

THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDYING CIVIC CULTURE IN THE FORMATION OF ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

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Abstract: *The reality of the last decades (terrorism, ethnic and religious persecution, discrimination, forced migration, criminality etc.) demonstrates that young people need to know their rights and duties to develop their sense of responsibility towards themselves and to the community, as well as the attachment and the spirit of sacrifice to their neighbours and their homeland but also to be patriotic. The main goal of civic education is to prepare generations for the essential principles and values of democracy embodied with a high sense of responsibility and active engagement in issues the society, community, or state face in their everyday life. The educational approach, in this respect, tries to cultivate behaviour in accordance with social norms and ethics, in order to apply and respect them in education's role is obvious in building the good behaviour of citizens. The paper analyses the perspectives offered by the actual Romanian curriculum for social as well civic culture.*

Keywords: *civic culture; social culture; education; citizenship;*

1. Introduction

The goal of civic and social education is to prepare generations for the essential principles and values of democracy embodied with a high sense of responsibility and active engagement in issues related to society, community, or state that they face in their everyday life. Civic education is “the cultivation of the virtues, knowledge, and skills necessary for political participation” (Tovmasyan, 2008, p. 5).

Kidwell considers that the implementation of civic education should provide a philosophical and structural framework on which to base the teaching of skills and strategies that reinforce reasoned decision-making skills, evaluation of information, practical application of civic virtue, and an in depth understanding of citizenship responsibility. In the terms of the role of civic education, this constitutes one of the most effective vehicles available to educators today who strive to encourage the understanding and assimilation and assumption of topics that highlight civic responsibility, civic awareness, rights and duties of the individual, community, governance structures, social responsibility and inclusiveness. (Kidwell, 2005, a, p. 8)

Civic and social education in the 21st century is necessary for maintaining and developing the skills, knowledge, and dispositions of the pupils and of the young people as they become informed and concerned citizens who assume responsibilities in the democratic governances. This focus on children, as well student engagement and the responsibilities of citizenship are reflected in some of the civic education curricula that have been developed in recent years all over Europe, not only in Romania.

2. Civic education - a comparative analysis

The Romanian school curriculum for Social Education is a curriculum specifically for grades V-VIII modified by the law nr. 3590/05.04.2016. The new standards and Program for

Social Studies prepared and realized by the Ministry of National Education in Romania brought a new perspective of opportunities for citizenship education starting with 2017.

The discipline of Social Education is provided in the curriculum Human and Society with a time frame of one hour per week, during each of the four school years. According to the provisions of the educational curriculum, within the discipline of Social Education are studied as follows: in the 5th grade - Critical thinking and the Rights of the Child, in the 6th grade - Intercultural Education, at the 7th grade - Education for Democratic Citizenship, at 8th grade - Economic and Financial Education.

The new curriculum addresses the skills of the 8th-grade graduate training profile, contributing to the gradual formation of key competencies for lifelong learning. This contribution covers both direct support of social and civic competences, a key competence spirit of initiative and entrepreneurship, and raising awareness of other key skills.

The novelty emerges in the 5th grade, by including the new discipline Critical Thinking and the Rights of the Child (under the general framework of Social Education), aiming at the development of critical thinking in relation to and/or by orienting to the issue of children's rights. The discipline proposes to approach critical thinking and child rights in an integrated way, starting from the specific competencies defined in the new curriculum. The learning activities proposed also by the ministry aim to support students in their critical reflection on their own rights and responsibilities; thus, this course provides contexts for formulating questions, building a grounded point of view, to examine opinions, and the explanations and arguments made by others. Also, learning activities are intended to stimulate and direct involvement of students in promoting and defending their rights.

In the 6th grade of Social Education - Intercultural Education discipline proposes a didactic approach centred on the values and principles of interculturality in the context of contemporary Romanian society. The discipline aims at educating students as individuals able to value their own culture and to appreciate positively different cultures that are found in an intercultural society.

In the 7th grade, Social Education - Education for Democratic Citizenship discipline is centred on the values and principles of democratic citizenship. Through this discipline, civic education of pupils continues, started in primary education, acquiring new competencies regarding the understanding of the functioning of the democratic state as a state of law, and the practice of active citizenship.

And finally, the 8th grade of the social education curriculum, Economic and Financial Education discipline is oriented on the economic, financial and entrepreneurial dimension of the exercise of citizenship. Secondary school students learn to solve issues related to finance and economics is achieved naturally, targeting key issues with which they come into contact directly or through family they belong; the discipline aims also the development of the spirit of initiative and entrepreneurship, as well as the realization of action plans (personal / family) for achieving a goal, on the person's ability to turn ideas into action.

The Romanian curriculum described offer a new perspective of the school in preparing the children to learn and function in diverse social circumstances, the pupils learn how to reason, to identify and solve problems. Also, they are organized to work in teams and to collaborate with others in order to develop research and critical thinking skills, to understand responsibility, to develop leadership, learn tolerance, how to coexist, and respect others. Having regard that the primary purpose of social studies and civic education is to instil in pupils/young the knowledge, skills, and values for active contribution to society as a citizen is important to start this education early.

Related to civic and social education it is complicated to realise a succinct summary of everything that is being done in Europe with respect to this topic education but is obvious to see that is a great variety in forms and aims. Even the names of the subject vary from aktivt

medborgerskap (in Norway), citizenship (in Great Britain) or politische Bildung (in Austria and Germany) to social studies (in Cyprus) or éducation civique (in France) (Veldhuis, 2006, a). The most interesting developments in the field are currently taking place in Great Britain; in 2002, a new topic was introduced in the curriculum there: citizenship. Great Britain invests a lot of energy into material development and teacher training in the civic education area. The topic of citizenship is part of the curriculum for school children from 11 to 16 years of age and the aim is centred on the perspective to make the children which represent the next people to 'think of themselves as active citizens, willing, able and equipped to have an influence in public life.' Much emphasis goes to the children's future roles as citizens in society' (Veldhuis, 2006, b).

The situation in Germany is different, because in this country since education is not coordinated by the central government, but by the federal states. Civic education is among the general aims of education in Germany and has been integrated in all subjects. As a separate subject, it is generally not taught to children before they are around 12 years of age. Germany is very active in the field of civic education as an enormous number of professors at teachers' colleges and universities are involved in civic education (Veldhuis, 2006, c).

Despite 50 years of democratic education, many people in Germany are still worried about the lack of political engagement among the German people and complain that the many investments in civic education have not been able to prevent right-wing extremism from re-emerging after World War II. Recently, a debate has flared on the question whether civic education should focus on the mechanics of political decision making or rather on key concepts like 'democracy' or 'acting democratically' (Veldhuis, 2006, d).

As it can be seen on today's European political scene, the European Commission is obviously confronted with a great lack of 'European citizenship'. The commission has taken a number of initiatives to tackle this problem. In the context of the Lisbon-agreement, the commission has established a number of committees for describing the competencies that school children should develop in various school subjects. One of those subjects is 'civics', furthermore, the European Commission is researching the indicators of active citizenship (Veldhuis, 2006, e).

In 2010 the Council of Europe member states adopted the Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education. The Charter is setting a common European standard in this area and is the only international legal document which makes explicit reference to both EDC (Education for Democratic Citizenship) and HRE (Human Rights Education). It has a strong role to play both with respect to informing policy-making and as a practical tool for the promotion of learning democracy and human rights. The Charter establishes the principle that the member states "provide every person within their territory with the opportunity of education for democratic citizenship and human rights education" and not only to their citizens (Council of Europe, 2017, a, p. 7).

The citizenship and the specific education should receive extra attention through the actual curriculum on the knowledge and attitudes among pupils of secondary school with respect to politics and democracy. In the next future, this will prove that civic education can be effective under certain conditions (Council of Europe, 2017, b, p. 8).

In June 2017, was held a conference on the Future of Citizenship and Human Rights Education in Europe in Strasbourg, where the participation of many representatives of public authorities, education institutions and civil society organisations took part. The aim of the conference was to explore how the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education (Recommendation CM/Rec(2010)7) could be further strengthened as an effective support tool for building democratic societies based on respect for human rights.

In that context, the Secretary General of the Council of Europe Thorbjørn Jagland asked in his report on the "State of Democracy, Human Rights and the Rule of Law, "How resilient are Europe's democracies?" and continuing by: "Europe remains, in many parts of the world, a beacon of democratic progress. Today, however, many of our societies appear less protective of their pluralism and more accepting of populism [...]. Balanced discussion gives way to polarised, us-versus-them polemic, making it harder for members of society to find common ground [...]. The European Convention of Human Rights founder fathers understood that our best security policy is one which stops our societies from descending into xenophobia, aggressive nationalism and disregard for democratic institutions[...]. Our shared standards are a means of resolving disputes and building bridges, whether between governments or communities" (Council of Europe, 2017, c, p. 7).

So, it's obvious that education plays an important role in strengthening the resilience of democratic societies. This is why the Council of Europe supports cooperation among its member states, which have a lot of good practice in the area of Education for Democratic Citizenship (EDC) and Human Rights Education (HRE), and can learn a lot from each other (Council of Europe, 2017, d, p. 7).

At the finale of the conference were underlined some important conclusions: Europe is facing serious challenges to democracy and human rights and education has to have an important role to play in addressing these challenges. A shared ownership of democratic societies and a sense of belonging are crucial for peace and security in Europe and in the world. It is therefore important to pay particular attention to vulnerable and marginalised groups and to address the issue of unequal access to citizenship and human rights education. More progress is needed in general education and it must remain a priority area. Further efforts need to be made in the areas of higher education, preschool education and vocational education and training, where education for democratic citizenship and human rights has not been sufficiently present so far. Capacity building for education professionals is of crucial importance and should be given more attention; synergies between formal and non-formal education sectors are essential for improving the quality and sustainability of this work. The Council of Europe should strengthen its regional leadership in promoting synergies among international institutions in the area of education for democratic citizenship and human rights, in particular in the framework of the UN Agenda 2030 (Council of Europe, 2017, e, p. 6).

According to the same Report, across Council of Europe member states, "education is increasingly recognised as a tool for tackling radicalisation leading to terrorism, for successfully integrating migrants and refugees and for tackling disenchantment with democracy and the rise of populism. International cooperation in education for democratic citizenship and human rights is growing, supporting national approaches by raising standards and allowing states to learn from each other's experiences. But despite this growing understanding of the relationship between education and Europe's overall democratic health, challenges remain. In many countries [...] citizenship and human rights education are not sufficiently mainstreamed. In some areas of learning, such as vocational training, they are often absent. Where they are present, in many cases not enough is being done to monitor their impact, meaning that they do not receive sufficient priority, with resources geared instead towards areas of education that are evaluated and ranked" (Council of Europe, Report on State, p. 5).

In this context, I chose an example of good practices offered by the Lithuanian state; the Lithuanian Ministry of Education introduced in 2015 the "Concept of Good School", which serves as a guideline to schools on how to improve education quality. It is addressed to all interest groups: pupils, teachers, parents, school leaders and school authorities, and the general public. The concept aims to support the development of the "basic skills that make it possible to become civic-minded, humane, cherished members of society and to successfully

plan personal and professional life". Each school is given the opportunity to choose which aspects of the school's activities it wants to improve first and to build up a school improvement path based on self-assessment, school community needs an agreement (Ministry of Education and Science of Lithuania, 2015).

3. Final conclusions

As is known, a few years ago the possibility of conceiving a European civic education had been discussed related to this, in 2009, the European Economic and Social Committee recommended the EU to introduce a "Common European Civic Education". Obviously, that proposal underlined that is important to take into consideration the national context having to regard that in the actual century numerous liberal democracies proposed civic education programs. On one hand, this intention had envisaged increasing of political participation, to raise awareness among the students and citizens in general about rights and duties, to ensure their loyalty and support and/or to address political challenges and not only (like the migration issues, refugees or other). On the other hand, even this social and civic education programs existent on the national level, in the actual European context, when the nation-state is based on different values, the particularities of the EU are a real challenge to the concept of civic education which is traditionally thought in the framework of the nation-state.

Even though it can be seen that the civic education is a constant presence in schools at the European level, one of the challenges educators face is how to help not only the young, but adult citizens as well to develop a more realistic understanding of today's world in which they live and to try to manage the complex global problems which affect them.

The evidence of recent elections (not only in Romanian state), including low voter turnout and voters' lack of knowledge of issues, underscores the importance of why we need to strengthen effective civic education in schools. A lack of understanding, among large sectors of the general public, of the complexity and interrelationship of economic, political, and social issues confounds the democratic process and places popular sovereignty in jeopardy. The willingness of the populace to remain detached from domestic and foreign policy issues can only be detrimental to the national and global outlook of today and into the future. Worse still, we regularly see the public opinion that is based on the incomplete or inaccurate information. Citizens frequently lack the analytical skills on which to evaluate sources of information. Civic education is one small but critical step toward promoting good decision-making skills and civic engagement as we work toward a better understanding of global issues, war and peace, economic stability, and international justice.

In conclusion, we reiterate the comments of Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, who wrote in the Council of Europe Report: "...We should never consider human rights and democratic citizenship as "optional extras" or routine obligations - they are vital undertakings to sustain social cohesion, promote inclusion and participation and prevent violence and conflict in our societies. They are an investment in our present and in our future which we cannot afford to overlook" (Kidwell, 2005, b, p. 10).

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