

PUBLIC CIVIC (POLITICAL) EDUCATION IN GERMANY

– A Brief Outline Focussing on German Schools –

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1. Institutions

Public civic education in Germany (the equivalent German term being 'political education') is mainly provided by

- public schools
- public institutions of higher education (universities etc.)
- public institutions of youth and adult education
- governmental (federal and state) agencies for civic (political) education
- foundations being affiliated with major political parties and being public in so far as they are funded by the federal government
- armed forces

Naming these public institutions all of those 'agencies' of functional political socialization (families, peers, media ...) are being neglected as well as non-governmental foundations, interest groups etc.

Since our extremely tight time-scale won't allow covering all of the institutions mentioned I decided to pick out one main institution I have been pretty much acquainted with for many years (in the context of my being engaged in educating future teachers of civic education): I am going to focus on civic education at German schools.

2. Public Schools

Diversity

The responsibility for public education on the whole (thus for public schools) lies with the 16 state governments. That is we have 16 ministries of education, 16 frameworks of all school subjects etc., and the terms, contents, curricular settings, the goals of civic education vary with the states – partly even within the states, due to the different school types.

In addition we have a highly selective school system: There are 4 or 6 (depending on the states) years of elementary school being followed by either lower secondary or intermediate or high school or – in some communities – comprehensive high schools. In the context of PISA (Program for International Student Assessment / OECD) aftermath

there has been a critical and controversial public debate on the impacts of that selective school system on students' achievements, and as a consequence some of the states are planning to reduce some of the selective elements. Others, though, are reinforcing them.

Most civic education frameworks are based on a broad range of social, economic, and political content covering thematic strands like social relationships, the foundations of democracy, the political system of Germany, economics, the social structure of Germany, how to participate in public policy, the European Union, media, international relations, peace keeping, comparing political systems, environmental problems ...

Students of all school types take civic education courses (being organized either as disciplinary or as multidisciplinary subjects) lasting 1 or 2 hours a week, starting at grade 5 or 7, depending on the state as well as on the type of school. They are taught by specialist teachers and quite often – mainly at lower secondary schools – by teachers who have not been educated as civic education teachers.

Goals

In spite of the wide diversity of civic education frameworks, subjects, contents (this normative diversity, by the way, would be much wider being considered empirically, because German teachers in most of the states enjoy quite a pedagogical freedom, and they don't really care much about official frameworks), in spite of this diversity there is a general consensus on the main goals of civic education at German schools:

Primary goal is to help young people evolving into self-determined, autonomous and critical citizens in a humane and democratic society being able

- to analyse social and political situations, problems, conflicts
- to obtain and apply appropriate analytical methods and skills
- to make informed and reasoned judgements and decisions on social and political issues
- to recognize and handle constructively and tolerantly controversial issues as well as alternative perspectives and views in a culturally diverse society
- to participate reflectively and democratically in public policy processes

In addition there is general consensus on the following essentials of the so-called Beutelsbach Agreement (1976):

- Students should not be (mentally) overwhelmed (indoctrinated) by their teachers
- Real world controversial issues are supposed to be presented just as controversially in the classroom
- Students should be enabled to recognize and express their individual interests

These goals, of course, are normative constructions, and they are, as I pointed out, more or less consensus among civic educators in Germany. These norms don't say anything about their implementation in every day practice, though. There is reason enough to assume that the normative goals and concepts are not at all identical with classroom practice, as it has been indicated by findings of the prominent cross national IEA-study: "... there is a gap between the ambitious goals of civic education and their realization ..." (Händle et al. 1999: 280).

Discourses

In order to understand the present situation and problems of public civic education in Germany better it might be of some help itemizing some of the major issues being discussed recently by civic education experts:

- Should we continue focussing on ‘political education’, or should we change to ‘education for democracy‘?
- Doesn’t it make more sense assuming that learners learn by constructing their individual interpretations of what we teach than believing that all learners collectively and simultaneously take over and mirror the units, systematic structures and categories being taught?
- In the context of this constructivist discourse and in the aftermath of PISA findings (which, as far as German students are concerned, have not turned out to be very positive) we are also having a debate on designing and implementing national curriculum standards for political education including appropriate means of assessment.
- Shouldn’t public civic education move beyond the public sphere and join the private market of competing providers, i.e. shouldn’t public civic education offer its services to ‘clients’ like civil society organizations, to scientific and political organizations, to companies, to all kinds of interest groups? (Civic education not only as a common but as private good as well?)
- Shouldn’t public civic education concentrate more on economic knowledge and skills to prepare students sufficiently for their careers in market economy?

Besides these recently discussed issues civic (political) educators in Germany have been controversially discussing ‘evergreens’ like these:

- What can civic education contribute to fostering the so-called European dimension in public education? Is developing something like a European identity really a rational perspective? Can European identity be taught/learned in public schools?
- Regarding gender-specific phenomena in politics (e.g. of politics as a male domain and thus reinforcing and reproducing gender-specific inequality), civic educators have been debating issues like: Which impact does civic education as a male domain have on girls and boys? Should we revise co-education? Do we need gender-specific or a gender-neutral civic education? Would gender-specific civic education only be an additional piece of contents to be added to the curricula, or would it be necessary to reflect the themes being taught in gender-terms on the whole? ...
- In competition with social science related subjects like history and geography civic education has always had a low standing, mainly because of its diverse appearance and profile (in less polite terms: ‘conceptual fuzziness’). How can this image be improved?
- What can we do to bridge the gap between highly elaborated theoretical discourses on civic education issues on the one hand and classroom needs on the other hand?
- Do we really need civic education as a subject? Couldn’t civic issues be covered by social-science-related subjects like history, geography or by economics?
- The connotation of public civic education has always been quite contradictory: On the one hand the need for political education and education for democracy has been self-evident to more or less everybody, especially to politicians, and in times of public scandals (like juvenile riots, increasing racism etc.) civic education seems to become even more prominent (either as the cause of or the savior from those ‘evils’);

i.e. often enough civic education is being blamed for deviant social developments or is being instrumentalized as 'social repair-shop'. On the other hand public civic education is being marginalized when it comes to resources (more civic lessons, improving material, teacher training, professorships etc.). – So what can we do to overcome this contradiction between overstressing and marginalizing civic education as a realistic and proper subject?

- Developments of the last 2, 3 decades, like social segregation, individualization, globalization etc., all in all developments which are likely to let man become object (instead of self-determined citizen) to processes which for him are neither transparent nor controllable, developments like these mean a tremendous challenge to civic education. So the question is what civic education can contribute to reclaiming enlightened citizens that will be able to sustainably participate in public policy processes and thus will construct their civil identities in a humane and democratic society. Without wanting to reinvent the pedagogical wheel, wouldn't it make sense intensifying our efforts to have more teachers finally practice those 'progressive' learning (not teaching) strategies that have been well known for almost a century (since John Dewey), and seem to be much more effective and sustainable than conventional instructing? I am referring to strategies like
 - experiential learning
 - project-based learning
 - problem-based learning
 - active, self-determined learning
 - cooperative, collective learning
 - issues-centered learning
 - inquiry

3. Best Practice: Experiential Civic Learning through 'Projekt: aktive Bürger'

In case you are interested and our chairman permits me to do so I could give you a brief impression of a good-practice example of a learning program which tries to apply 'progressive' learning strategies (it especially stresses the strategy of experiential learning). Some of you might know this program. It's called 'Projekt: aktive Bürger', the German adaptation of 'We the People ... Project Citizen', designed by the American Center for Civic Education. This program actively engages middle school students in learning how to monitor and influence public policy and encourages civic participation among students, their parents, and members of the community. As a class project, students work together and accomplish the following steps:

1. Students begin *identifying public problems* in their community that they think are important.
2. The class *decides* upon the *problem* to solve.
3. The students will gather and evaluate *information* about the problem from a variety of sources.
4. In the fourth step the students will examine *possible solutions* and alternative policies being suggested by political institutions, by groups of people, like non-governmental institutions etc.
5. Next the class will develop a *public policy* to solve the problem.
6. The students will develop a detailed *action plan*.

7. In the seventh step the students will develop a *portfolio* displaying the essential steps taken during the active learning process.
8. Now the class *presents* its *portfolio* to the public to show how they suggest to solve the public problem they investigated, and how they intend to influence the political institutions, governmental agencies, public administration etc. to adopt their proposed public policy.
9. The class will *actively participate in the public policy process* dealing with the problem. The class sticks to the political institutions and the public administration implementing the solution the class has worked out.
10. Finally the class *reflects* on their learning experience.

The original 'We the People ... Project Citizen' as well as the German adaptation 'Projekt: aktive Bürger' perfectly combine – as evidenced by the ten steps drafted – core-elements of experiential civic learning: Students are learning by (inter)acting, by cooperating and reflecting in the context of an authentic policy process dealing with an authentic public problem.

4. Infrastructure and Communication

Last but not least I should mention some aspects of the infrastructure and communication of public civic education discourse and practice in Germany:

Wide-ranging scientific discussion on the pedagogy (didactics) of civic education is being published in specific journals like *Politische Bildung*, *Gesellschaft-Wirtschaft-Politik*, *Politisches Lernen*, *Forum Politikunterricht*, *kursiv*, *polis*.

There are 2 major professional associations (besides the teacher unions), one primarily meeting the needs of practitioners (DVPB) and the other one having been founded recently by academic experts of civic education (GPJE).

And finally the Federal Agency and some of the State Agencies for Political Education have to be named as partly excellent providers of appropriate material for teachers and students, and of teacher-training courses, excursions as well as civic education conferences – among others the one we are enjoying right now ...

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