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★ NETWORKING EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

The Impact of Cultural and Citizenship Education on Social Cohesion

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Report

**Workshop 2
Inclusion Through Participation: How Could Minorities Play a More
Formative Role in Civil Society?**

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Inclusion Through Participation: How Could Minorities Play a More Formative Role in Civil Society?

Scientific Inputs:

Michalis Kakos, University of Leicester (UK)

Project Presentations:

Donald Rowe, Citizenship Foundation (UK) & Tehmina Kazi, British Muslims for Secular Democracy (UK)

Davide Tosco, Zenit Arti Audiovisive (Italy)

Moderation:

Girvydas Duoblys, Civic Initiative Center (Lithuania)

Presentations

Three presentations were given, followed in each case by questions.

The presentation by **Michalis Kakos** focussed on the challenging conception of 'identity' which is implicit in some understandings of citizenship education. It is a mistake to think that individuals have a 'core' identity which is static or independent of the identities of others. At the same time, it is a mistake to identify individual identity with any static collective identity. Rather, we have to base citizenship education on a critical notion of fluid identity.

Michalis defined civil society as a constant outcome of interactions, in which each individual is part of a plurality of groups. The 'British community', for example, is a community of communities. 'Society' has to be understood as a society of societies. If this understanding of society is correct, this poses a question in respect of the interpretation of 'minorities' and 'majorities'. Everybody is part of a minority, just as everybody is part of a majority.

'Personal identity' has to be understood in a dialogical way: there is a sense in which a person understands who he/she is by what he/she is not – by comparison. We know from psychoanalysis that infants construct themselves by differentiation from others. Identity is interactive, discursive, fluid and subjective.

It is nevertheless the case that we do define ourselves as part of certain groups (or as not being part of certain groups). This leads to the question of what it is into which we include ourselves?

Michalis defined national identity in this way:

"A subjective interpretation of the discourse constructed through social interactions within a given social framework which is recognised by the subjects as 'national'."

This is quite a different understanding of national identity compared to that implicit in the 'social cohesion' agenda in the United Kingdom; for example, where it seems that there has been an attempt to first define what 'Britishness' is, and then derive social cohesion from it. This is the wrong order.

Michalis drew the following conclusions about how minorities can play a formative role in society:

- By not seeing themselves as minorities. We are all minorities.
- Minorities need to have an understanding of the bureaucratic and political institutions of society in order to reform them. Citizenship education therefore has to provide individuals with knowledge and skills.
- We are undergoing a constant process of de- and re-construction of the 'other' in order to understand who we are. Citizenship education has to teach critical thinking, as a process of constantly questioning our own identity and the identity of others.

Michalis ended his presentation by drawing attention to the dangers of the institutionalisation of citizenship education as a threat to the fluidity of identity.

During the questions and answer session, it was stressed that a strongly identitarian nationalist discourse is gaining ground in several European countries, and that therefore a discursive approach to identity and citizenship cannot be taken for granted. The discursive approach based on alterity needs to be constantly defended.

The presentation by **Don Rowe and Tehmina Kazi** focussed on the *Young Muslim leadership network* in the UK, which is a project of the Citizenship Foundation.

The project was designed in the context of a feeling of increased tension in the UK between Muslim and other communities, following the events of 9/11 in the United States of America and the 7/7 bombings in London. In addition to increased tensions between these communities it also came as a shock that the extremists in the UK who perpetrated the bombings had been born and grown up in the UK. This led to the 'Preventing Violent Extremism' program of the UK government, which provided the funding for the project of the Citizenship Foundation.

Don Rowe and Tehmina Kazi were keen to point out shortcomings in the context of the 'Preventing violent extremism' conception in respect of how it deals with the problem.

The project itself brings together 40 young (16-21 years old) Muslims of both sexes in different working groups. It enables these working groups to have access to 'experts', such as journalists, police officers, politicians, educators etc, to whom these young individuals normally have no access. By contacting these experts, the groups work out an understanding of the causes for Muslim alienation in the UK, and also they learn skills by help of which they might act as engaged citizens, addressing the problem. These skills include communication and media skills, such as making films, writing articles and communicating via the internet.

Via the project the participating individuals become messengers because they disseminate the results of their activities amongst their peers and the general public.

The groups are led by a young leader who is employed by the Foundation. These young leaders are particularly active individuals in their societies.

Tehmina Kazi leads one of these groups and described the objectives of the participants' cooperative work as follows:

- to counter misconceptions and misreporting of Muslims in the media
- to increase engagement of Muslims in local politics and national politics
- to improve knowledge of other faiths amongst Muslims
- to combat the conflation between cultural practices and those sanctioned by religion
- to highlight commonalities between British/ European values and Islamic values

A number of challenges for the project were outlined by Tehmina, including the need to keep the work of the groups active and fun to maintain interest.

Davide Tosco presented a film-based project. The film was directed by a young woman of 17 with a Roma background who wanted to make a film about her life in an apartment in Italy. The title of the film is "Me, my Roma family and Woody Allen", by Laura Hallovic.

The approach of the young woman was of interest, Davide said, because it did not focus on the Roma as a minority as such but rather a personal experience is communicated.

This film generated wide media interest in Italy, was shown on national television, and gained recognition at film festivals. It was also well received amongst the Roma communities

in Italy, as its release coincided with a state of tension with regard to the Roma minority in Italy.

Davide presented the process of making the film as a good example of empowering a young person from a minority group by giving her the skills and the opportunity to express herself. This is a good example of a young person with ideas being supported and working professionally to create the product she wanted to create.

As the director, Laura was given full freedom to make the film she wanted to make, and Davide maintains that the film is much better this way: it is authentic, it is honest, and indeed this becomes obvious by frequent reactions of audiences. The authenticity of the film is powerful and it sets an example for other young individuals. Davide defined the role of citizenship education with regard to young people as putting them in a position where they themselves can create change.

In the discussion it was highlighted that the process of the distribution and dissemination of a project is crucial, and that often not enough attention is given to writing project applications.

Conclusions

Subsequent to the discussions in small groups, the workshop came to the following conclusions regarding the guiding questions:

How can minorities play a more formative role in civil society?

- We have to change our understanding of 'minorities'. Everyone is part of a minority, everyone is part of a majority. Personal identity has to be understood as a fluid concept and it is defined through dialogue with others.
- There is a need to educate politicians to change their conception of what a minority is. To work particularly with politicians representing minorities, in order to educate them towards not reinforcing their differences.
- Educate the media in the way they depict minorities.
- Citizenship education should concentrate on giving citizens the tools to be critical of their identities.
- Teachers have to be taught to promote critical thinking.
- A personal approach should be adopted, relating citizenship identity to personal stories, and these stories should be disseminated through the media.

What could the contribution of culture and citizenship education be like in the future?

- Culture and citizenship education can improve the skills of young people themselves.
- In order to have a more productive approach to citizenship education:
 - We should concentrate on involving stakeholders.
 - We should promote peer education.
 - 'Formal' (in schools) and 'informal' (NGOs, civil society) citizenship education should be mixed, with an emphasis on making formal education more fun and participative, with a focus on what is interesting for young people.

What are the main challenges of cultural and citizenship education in the future?

- Familiarising people with the idea that identity is fluid and defined by a dialogue with others as a challenge.
- Taking account of the increasing diversity of society in the context of globalisation is a challenge for citizenship educators.
- Keeping an open-minded approach to and maintaining the emphasis on citizenship education as a means of empowerment. Resisting 'missionary' approaches to citizenship education.



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- The ever-changing political agenda poses a challenge.
- There is a constant need to fight for the recognition of the importance of citizenship education and to improve the quality of teaching.