

Comment

European citizenship and active citizenship: an ever open debate

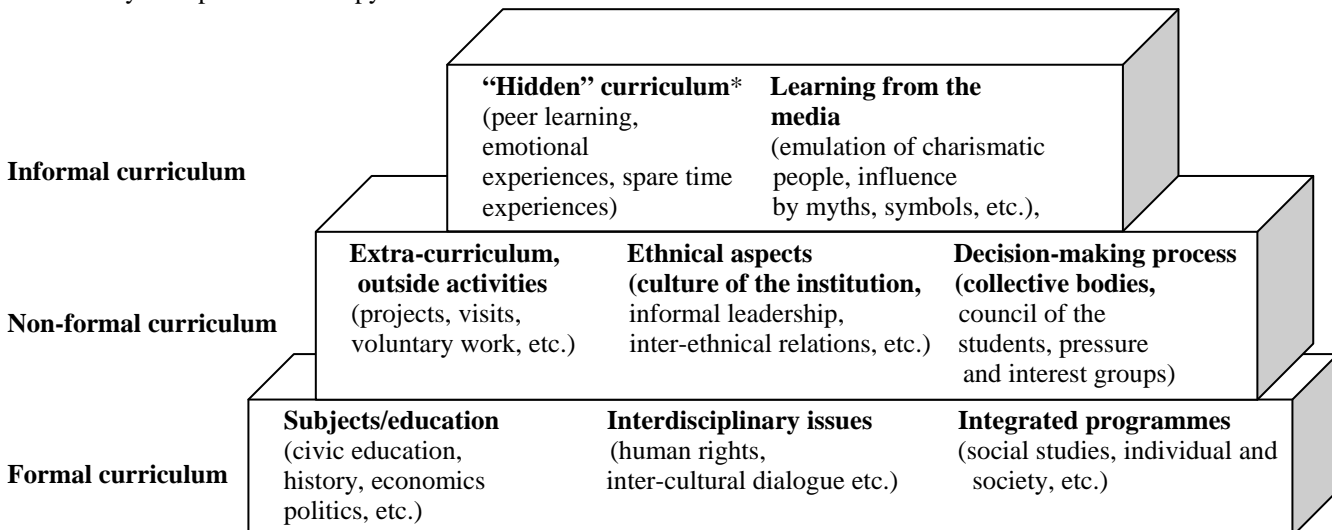
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The concept of citizenship cannot be easily defined, especially when a view related merely to a legal status is to be avoided. Indeed, the concept of citizenship itself contains implications that go beyond the field of rights and duties arising from belonging to a politically defined community. As stressed by Kymlicka e Norman,¹ the word “citizen” implicitly contains behavioural factors (e.g. being a good citizen, acting as a good citizen and so on) that typically connote the concept of citizenship as a way of acting. Nonetheless, as acting always takes place in a context that changes, by its very nature, when cultural, social and economic conditions change, also the concept of citizenship evolves both in time and space. Therefore, citizenship - as an activity and a process of active participation in the community (or communities), of belonging and as a set of knowledge, feelings, attitudes and behaviours of individuals - inevitably pushes us to identify its links with the acquisition/employment of skills that should make a citizen's action real and effective.

The Committee of the Ministers of the Council of Europe proclaimed 2005 as the European Year for the citizenship through education. What was the objective of such an initiative? The purpose was to underline that, in a life-long and life-wide learning perspective, education - considered as a formal, non-formal or informal learning process- plays a crucial role in the acquisition of the value of citizenship, in the quality of the participation in the democratic life of a community and in the promotion of its culture. Thus, for an active citizenship, learning means acting in synergy with a variety of contexts: a process that can be described as a critical guidance within which students (of any age, in any context) are offered opportunities structured at a cognitive, affective and pragmatic level to acquire and renew the skills needed for a self-directed participation, for social purposes, to experience the negotiation of meanings.

It means that an active citizenship is actually built on the basic concept of civic, political and social education which is generally present in all the European curricula,² but goes beyond them.

In the final report for the research “All-European Study on Education for Democratic Citizenship Policies”, promoted by the Council of Europe, the education for citizenship in a school/educational context may be represented as a pyramid structured as follows:



The education to citizenship in a school/educational context³

*(translator’s note: a literal translation was chosen here, since the definition of “implicit curriculum” has a broader meaning in Italian)

The educational and training context consequently becomes “locus” - one among the many possible in a society of knowledge - for an individual and collective identity and sense of belonging which, as stressed, is to be developed and promoted in many contexts, from the national, to the local or community ones, aside from the usual European and global level. At European level, this interpretation approach achieves the most widespread support. Indeed, one of the most recent documents by the European Commission states that implementing a citizenship implies empowering individuals, allowing them to feel at ease in a democratic culture and feeling that their contribution can change the community they live in.⁴ In this perspective, it appears evident that the concept of citizenship cannot be restricted to an univocal relation in which the state provides a number of guarantees to its citizens, but it rather becomes a bidirectional process in which citizens are prompted to exercise their rights and to take advantage from the opportunities they are given. The result is that an active citizenship becomes a constant interchange between personal development and society. However, to participate, you need to be able to do it. Hence, the debate on active citizenship is joined - as previously stated - by the one on the skills needed for its effective and conscious exercise.⁵ Is it therefore possible to learn how to be active citizens? A study by the Directorate General for Education and Culture of the European Commission on citizenship education, carried out in thirty-three countries (including EU and EFTA members and candidate countries), reveals that in the process of active citizenship learning there are - as inferable from the “pyramid” above - cognitive, affective and behavioural components. The study confirms that understanding key concepts and their underlying values is the first step towards participation. Cognitive learning is indispensable to lay the foundations to proceed on the path to active citizenship; the affective component influences attitudes, opinions and feelings, whereas the behavioural component is expressed through the commitment and the participation in the community and in society.⁶ However it requires - as highlighted by Bruner - the development of cultural instruments - competences - that should help to live as active participants in an ever-changing world.⁷ So, what are those competences? According to the results of the previously mentioned Grundtvig II project on the European citizenship, the necessary skills for the exercise of the citizenship are: knowing how to express oneself, the sense of belonging, knowing how to pay attention and be available to different codes, knowing how to negotiate meanings, being “open”, being aware of one’s own identity, knowing how to translate ideas into practice, feeling capable to act and possessing a basic knowledge on the key concepts of citizenship and democracy.

Knowing how to express oneself is a fundamental skill. Without it, one is forced to silence and an active participation is impossible. The sense of belonging is also a preliminary aspect for an active citizenship. In general, one prefers to express oneself in known situations and contexts whose dynamics are intelligible. The sense of belonging is not to be interpreted as a rooting factor; on the contrary, it is dynamic, flexible and mobile, a skill that follows us in the contemporary society characterised by continuous changes and even dramatic transformations. “In each context we are entering a scene already in action. And we have to figure out what the play is about and how is played, before we can take part in the action”, says Horsdal⁸. Knowing how to be careful and available to different codes allows to participate and to create the sense of belonging to different social communities. The more “belongings” you have, the more opportunities for “belonging” you develop. Knowing how to negotiate meanings – aside from being a fundamental element to any type of learning – is indispensable to manage conflicts and a precondition to an effective democratic dialogue. Being open is another precondition to learning and it is frequently linked to the acceptance of diversity. Identity, meant in a dynamic way, is an indispensable preliminary element to the development of the sense of affiliation and, at the same time, of independence and represents a bridge between public and private. Knowing how to translate ideas into practice, i.e. knowing how to move from dialogue and negotiation to action is the crucial skill for an active citizenship. It is a skill which requires other cross-competences such as knowing how to plan, organise and implement an action. It requires self-confidence, determination and some basic civic and political knowledge, as stressed.

Evidently, in this perspective the role played by teachers, and educators in general, is decisive to the purpose of achieving an active European citizenship education. The training of teachers, both initially and while in service, allows to acquire or improve new teaching methodologies that, implementing processes and favourable learning conditions, promote competences that are a basis not only to citizenship education, but also to the coexistence in various contexts. A teacher may use different instruments (collaborative ones, action learning, active teaching in general) in a perspective of “social”

learning. What methodologies and active didactic activities typical of a scientific teaching – such as debating and supporting on the basis of factual data, problem-solving, cooperating and decision-making according to a participative and shared model, acknowledging values and interests implied in the scientific research and their historical value – are all-encompassing and transferable to other learning contexts for an integrated development of competences for the active citizenship? This perspective is the context for the SEDEC project (Science Education and European Citizenship) and for the structure of the in-service training course the international work group aims at developing, to offer science teachers the opportunity to participate in the debate on the active citizenship in a European context.

Translated by Massimo Caregnato

Notes and references

- ¹ W. Kymlica and W. Norman, *Return of the Citizen: A Survey of Recent Work on Citizenship Theory*, *Ethics* **104** (1994) 352.
- ² Citizenship Education at school in Europe, Eurydice, The Information Network on Education in Europe. <http://www.eurydice.org>
- ³ C. Bîrzéa (edited by), *All-European Study on policies for Education for democratic Citizenship. Synthesis of EDC policies in Europe*, DGIV/EDU/CIT **18** (2003) 22.
- ⁴ European Commission, *Learning for Active Citizenship: A significant challenge in building a Europe of Knowledge* (2005).
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- ⁵ M. Horsdal, *Active Citizenship and the Non-Formal education – a Socrates-Grundtvig II project*, Højskolernes Hus, Copenhagen (2004).
- ⁶ Directorate General for Education and Culture, *Study on Citizenship Education*, Final report (2007).
- ⁷ J. Bruner, *Act of meaning*, Harvard University press (1990).
- ⁸ M. Horsdal, *Active Citizenship and the Non-Formal education – a Socrates-Grundtvig II project*, Højskolernes Hus, Copenhagen: (2004) 53.

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