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Learning Citizenship Education in University: Views and Experiences of Finnish Class Teacher Students

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Abstract

In the era of rapid societal and global change, citizenship education faces new challenges. On a general level, current Finnish educational policy is promoting citizenship education in teacher education. However on the basis of earlier research knowledge it seems that on the institutional level the realization of citizenship education depends on the interests of teacher educators and institutions. The research knowledge also suggests that it might be fruitful to explore and exploit more intensively the potential of students in planning and realization of citizenship education. Therefore, it is vital to examine how citizenship education has been realized in teacher education from the point of view students. The study focuses on teacher education by examining the views and experiences of a cohort of students in their third year of schooling. We will present the results of this research, (data mainly gathered through a net survey in 2009).

Introduction

In the era of rapid societal and global change, citizenship education faces new challenges. On a general level, current Finnish educational policy is promoting citizenship education in teacher education. However, on the basis of current research knowledge it seems that on the institutional level the realization of citizenship education depends on the interests of teacher educators and institutions.

The research knowledge also suggests that it might be fruitful to explore and exploit more intensively the potential of students in planning and realization of citizenship education. Therefore, it is vital to examine how citizenship education has been realized in teacher education from the point of view of students.

The background and aim of the study

In citizenship education, the conception of citizenship has often been understood in a traditional way focusing on state citizenship. However, there is an emerging body of international and Finnish literature widening up and discussing the conceptions of citizenship education and citizenship. For example, Bauer, Clarke & Dailidienė (2003) represent a wide conception of citizenship education describing that there is personal, family, local community, national, regional and global citizenship education. According to Arola (2008, 87) the local activities become more and more important for citizens although these different tendencies have been shown on a European level. Tanner (2007, 150) argues that the true citizenship involves not just formal rights, but also the life of local communities and the nation state. He brings up the view presented by Janoski who says that the right to participation in civic society is as important as are legal, political and social rights. In addition, Tanner discloses Held's proposition for a model of "cosmopolitan democracy" which acknowledges the interlinking of local, national and global aspects of contemporary citizenship (Tanner 2007, 150).

On his part, Ilsley (2008, 379) shares the view that citizenship is a concept which is often understood narrowly. He goes back to pragmatist philosophical tradition drawing on the views of Dewey (1916), according to whom "active citizenship means gaining a degree of political savvy, exercising active judgment, not just obeying laws but also influencing them, displaying commitment to the community, and reaching for social compatibility. Active citizenship means examination of experience, through intelligent reflection, social action, in a collective effort toward social progress". In current discussion on citizenship education, Evans (2008, 521) also refers to Dewey's thoughts about democratic citizenship pedagogy. In order to realize active citizenship in school education Dewey (1938) has developed the pedagogy of active learning.

The on-going discussion on citizenship education and citizenship forms the framework and also the catalyst for this study. The aim of the study is to examine the situation of citizenship education in Finnish teacher education and its conceptualizations from the point of view of students. On the basis of earlier research (Rantala & Salminen 2006; Hansen 2007; Korhonen & Lestinen 2008) it seems that in general students do not show themselves to be particularly active as citizens. If this is a case, it would be considered a vital challenge for Finnish teacher education to educate and arrange nourishing and supportive possibilities for teachers-to-be to become active citizens. Therefore, major questions that will be addressed in this study are: how to educate students with possible varying interest in citizenship activity to become active citizenship educators themselves and, how would cooperation with students influence and enhance the development of citizenship education.

The study focuses on teacher education by examining the views and experiences of a cohort of students in their third year of schooling. A student-responsive approach is adopted in the study which means finding out the views and experiences of students concerning active citizenship in general and citizenship education in their own schooling. Also the views of student associations will be gathered. Partly, the views of students have been exploited in developing the questionnaire used as the research instrument in the first phase of the study.

Earlier research in teacher education

In Finland, a nation-wide research and development project, Promoting Citizenship and Civic Activity in Teacher Education (2003-2007), was conducted. It examined the profile of teacher education students related to active citizenship and their possibilities and ways of having an influence on their teaching and learning environment in the university.

In the conclusion of the project it is mentioned that active citizenship is based on voluntary action. The project has aimed at supporting teacher trainers to develop their operating culture in the units toward a direction that encourages active citizenship. It has been shown to be important to understand that education towards active and critical citizenship does not need huge resources – just a proper attitude among teacher trainers. (Rantala 2008, 80.) According to the final report of the project (Hansen 2007), it seems that all the changes in the structures and operating culture of teacher education units demand time.

Ahonen (2006, 223-225) stresses that since the seventies any organised study of society and current affairs in the curricula of teacher education in Finland is missing. This could explain why teacher students seem to be less active in the issues of citizenship. In any case, according to Ahonen, teachers as a group of professionals are quite visible actors in society although their knowledge of society might not be strong. For instance, many teachers are active in local councils.

International research literature gives a positive perspective to examine and develop teacher education also in Finland. For instance, Holden (2007, 43) has reported about her research on students' views about participation, citizenship and globalisation. She has collected research materials by interviewing and using a questionnaire in four university (N=856). The data from the questionnaire indicated that the majority of students wished to know more about global issues and felt that they could make a difference in pupils "understanding". This was reflected in the interviews (Holden 2007, 51.)

Materials and their collection

The number of subjects is over 800 students that are studying in their third academic year in 12 class teacher education programmes within Finnish universities. So far, in the first phase of the study, the research material is consisted of data that was gathered through a net survey in May-June in 2009. Altogether 129 responses were received; thus the response rate of the survey was low, about 16 %. It is not rare that the response rate of net surveys remains low. However, it is questionable to what extent the results of the survey conducted for this study can be generalised to cover the experiences and views of the whole cohort of students in all teacher education units. On the other hand, in this case the low response rate could also be seen as a result itself, although unintended, supporting the main results of the survey that will be presented later in the text. In addition, it may not go very wrong to suppose that the received responses represent at least somewhat accurately the experiences and views of the non-responsive students as well.

The collection of the materials for the study has been made applying the idea of mixed methods combining quantitative data and qualitative materials (Plano Clark & Creswell 2008; Creswell 2003). The next phase of the study includes interviews of students in the class teacher education programmes within universities. The interview materials, analysed within a phenomenological-hermeneutical framework, are expected to enrich and deepen the study in understanding of the experiences and conceptions of students.

Questionnaire

The study is based on a pilot survey conducted in one teacher education unit in November in 2008. The questionnaire was developed on the basis of feed-back received from the student respondents of the pilot study and of a test version of the final questionnaire. The final version of the questionnaire included altogether 32 questions, presented mainly in a structured form. The questions were dealing with students' conceptions of active citizenship and citizenship education, their experiences from and views of citizenship education in class teacher education in university and primary school. The respondents were also asked to give information on their own activities as citizens.

Themes of the questionnaire were the following:

1. Citizenship education in general
2. Citizenship education in a class teacher study programme
3. Teacher's competence and educational needs in citizenship education
4. Teaching practice
5. School as a learning environment
6. Personal activities as a citizen
7. Students' further conceptions of citizenship education and evaluation of the survey.

The main results of the selected themes are presented below

Results

The survey confirms that citizenship education is still quite rare and unknown among students (respondents of the survey) in Finnish class teacher education. Yet, students think it is important to provide pupils with citizenship education and support pupils to become active citizens in lower basic education (grades 1-6). The most important theme would be teaching pupils critical thinking, values and attitudes. Becoming class teachers seem also to be well aware of current major environmental and societal concerns by seeing that the principles and models of action of sustainable development should be included in citizenship education in schools. Although, for example sustainability is a global concern, it can be well understood and acted on locally. Overall, students think that the local dimension of citizenship education is very important, even more crucial than a national, a European or a global dimension although these were also thought to be quite important.

On the basis of the survey there are great challenges to develop teacher education programmes toward a direction that makes citizenship education more visible and available for students. So far, students have a conception that citizenship education has been only little taken into account in class teacher education, and for quite a many of them it was even difficult to say whether it has been taken into account or not in their education. The respondents assessed their study programmes as study modules from communication and orientation studies to advanced studies in education science. According to the results, students feel that they have received citizenship education quite sufficiently only in teaching practice and in subjects taught in schools.

In the current situation it is not surprising that the students being aware of the future tasks as class teachers were not very satisfied with their own citizenship education in their study programme and support they have been given in becoming active citizens themselves. When asked to specify the areas in which further education would be needed, one student put it clearly: "I don't know, because I haven't a clue what this is, although I will graduate as a teacher within a week!" On the other hand, students may feel it difficult to act as a teacher in citizenship education, if they themselves feel not being active citizens. Many students shared the conception that they have educational needs in citizenship education quite a lot. The area of citizenship education seemed to be extensive and even the knowledge of the basics were needed. Only a minority of students feel they know by themselves where to acquire further information or receive support in the issues of citizenship education when needed.

Through the survey, students were also asked their views on the different methods of learning citizenship education in teacher education. According to the respondents, the most suitable ways of learning citizenship education would be the arrangements and ways of action in connection to teaching as well as visits of experts and guests in their study programme. In addition, it seems that the use of media, educational theme days and excursions would also suit them well as a learning experience. Whereas, for example a separate course, conducting research, reading research and other literature, information flashes or discussion forums were not valued that much in order to learn citizenship education.

It is interesting that the respondents' views on the idea of learning citizenship education integrated within all the teaching and other activities in their study programme seemed to be mixed. One would assume that participating in the activities of the university departments could be considered from the point of view of students as a way of learning active citizenship contextually and authentically. In any case, the results of the survey would indicate that students feel they have generally quite bad possibilities to have an influence on the activities of their departments. Students felt that especially student representatives in departmental organs and common meetings and feedback situations with the faculty and other personnel of the department are very important channels of influence for students.

Considering the citizenship activities of the class teacher students themselves, it seems that they are quite passive societally if measured by their participation in the activities of different organisations or other groups. Usually, only the activities of hobby clubs and associations are visited regularly. Most attractive to participate every now and then, are the activities arranged by the student organisations. Whereas most popular among organisations dealing with major societal issues seem to be help and volunteering organisations.

But, in the activities of political organisations only a small minority of the respondents participate every now and then. It seems that traditionally organised political activity is not so attractive as a form of citizen activity. Instead, according to the respondents many of them had been actively working as a citizen for a societal issue, against an issue or promoting an issue independently or in a group.

However, the survey indicates that students still value the civil's right to vote in elections which is a traditional form of citizen activity. Almost all the responders participate regularly in elections of President, members of Parliament or in communal elections. Whereas the elections of Finnish members for European parliament were of interest to not that many students at least on a regular basis. Surprisingly, the least interesting among the respondents were the elections of members for student organisations. Overall, the results would suggest that there is a potential of using voting as a more direct form of political civic activity: The great majority of the respondents considered they would vote in eventual referendums.

Conclusions

It is possible to summarize shortly the conclusion of results in the following way:

- 1) Citizenship education is not known well, but it is felt to be important and necessary in education.
In this connection, principles and models of sustainable development were considered crucial.
- 2) The issue of multiculturalism arose in many comments and it can be seen necessary in the future.
- 3) Most students are not satisfied with citizenship education in their own studies.
- 4) Training periods in practice have been the most effective way to learn citizenship education as well as the didactic of primary school subjects.
- 5) Students feel they need to have basic knowledge of citizenship education.
- 6) Students would most favourably like to study citizenship education included in the ways of action in connection of teaching, and share information with visiting experts. However, they were open to a variety of ways of learning citizenship education.

It would be important to gather more quantitative data from students in teacher education in order to strengthen the formal generalizability of the results of the survey. Therefore, it is worthwhile to consider repeating the survey, e.g. focusing it on a new cohort of students or enlarging the group of subjects to cover subject teacher students as well. In any case, the research-based view on the situation of citizenship education in Finnish teacher education will be complemented and deepened by the next phase of the study. The aim is to collect research materials by conducting some interviews with students in different class teacher education programmes.

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