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Teaching active citizenship in pre-school education: Teachers' values, views and attitudes towards the development of pupils' democratic capabilities-behaviours

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Abstract

This paper examines views towards citizenship of Greek pre-school education teachers, as well as teaching approaches that Greek schools use in order to promote citizenship education. The first part of the paper includes a review of trends with respect to the connection of active citizenship to school, with particular focus on pupil's acquisition of skills necessary to the development of active citizens (Gutmann 1999). The second part of the paper deals with our research findings which indicate that many of the pre-school education teachers feel under-prepared to handle citizenship education in their class.

Keywords: *active citizenship, pre-school education, democratic capabilities, attitudes*

Introduction

The contemporary multicultural reality and the crisis of values that characterises modern democracy requires the promotion of democratic values through education. The school, especially the pre-school level, as the first formal education and training encounter, can instil values and conduct in young children, which are likely to shape awareness and active citizens.

The rapid economic development, social transformations and upheavals, violations of human rights, outbreaks of violence, xenophobia and racism and the intolerance of diversity, require active, democratic citizens. These citizens, being free of stereotypes and prejudices, would promote democracy and values and will be able to live together, work together, communicate, interact, innovate and create common visions and goals (Balias, 2004, 2011).

Thus, modern education, especially at the pre-school level, which is characterised by flexibility, could contribute to the development of citizenship and democracy. Pre-school education and training may be catalytic for today's young children's – future citizens' – active and creative participation. Citizenship and democratic education, which are associated with the cultivation of dialogue, freedom, peace and values such as moral self-development, tolerance, justice, equality and respect for diversity, allow for the development of children's thoughts in a pedagogical climate of freedom, self-motivation, participation and spontaneity.

They also foster logical and critical skills and promote creativity of pre-school students (Balias, 2004, 2011; Govaris, 2001).

Teachers, and more specifically kindergarten teachers, are an indispensable help in this particular case. The views, perceptions and attitudes of kindergarten teachers regarding democracy in education act and interact in order to develop the democratic skills of today's young children. The importance of the influence of interpersonal relationships, communication and teacher-pupil interaction, has also been expressed in various scientific fields. The adoption of democratic ideals and the personal example of kindergarten teachers, who embrace and apply the democratic model of education and training, influence and shape skills similar to those gained from participation in a dialogue characterised by interaction and mutual respect (Balias, 2011).

As Freinet (1931) stated: "Tomorrow's democracy is prepared by democracy in school. An authoritarian regime in school could not develop democratic citizens".

Based on this assumption, attitudes and perceptions of kindergarten teachers on citizenship and democratic education play a key role in pre-school children's acquisition of democratic skills. Indeed, this is the main focus of this investigation.

Theoretical starting points and conceptual introduction to the problem of research

Democratic and citizenship education, being inextricably linked to intercultural education model, promote mutual respect and solidarity, aiming to foster active participation and creative thinking to today's children, tomorrow's citizens of the world. Democratic values as moral self-development, freedom, respect of human rights and cultural diversity, are the values that constitute the modern multicultural social reality and should be promoted by the modern pluralistic democratic school in order to contribute decisively to the creation of democratic, active, creative and critical thinking citizens (Karakatsani, 2003).

According to Gutmann (1999), the democratic theory of education helps to resolve differences of opinion with the fairest possible way. Gutmann also spoke about the prospect of promoting a democratic theory of education, whose goal may be to equip pupils with the skills, necessary to the formation of an active citizenship, giving an emphasis on the fact that the association of public school education and citizenship can be a strategy that can help to reduce the democratic deficit.

Kymlicka's theory (2002) emphasizes on the need for a more cosmopolitan or supranational conception of democracy. Kymlicka also highlights the importance of school as an institution in shaping human character and teaching children how to think critically and how to participate in the exercise of political power.

Thornton (Osler, 1995) believes that the education will contribute to the respect of human rights and human dignity. In this era where societies are characterized by multiculturalism, education and curriculum play an important role. Through education, modern societies try to inspire respect for human dignity and human rights in every person.

In short, democratic education and training expand the horizons of thought of children beyond the cognitive domain, create a similar and appropriate educational environment in the classroom, encouraging the development of democratic skills associated with the active participation of children in various activities and the development of creative and critical thinking. In the educational environment of democratic education, pupils are no longer passive receivers of knowledge. On the contrary, children, through active and experiential teaching methods (such as the method of project) will learn how to discover, collaborate, innovate, create, respecting their experiences, their characteristics and the diversity of others (Karakatsani, 2003).

Methodology

The main research topic of this paper is the exploration of attitudes, perceptions and views of kindergarten teachers, and whether or not they contribute to the cultivation of citizenship and democratic education in pre-school children. Thus, we attempted to discern:

- whether and / or how familiar with the concepts of democracy and citizenship education kindergarten teachers are,
- how willing they are to apply teaching methods that promote citizenship and democracy (method of project),
- how willing they are to work together to create innovative new programs towards citizenship and democracy in pre-school education,
- whether relationships among kindergarten teachers and parents influence the pedagogical climate of the class and the choice of activities realised in the kindergarten classroom (Kiprianos, 2007).
- whether recent social and economic situation has an impact on kindergarten teachers and on their work.

To this end, the purposive sampling (Morse, 1994) formed by three kindergarten teachers, who were interested in participating in this pilot survey and were willing to respond to our questions, was used. Semi-structured interviews with these teachers of kindergartens in Athens were used, so that participants in our research would give their views on the matter as freely as possible, according to their personal views and experiences. The choice of the semi-structured interview was suitable for the needs of this research as it combined both reliability and flexibility (Filiat, 1994; Alexiadou, 2001; Iosifidis and Spiridakis, 2006). Each interview had a 40-minute duration.

Semi-structured interview focused on five axes:

1. personal data

2. questions concerning the studies of kindergarten teachers, the in-service training, the working conditions, schools' infrastructure and social and economic situation in Greece
3. working methods (styles)
4. the views, beliefs and attitudes of kindergarten teachers
5. desirable skills' acquisition by the infants in the kindergartens.

Our basic hypothesis was that kindergarten teachers were not very familiar with theory and practice of citizenship education. We believe that this research moves towards the investigation of citizenship education as well as the discovery and promotion of the values of democracy and human rights in school. The encouragement of democratic skills of young children in kindergartens could represent the future social capital of the new generation, who will in turn defend and promote citizenship and democracy in the future.

In order to explore kindergarten teachers' beliefs towards citizenship and democratic education, our study based on the structuration theory of Giddens (1976, 1984). The structuration theory and the concept of duality of structure of Giddens fit well to the interpretation of the views and the behaviour of actors-subjects, who, in our case are the kindergarten teachers (Schmidt, 2004). According to Tatsis (2004): "Not only the individual experience, but also the collective conception of a social type, can provide complete knowledge".

Results

The first findings from the survey - pilot tend to show that:

- Kindergarten teachers are not very familiar with the concepts of citizenship and democracy in education and consider their training on these issues to be incomplete. They also consider the information provided by the State regarding democratic and intercultural education to be incomplete.
- Kindergarten teachers satisfactorily implemented teaching methods which promote creativity and democracy (project method).
- Kindergarten teachers are willing to work together to create innovative new programs, consisting of actions whose aim is to promote citizenship as well as democratic and intercultural education in pre-primary education.
- Relationships among kindergarten teachers and parents affect the pedagogical climate of the classroom and the choice of activities (Kiprianos, 2007).
- Kindergarten teachers are affected by the recent social and economic situation in Greece as well as by the educational reforms that will come into effect in September 2011. These two parameters affect kindergarten teachers' performance and mood.

From the above mentioned, it becomes evident that the analysis of the data is influenced by internal and external factors. In this research, internal factors are: the experience, the views, the attitudes, the feelings, the expectations and the independent training kindergarten

teachers received. External factors are: the structure, according to Giddens, that is the framework, the official training of kindergarten teachers on democracy issues, the legislation in force and the infrastructure (Stamatis, 2005).

Conclusions

The results show the crucial importance of the role of kindergarten teachers in the promotion of interculturalism and democracy in education. The lack of democratic and intercultural education has been demonstrated, suggesting the need for increased information and awareness in kindergartens' democratic and intercultural philosophy.

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