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Citizenship Education as a Challenge in Kindergarten Teacher Education

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Abstract

This research focuses on values and attitudes promoting active citizenship education in early childhood education. Encouraging students to reflect on issues which promote active citizenship enables them to develop their capacity for ethical and moral reasoning and become critical thinkers. Citizenship education is a highly contested and complex issue. The transmission of such values presupposes safe settings, co-operation and space for democratic decision-making and negotiation procedures. Kindergarten teachers have to act in a rational way as citizens and are a model for young children. Parents are the most important models, and families and teachers cooperate in the best interests of the child.

Introduction

There has been encouragement for early childhood education (ECE) in Finland to contribute to the implementation of citizenship education (CE). We have been asking students about their attitudes and opinions about the role they feel citizenship education might have in kindergarten teacher education, and how they themselves reflect on their own active citizenship (See Foster, Graeffe & Zuzeviciute 2005).

Citizenship education in early childhood education

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Finland has two main goals: to provide early childhood education for children under school age and to fulfil their day-care needs.

Children who are in day-care spend at most 8-10 hours there each day. Parents and staff have to work together for the best interest of child. It is important for children to learn how to deal with changing society. The forces of change and the trends with the greatest impact on citizens' lives are linked to globalisation, environmental aspects, safety, ethical issues, new opportunities offered by technology, economic risks, a multicultural society, the quality of public services and privatisation (See Syrjäläinen et al 2006, 210-275; 2005).

Citizenship education is a lifetime process of continuous learning, involving the total development of the whole person, not a finished product or an outcome of a curriculum for a given time or location. We are not used to talking much about citizenship education in early childhood education – it is used more as a concept, for example in social education. We use here citizenship education (See also Hansen 2007; Hicks & Holden 1995; Holden 2007; Korhonen 2002).

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Clough and Holden have listed the contents for practical teaching (2002, 3):

1. Truth. Teachers and learners will be concerned to research topical and political issues, through collecting evidence from a full range of courses of information including those reflecting different perspectives and understanding of self and relation to others.
2. Honesty. Teachers and learners will be concerned to explore how the media present information and recognise stereotypes and others forms of unfair representation.
3. Justice. Teachers and learners will be concerned to understand that resources can be allocated in different ways and that these economic choices affect individuals and communities and reflect critically on their own views of people living in other places and times and people with different values and customs.
4. Trust. Teachers and learners will be concerned to recognise that the voices of children should be heard, recognise that the law of the land and Human Rights Conventions protect citizens and understand how groups can work together to solve problems locally and globally
5. Sense of duty. Teachers and learners will be concerned to ensure that children can and do participate in the decision-making process of the school and challenge stereotypes and other forms of injustice.

Partnership

The younger the learner, the greater responsibility of the adult. Parents have the largest responsibility and they are the most important models for children.

'KGOY' - Kids getting older, younger - is an increasingly big challenge. Families and teachers are becoming used to cooperating for the best interests of the child. Families are seeking privacy more and more, children are spending more time with computers, families are smaller and teenagers are getting bored and alienated. In early years children are not used to having a real traditional 'normal' daily life. The 'others' are taking more time and responsibility in everyday life.

Partnership should be a lasting way to work. Parents have the right to wish their child to be met as an individual, not only as 'one in the group'. Teachers' duty is sometimes to act as child's advocate even against parents' opinions. ECE has to support the educational responsibility task of parents. In partnership we can see both 'parties' have rights and duties.

Research

In our research the point of view is mostly to find out how students see their status/position as citizenship educators. We raise two questions. How do students assess their personal activity in CE-issues, and what weight do they give for them in their

studies? Ensuring continuity and cooperation in ECE means: implementing listening, caring, supporting partnership and cross-cultural work. (See Graeffe & Korhonen 2006). The best interests of the child must be prioritised in the action and decision-making. Kindergarten teachers have to act in a rational and responsible way as citizens, as they are models for little children.

Background of the research is a new programme ‘Citizens for Europe’

This new programme will provide the Union with instruments to promote active European citizenship, put citizens in the centre and offer them the opportunity to fully assume their responsibility as European citizens. It responds to the need to improve their participation in the constructions of Europe and will encourage cooperation between citizens and their organisations from different countries in order to meet, act together and develop their own ideas in a European environment which goes beyond a national vision, respecting their diversity.

(http://europe.eu.int/comm/dgs/education_culture/activecitizenship/new_programme_en.htm)

Political programme in Finland

The Finnish national three years project started in 2005. It was one part of our former government program (Suutarinen 2006, 59).

The purposes of the project were that it would be one part of the development and research political programme.

Promoting of the political program works for:

- 1) To be as an active citizen,
- 2) Activities in social context,
- 3) Possibilities for acting,
- 4) Representative democracy in acting.

Our research is linked to the project concerning early childhood education. What does it mean to promote active citizenship in practice in early childhood education and in kindergarten teacher education?

We do not have Citizenship Education as a separate subject but integrated into the other subjects. We can see kindergarten as some kind of community institution or public space in civic society where we are working/cooperating with children not just for them. It is important to work with them and give them possibilities to take an active role in cooperation with peers. For students it is important to see the importance of their work: to find their professional identity as a ground for citizenship. (See also Rantala & Siikaniva 2005; Rantala & Salminen 2006.)

Research questions

Students (second and third years) were asked to write their opinion about their views of themselves as active citizens. It happened in the beginning of the course 'Adults cooperation in early childhood education'.

- How do they think about this topic in general?
- What kinds of challenges are bound to contents of studying?
- What do they think about their professional role and possibility to act as active citizens?

Analysing results

All writings have been read and analysed (N=130). Single words, combinations and whole sentences have been used as units of analysis. The process is not complete, but it is already possible to see some results as in many other sub-projects/studies concerning our national project. The research material is classified deductively and behind this have been common concepts and theoretical frames.

In most writing students are not speaking about themselves. Their role as responsible educators 'takes' more attention. They are usually thinking about values and attitudes which they transmit to children. They see their own behaviour very strongly as a model. 'The best interest of a child is a leading principle' – but how to work for it? How to be an advocate, how to raise their voice, how to be listened to etc.?

When they really think of their own position as active citizens they see the connection very often; 'I'm not so active and not interested in politics'. It seems sometimes they don't notice the difference between common issues and party politics.

Some examples from writings (subject female 92):

Kindergarten teachers act like other teachers in their teaching work. The focus is on education, communication and teaching with human beings who are citizens in the future.

A teacher must be an example of an adult person, who is interested in environment and society. So she/he gives a model for children that every person is able to influence on circumstances in practical level.

Kindergarten teacher can act for children and try to influence on problems, to start discussions in public level, voting and taking part in policy.

After the course (4 ECTS) there was a one hour feedback discussion with students (alone or in little groups). One very important result was that students had gained a broader perception about themselves as active citizens. They have seen how important their work is – how it is not only multi-professional, but is also cross-professional. Students had some problems to 'find' their professional and academic identity. Early childhood education has for a long time been seen as one part of our educational system but administration is categorized under social sector. Students think it would be easier to

find synergy benefits and possibilities for co-operation, if administration were under the same system as schools.

These questions about academic and professional identities are not relevant issues here in general but we can point out that they have their relevance in discussions of how to promote active citizenship in teacher education. It is important how work is appreciated in society – which role childcare has there. How to support students to find and build up their professional identity? Which model and support does teacher education offer?

Conclusions

According to our results, views, expectations and needs for education are:

Connections for plans and curriculum in early childhood education and also the structure of education for students are important and they must be planned carefully. Students have rights to challenge universities to change and universities ought to offer these in the studies. It is necessary to confirm students' professional identity. Students and potential kindergarten teachers need knowledge at a practical level, networks in international context and discussions in these. Kindergarten teacher students later become important persons in society and they ought to have good skills for co-operation and acting and decisions.

We can agree that students' professional identity is one important starting point for active citizenship. Teacher education has big challenges in order to be aware of changes in society and people's lives. Early childhood education is a picture window for listening, answering, caring, cooperating and supporting children and families but it has the right to be heard too. Finland has achieved fine results in PISA but not so well in CIVIC-research. PISA is a result of equal possibilities from early childhood education to school education in 'knowledge' - both institutions have to work for better active citizenship results.

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