Citizenship Education in Germany

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Background Information/Brief History
The history of citizenship education in Germany is closely linked to the experience of totalitarian rule in the early days of its democracy. The development of democratic attitudes within Germany was understood to be an indispensable ingredient in building a stable democracy in the Federal Republic after 1945 and in reunited Germany again in 1989. The failure of the Weimar democratic experiment and the ease with which Hitler took over Germany in 1933 was seen as in part due to the educational systems, which were themselves anti-democratic and authoritarian, and unable to bring the idea of democratic values across (Roberts 2002).

Although the strategies of the four occupying powers differed considerably in terms of purpose, content and method, all agreed that the development of a stable democracy would require more than citizens which paid lip-service to democratic principles and tolerated a democratic order imposed on them by the occupation authorities reluctantly (Roberts 2002). This diagnosis emphasised that mere transmission of information about the logic behind democratic systems was insufficient. A focus on developing democratic attitudes and practices rather than imposing certain ideas "from above" was required. "Democracies need democrats" soon emerged as the underlying credo for the concept of citizenship education, valid even today.

By the 1960s, new left-wing approaches took the argument further, demanding a more emancipatory take on citizenship education, encouraging people to question authority and if necessary, to resist it. Opposed to this were approaches that took a more "rationalist", less politicalized stand, emphasizing the value of information and reflection rather than political activism. One believed that the goal of citizenship education was to help citizens make rational judgements; the other believed it was to teach citizens how to emancipate themselves from those who might seek to seize power. Because of the socio-political demands made by citizenship education, the debate was at times bitterly contested. At its root, it reproduced the controversy on scientific theory taking place between critical rationalism and critical theory.

After German reunification in 1989, "re-education" was seen as a necessary antidote to years of intensive indoctrination under the totalitarian regime. Again, it was reiterated that the internalisation of democratic values and practices would be the most effective in eradicating anti-democratic ideas among the population. Citizenship education in Germany is non-partisan but not impartial; it is grounded in the values and interpretation of democracy found in the Constitution, Germany’s most basic laws. In its initial phase of emergence, citizenship education was derived from the closely related fields of education and political science, and it wasn’t until the 1960s that the program developed into an independent academic discipline. Ever since, it is has demanded the right to deliberate over questions concerned with planning,
actualizing, and assessing citizenship education processes, which involves empirical research, (normative) reflection, designing and implementing learning processes.

Definition
The definite definition of citizenship education has long been contested. The debate centres on what knowledge should be applied, what academic disciplines are most worth considering regarding the topics of citizenship education content and which conceptual frameworks are most promising in regard to an efficient and meaningful teaching and learning.

Different positions have coalesced throughout the ongoing academic debate (Lange 2008a). The first attempts were to re-establish political science as the benchmark discipline for citizenship education (Weißeno/ Detjen/ Juchler 2010). The second model utilizes a variety of fields from within the social sciences, giving each their respective importance, in an effort to mediate citizenship education (Autorengruppe Fachdidaktik 2011). The third perspective refers largely to democratic discourse and citizenship engagement (Himmelmann 2013, Behrmann/Grammes/Reinhardt 2004). The fourth position emphasizes the individual subject, and uses learners’ prior knowledge as its point of reference (Lange 2008a).

What the first three approaches have in common is that they place the centre of citizenship education firmly in academics, whether in political science, the social sciences or the study of democracy. The fourth has disengaged from the demands made by institutional academia, and instead favours individuals’ perceptions as a point of departure, in order to develop subject-centred approaches.

Each different framework translates into different learning goals and objectives pursued in the classroom, speaking in varying degrees to theoretical models of citizenship such as the Liberal, the Citizenship Republican and the Critical Model (Hoskins 2013, 25 ff.). The liberal approach to citizenship education is focused on creating autonomous citizens who can act towards supporting their own self-interest. It is focused on enhancing individuals’ basic level of citizenship knowledge and dispositions towards engagement. The citizenship republican approach emphasizes the need for citizens to be actively engaged within a community as equal and free citizens. The approach stresses citizenship responsibility so as to act for the common good. The critical approach focuses on improving and critiquing society through political action and social change. The approach is based on the idea of empowerment, social justice and the critique of the status quo.

Despite competing ideas of citizenship education, widespread agreement exists in three basic principles known as “Beutelsbacher Consensus”. In 1976, a conference of educationalists form different didactic schools addressed the need to avoid indoctrination. Education as propaganda and as a means of brainwashing citizens has been an especially sensitive issue in the Federal Republic because of former Nazi and communist indoctrination policies (Robert 2002, 561). The conference participants agreed on a set of guidelines emphasizing the notion of ‘objective’, value neutral education (Schiele/Schneider, 1977). The first principle prohibits educators from overwhelming students with political opinions, attitudes or values. Any kind of indoctrination contradicts the core idea of a self-consciously critical individual, and is therefore irreconcilable with citizenship education overall. Second, educators are expected to reflect on the variety of perspectives and plurality of interests, and the problems they present. If a topic is controversial in science, politics or society in general, then citizenship education must also teach it as controversial. The third postulates that students are to be taught to analyse their own political interests, and to influence society in a realistic way so as to pursue those interests. The “Beutelsbacher Consensus” has played an eminent role in citizenship education in Germany and continues to act as a fundamental pillar. However, recent critics have been
demanding that the normative, underlying assumptions and implications of the consensus should be explicitly interrogated as they tacitly speak in favour of the status quo rather than of truly emancipatory notions.

**Ecosystem of non-formal CE**

The system of non-formal citizenship education in Germany is characterised by a diversity of 16 federal states, known as Länder, each defining their own priorities and goals regarding education, which therefore allows for a decentralised system for non-formal education. There are, however, some general, overarching policies and federal funds. The “Kinder- und Jugendplan des Bundes” is the main federal subsidiary fund that allows for diversity in citizenship non-formal education. It finances a variety of non-governmental organizations and regional centres, ensuring diversified and impartial approaches to citizenship education.

The situation of non-formal citizenship education is characterized by a range of provision from agencies outside the direct responsibility of the federal or regional governments, placing special emphasis on a diversity of education.

Educational offers in terms of content, purpose, method and philosophical affiliation.

Non-formal citizenship education is carried out through a variety of governmental and non-governmental agencies. They include schools, colleges, publicly-funded adult education institutions, trade unions and churches. Germany’s history accounts for the important role taken by institutions, which are in some cases, necessarily unique to Germany; this is true especially for the variety of citizenship political and religious foundations and the Federal Agency for Citizenship Education (BpB). The latter is amongst the Federal Ministry of the Interior’s executive agencies, and is involved in both formal and non-formal citizenship education. It has branch regional offices in 15 states. The foundations are affiliated with established political parties or religious communities in terms of their political, intellectual, philosophical or religious orientation, but they are independent of the parties and churches and they offer a variety of educational services.

**Legal environment of Formal CE**

Citizenship education in schools is categorized under the cultural authority of the German states, which means its importance as a subject varies from federal state to federal state. With regard to its place in curriculum, citizenship education is structured as its own subject. While situated within a normative framework of democratic values and human rights, the subject is non-partisan as it does not educate citizens exclusively in their relation to the state. It does not simply aim at maintaining the democratic status quo but rather, seeks to develop citizens’ ability to judge and act, which thus enables them to rethink and reframe citizenship principles and structures, especially those involving critical thinking and political participation (Lange 2008b). Citizenship education claims to be institutionalized as a school principle in all of Germany’s varied formal educational facilities, at every level of education. In practice, however, most schools provide less than the ideal two hours of citizenship education each week.

**Stakeholders**

Alongside school-related activities, another important aspect of citizenship education is engaging both younger and older students outside the classroom, in a variety of non-formal learning opportunities sponsored by state and social authorities. Extracurricular citizenship education activities are supported or have been financed by political parties, unions, trade associations, foundations, religious and spiritual communities, the media, academies, independent institutions, and initiatives that pursue citizenship education due to their commitment to political ideals. Recently, however, public institutions have been withdrawing from the financial support within the field, which has therefore caused private funding for
citizenship education to increase, often implicitly or explicitly advocating partial norms and values.
Non-formal citizenship education increasingly competes with educational offerings that are tied more closely to the issue of employability and economic needs, which prompts a need for a discussion to ensure that employability and its educational programmes do not displace critical citizenship.

**Challenges**

Concerning research needs, the major challenge for citizenship education in Germany at present is to build further upon the international discourse and research base that already does exist, so as to further develop into an independent academic discipline. Regarding empirical research, attention should be given to what is known as citizenship awareness (Lange 2008a), a subject-centred approach referring to individuals’ intuitive ideas about the social and political world. The citizenship awareness approach calls into question any teaching that focuses upon the exhaustive coverage of citizenship education knowledge or normative dispositions that does not include the meaning it implicitly possesses for the learners. Instead, the approach sets out to propose an alternative to normative approaches of citizenship education that usually draw from liberal, republican and critical theories (see “definition”), by placing more of an obligation and value in individual meaningfulness. The citizenship awareness approach means putting the learner at the centre of the process. Elaborating on the assumptions that inform individuals’ mind-set and being able to discuss these will help students to truly understand citizenship issues, not just to learn to a specific end. Accordingly, a working knowledge of research findings on learners’ conceptions of the political-social reality might well be considered fundamental to the professional preparation of educators in this field.

Citizenship education is confronted by recent right-wing populism in the wake of the 2014 European elections. Especially in times of crisis, the right-wing positions score with exclusionist slogans and allegedly simple “solutions” for any perceived problem. Founded in 2013, the party “Alternative for Germany” (AfD) achieved around seven percent of the vote in the European Election by opposing the German government’s Euro zone policy. What is more, the rapid rise of a group calling itself Patriotic Germans against the Islamisation of the West (PEGIDA) has become a cause for concern. The anti-immigrant rallies against the supposed “Islamisation” of Europe that drew a record of 25,000 people in January 2015 have prompted a debate about German identity and shades of xenophobia among the citizenry. A study published by the Bertelsmann Foundation in 2015 revealed that around 57 percent of Germany’s non-Muslim population feel threatened by Islam, with one in four Germans willing to support a ban on Muslim immigrants altogether. About 61 percent of Non-German respondents feel that Islam doesn’t fit into the Western society.

Citizenship education in Germany indisputably has a key role to play in advancing society’s political discourse on anti-democratic tendencies and pluralism in Germany, and in contributing to a more integrated society in terms of minorities and social classes. Other current areas singled out for advancement include the topics of including hard-to-reach-learners, gender mainstreaming, and economic education as a requisite for citizenship education. Rather than take the foundations of a democratic order for granted, citizenship education must convey and deliberate over these notions again and again, and simultaneously encourage active democratic citizenship.
References


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