

In *pre-schools* children start becoming aware of who they are and what they are allowed to do, or how they are supposed to respond to some situations through different strategies used by teachers, such as:

- Individualising/naming kids to focus their attention on their civic identity
- Cultural activities and gatherings (singing, dancing, celebrating Christmas, Easter, birthdays) to socialise them as both part of group and as an autonomous being
- Role playing, organising games, helping each other, contributing to the group's life in order to develop their skill to management, initiative, responsibility.
- Inclusion practice through group activities of exchanging, cooperating, negotiating, accepting and offering things in order to develop a positive interdependence through activism.

When in *primary schools*, children are asked to perform activities as:

- to discuss/ argue/ express viewpoints regarding life experiences selected from everyday events;
- to identify community rules and attitudes about issues of the day (homelessness, begging, having pets, people with special needs, coping with old age, bereavement, disasters);
- to understand and develop positive attitudes towards local/ national/ global values (life, individual, group, environment);
- to reflect on local/ regional/ national/ world events provided by the media;
- to come with personal ideas and opinions about social life and defend them;
- to think and reflect on human / children's rights, moral, local values, legal issues.

These represent the teachers' main interests when getting pupils to participate and included in events that are part of mini-projects carried out in classrooms or during outings and trips.

Adolescents are trained in a more complex set of practices included in social, civic, ethical education for future good citizens, voters, parents, members of a local community, consumers of social services, assigners of social roles, such as:

- class management within the local project of *Switching responsibilities* to students, in which they study and solve cases of disruptive pupils by 'contract agreements' between students and teachers, in which they evaluate behaviour and consequences;
- awareness of daily life experiences in schools/communities when facing situations of marginalisation (shyness and difference, whether cultural, mental or physical), of negotiation, cooperation, tolerance, volunteering (as in the project *Let's Find Happiness Together or in the Community Project*), by organising extracurricular activities, such as drawing, drama, dancing, computer operation, music, modelling, aromatherapy, even parties;
- debates on social justice, democratic politics, controversial issues (drugs, unemployment, poverty) during meetings and clubs, designed to develop skills of

rational/critical thinking and of decision making, and to gain confidence to voice one's opinions;

- environmental issues, designed so students reflect how to provide a better, healthier environment for the community and how to stimulate the other members of the community to respond to these needs, such as the projects Zebra and the Pedagogical Park, consisting of providing a secure, healthy environment for all pupils;
- school councils, in which representative students decide on school issues (the school newsletter, school projects or partnerships in projects, spare time management, festival and competition organization), bringing forth the needs for integration in a sub-culture, permitted in a democratic world;
- 'A Mayor for a Day', a community project that is an experiential strategy in active citizenship education which increases civic participation, helps young people discern public problems of the community, makes them evaluate, decide, elect in civic projects.
- School and institution partnerships, representing an informal way of active citizenship, teaching students practise decision making, participation, awareness of community's needs and demands.

Developing active citizenship skills and competences in *universities* can be acquired through extra-curricular forms, such as meetings, sessions focused on awareness of national and European citizenship and the rights and responsibilities implied in this duality, or on multicultural or on new issues which require special training, such as work in homes for battered women, for senior citizens, for homeless children, or for disabled people.

Students Councils and organizations in Romania and Oradea develop social and economical projects with companies or NGOs to provide skills for accepting responsibility for the future workers, citizens of a community, parents, and educators.

Discussion

An important aspect of non-formal active citizenship education consists in connecting active citizenship learning, determined by groups, communities, families, friends and religious affiliation, to the issue of defining and shaping identity, individually and collectively. It is important for the individual to be able to speak about and analyse social and moral responsibility, community involvement and the nature of power in a contextualised manner. From the maximised socio-cultural and political map to the groups/communities/social fields, selected issues should be forwarded to a personal context close to the background of the individual, and *vice versa*, they should be transferred from the context of school to that of the community/nation. This flexible transfer can be achieved by gradually introducing issues of responsibility, involvement, professionalism, tolerance, hard work and perseverance in carrying out tasks, commitment, and enthusiasm.

Conclusions

1. Teaching active citizenship has discontinuities and inconsistencies when turning theory and knowledge into practice and competencies.

2. Teaching active citizenship is a compact process, carried out at the end of a period of learning when pupils focus on final testing, and may have negative responses, being seen as an extra burden in their schedule.
3. Teachers are trained in specialities that are connected to but not specific for teaching active citizenship; they may be less successful in practically training pupils and in providing a proper skill acquisition.
4. Teaching active citizenship is completed by both non-formal and informal ways of education.
5. Active citizenship, affected by the socio-economic transformation of the country and by the implications of new democracies, foregrounds the individuals' desire, capability and skills to influence public life, their critical judgement and potential for volunteering for public services, for using their organization abilities and resource fullness to protect their right or to obtain new rights or to produce new public goods.
6. Teaching active citizenship via formal and non-formal or informal education contributes to balancing economic development and active citizenship, to involving citizens in public life, to changing mentalities, civic and political behaviour, to acquiring democratic values and behaviour in pre-school, school, universities, as adults.
7. More stimuli from society influence teaching active citizenship in schools, so that eventually both schools and community will come together in the aim of having good citizens.

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