OVERTONES IN CONTEMPORARY EDUCATIONAL THEORY
AND PRACTICE:
EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP

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Abstract
Democracy is strong when citizens are well informed and participate responsibly to public life, and vice versa, democracy is fragile when citizens are poorly informed and they show indifferent to public life. The tasks that undertake such education are very complex and converging towards the formation of a citizen informed about political institutions, values and democratic norms, about changes and social alternatives, sensitive to his community and global issues, active and responsible; a citizen who thinks and acts in a democratic spirit, able to defend themselves against abuse and attacks on their rights.

Keywords: Education, Democratic Citizenship, Curriculum

Introduction
Social movements in contemporary times have brought to the forefront, more than ever in history, Educational issues for a superior type of democratic societal organization. „One of the major reasons for the revitalization of citizenship in theory and practice in the late twentieth century was the enhanced consciousness of the value of democracy and its adoption as a style of government by an increasing number of countries” (Heater, 2004).

Assuming the responsibilities of training citizens, the school is forced to constantly adapt, through innovative curriculum projects, to the rapid economic and social changes that decisively influence the conception of the role of the education system. Its major objectives are determined by the need to develop human resources to match the increasing complexity of living conditions and aspirations. The idea of preparing individuals in accordance with the requirements of the society they live in, particularly important in modern pedagogy, requires initiating suitable instructive-educational steps to meet the present and future formative requirements.

Citizenship education and Curriculum

The education process is now oriented towards the development of an autonomous, dynamic and creative personality, rooted in social realities (Audigier, 1999). To achieve this, school must assume those formative objectives, through which the individual is led to a rapid and efficient integration in the social field. Depending on the quality of this integration we will be able to appreciate the relevance and quality of education. Social integration, as a relatively distant aim of school education, is the result of communication and assimilation of behavioral or action patterns appropriated to the conditions of existence of individuals as members of a community (Canivez, 1990). In this sense, by teaching-learning various school subjects we seek, as we learn from curriculum documents, to develop intellectual skills, skills for communication, networking and effective participation in social, economic and political life, prerequisites for students in assuming the role expectations arising from society.

A curriculum design towards an education that effectively fulfils a social function involves a continuous readjustment of the contents, objectives and action strategies, as overcoming or renewing patterns or principles considered to be obsolete. This is the only way we can promote a training profile adequate for a rapidly changing world.

Changes occurring in the contemporary world generated new issues in terms of education, based on a number of values seen as priorities: communication, participation, responsibility, morality, democracy, tolerance, cooperation etc. Theoretical developments of these issues and the practical undertakings they arise and support are conveyed by means of expressions such as: Education for Democratic Citizenship (EDC).

Talking about an Education for Democratic Citizenship means to basically look for appropriate answers for questions such as: What is the impact of values, meanings and principles in connection with the idea of democratic citizenship upon the general orientation of education? What are their consequences on the School Curriculum? How are all the above applied in educational practice? What content and what methods regarding the education for democratic citizenship appear in curricular programs of school subjects? What is the training potential of activities complementing the curriculum? How do school management models are developed, especially concerning participation of teachers, parents, students and other community members when taking decisions about the educational process? How is the education for democratic citizenship performed with adults?

The concept of citizenship education is quite controversial and somewhat competitors due to the existence of terms that refer to parts of citizenship or the context in which civic education can be achieved. „Maximal interpretations lead to a broad mixture of formal and informal approaches to what has been termed citizenship education, as opposed to narrower civics education. This citizenship education includes the content and knowledge components of minimal interpretations, but actively encourages investigation and interpretation of the many different ways in which these components (including the rights and responsibilities of citizens) are determined and carried out (Kerr, 1999).”

While relentlessly promoted for a long time through educational policies in the countries with an old
democratic system, the education for democratic citizenship was imposed in our country in the current National School Curriculum, as well as in a series of actions regarding adult education, in non-formal and informal educational activities. The education for democratic citizenship has the mission to form and develop for the individual, abilities of active participation in public life, from participation in the voting process, to specific interventions as to influence political decision, to protection and promotion of his own rights or to express a responsible behavior in the society (Velea, 2004), taking into account the relevant issues posed by social dynamics and those related to individual development, as well as those resulting from complex interactions between components: “The public benefits of education were not, however, simply the sum of individual private benefits, for norms such as political or civic tolerance, literacy, or the values required for democratic functioning adhere to the quality of a community and are not reducible to, or contained in, the psychological characteristics of individuals” (Olssen, 2002).

Even though the education for democratic citizenship should be a constant preoccupation of all citizens and many institutions in a society, the school will hold the indispensable absolute role. It is its duty to contribute with specific methods to the promotion of values and democratic practices, whose presence in the environment outside the school system is not inherent.

In order to cope with expectations and complex challenges that contemporary society has to face, the educational policies should (Bîrzea, 2000):

1. Develop the formal curriculum for EDC, either by introducing some distinct subjects, or through trans-curricular subjects, or integrated programs;
2. Attract all types of institutions assuming an educational role in achieving the specific objectives of EDC;
3. Orient the entire educational system towards a certain set of values: human rights, political multi-party system, rule of law etc.;
4. Develop fundamental abilities in young people as to exert their democratic citizenship, especially in terms of rights and responsibilities, social and communication skills, participation in public life;
5. Promote EDC through school ethos, informal or hidden curriculum, as well as through strong connections with their social environment;
6. Use the school as a tool for fighting against violence, xenophobia, racism, aggressive nationalism and intolerance.

The education for democratic citizenship is not a school subject, a curricular activity, a field of knowledge, a form of social action, a type of education similar with the education for human rights, a political education or an education for values, but a major goal of educational policies, created also from the level of permanent learning process, which has under its subordination all the above-mentioned dimensions.

It is clear though that the education for democratic citizenship covers and transcends all these particular aspects. It has its own identity and operational content resulting from the integration of the three general terms: education-citizenship-democracy; actually, it is a common element for many educational activities, for a large variety of experiences that people live, irrespective of their age, institution or learning environment. In contrast with other closely related terms (civic education, political education etc.), the referential integrating term of “citizenship” provides EDC with an identity. In other words, as a result of this identity, EDC stands for learning a democratic behavior by means of a variety of experiences and social practices. EDC is a system of educational practices and perpetual learning situations meant to teach individuals, groups and communities about the acceptable way of actively participating in the social life.

The process of forming individuals for democratic citizenship does not imply only acquisition of information on the democratic mechanism, but also creating capabilities and attitudes that can transform a behavior into a building and rebuilding process; this is not an easy task since we step into a territory where tradition plays an important part (Almond & Verba, 1996). The education for democratic citizenship promotes the culture of democracy, sharing responsibilities, mutual understanding, tolerance and peaceful
settlement of disagreements. Its major objectives consist of transmitting a system of values (pluralism, human rights, cooperation, participation, tolerance, respect etc.), forming an ability to dialogize, to initiate changes, to take responsible decisions, forming certain positive attitudes, such as responsibility towards the community, solidarity and trust in our peers, flexibility when relating to others, respect for other people’s culture, opting for peaceful solutions during disagreements etc. Thus, the students should possess:

1. Correct knowledge of codes, languages and conventions of the democratic society, and the ability to use them in various circumstances;
2. Knowledge of the fundamental human and citizen rights, as well as their impact on everyday life;
3. Creative thinking evidenced by use, assessment and permanent improvement of their own strategies for solving the problems;
4. Models of strategies for acting and taking the appropriate decisions in a particularly active world;
5. Skills of critical judgment and various argumentation techniques, to be used in different social contexts;
6. Skills of social communication, verbal and nonverbal, as well as skills of using computer equipment as communication tools;
7. Proper understanding of the sense of belonging to different types of communities, a sense that is acquired through participation in the social life of the classroom, school and their local community;
8. Understanding of the way that social and cultural environment (family, social rules, linguistic codes, historical traditions etc.) affects their own ideas and behaviors, as well as their peers’.

Moreover, the education of the citizen must promote the spirit of free-willed observance of the law, if, of course, they are accepted as just, since no individual can become a part of social life without the habit of observing the law.

The fundamental capabilities when exerting one’s citizenship in a democratic society are the ones determined by the construction of a free autonomous personality, aware of its rights and responsibilities in a society where the authority to establish laws and community living rules defining the boundaries of expressing one’s freedom, of representing and controlling those exerting power, is available to all citizens. The education for democratic citizenship stands for the base of respecting freedom, peace and justice, helping the creation of an ambiance of understanding, tolerance and true equity in terms of dignity and law observance (Engle & Ochoa, 1988). It serves the mission to train the active citizen participating in the democratic act and attached to democratic values and principles.

The education for democratic citizenship can be accomplished in different forms and ways since it actually represents a continuous action, with fundamental grounds laid during childhood years and mainly enhanced through the agency of the school system. The implicit way of training students to become active responsible citizens encompasses all factors and all school aspects that may have a significant formative role, even if their action is sometimes diffuse or without a clear intention.

The school provides an appropriate environment for the development of the individual’s ability to take part in the democratic processes, whereas the School Curriculum plays an important part in this process. The goals related to the education for democratic citizenship may be achieved only when taking into account the development of the students’ cognitive and acting abilities, as well as the ethical dimension of their personality. There are three structures for accomplishing such a development:

1. The lessons themselves where teaching and learning the subjects targeting EDC objectives take place;
2. The moments, places and situations for initiating the students, outside the actual teaching facilities;
3. The daily school life and, in particular, all situations provided by the school as a social environment, with its collective rules, interpersonal conflicts, moments and cooperation opportunities etc.

At the same time, school should be seen as a community where teachers and students take part together in long term activities hopefully interesting, attractive, useful, generating satisfaction, and life-related. These characteristics may constitute reference points for assessing the quality of school life: „The quality of school life is associated, with the satisfaction of performed activities, of incurred expectations, and constantly generated initiatives. The basic terms of ‘human’ and ‘cognitive’ represent good fellowship, similarity of goals, options and accomplishments, where the differences are always negotiated and eventually assimilated” (Vlăsceanu, coord, 2002, p. 35). The whole organizational school structure is determined by its essential part, i.e. achievement of the training and educational process. However this structure applies its educational influence upon its students by means of direct actions, inherent in the training and educational process, as well as indirect actions, by means of the school environment, extracurricular activities, organization and capitalization of the cooperation with other educational factors etc.

In order to achieve an education for democratic citizenship, a number of extracurricular activities can be promoted: participating in decision-taking activities within organizations and associations, attending clubs, visits, trips, exchanges among schools, pilot projects, involvement in community life (volunteer activities, religious programs), meetings with elected representatives and local authorities, campaigns for promoting awareness regarding certain issues, work experience (entrepreneurial learning). For example, there are studied how it could substantiate EDC in specific situations such as traveling during which: „the young people in these settings used travel to position themselves as successful, mobile, global citizen subjects” (Allan, Charles, 2015).

Conclusions

The education for democratic citizenship is oriented towards all individuals, irrespective of age and job, of their role and status in the society. Therefore, we may assume that, on the one hand, it is not meant only for those about to exert their authority on different levels within the society, and especially for those holding a part of the public authority; on the other hand, we can assume that it outgrows the school environment where it was initially created, existing also through the contributions of the organizations owning a true educational potential, besides other basic functions (mass media, NGOs, youth clubs etc.). The numerous situations an individual may find himself in throughout his life can stimulate a learning process: critical events, challenges, dilemmas, compromises, important moments etc. Thus, such an education assumes a perpetual learning process, under any conditions and in any kind of human activity, in order to provide acquisition, renewal, modernization and completion of a large range of knowledge and skills determining the individual’s successful involvement in public activities.

The behavior of the individual within the society is controlled by values and rules, by traditions and customs set during previous generations, and all the above stand for factors generating conduct, even in a „democratic deficit” situation. An active participation in the community life they belong to is determined by the personal and active assimilation of these components, by the level of development of his personality’s socio-cultural dimension, provided by means of educational influences originated from his entire social environment. The ensemble of these influences setup the dimensions of the social integration process and „There is no reason why citizenship should not continue to adapt and survive” (Heater, 2004) especially being given recent conditions in which larger social movements from the most various reasons of migration determine rethinking of a concepts like the group cultural identity, reconsidering processes of adaptation, integration, social inclusion, etc. in such manner that the current historical stage will represent a fertile phase of the social and cultural progress and not a period of stagnation or even regression.
References


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