NETWORKING EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

Rethinking Citizenship Education in European Migration Societies

Political Strategies - Social Changes - Educational Concepts

Conference Paper

Contribution to Workshop 5, Session 2:
Intercultural Citizenship Education –
New Perspectives for Learning at Schools

„Consequences for Teacher Education and Classroom Practice"
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What is the problem? What are the challenges? And the solutions?

Before we can engage in any meaningful discussion about intercultural citizenship education, we must first take on the arduous task of agreeing on the diagnosis of 'the problem', the 'challenges' that arise out of them and the 'possible solutions' to these problems and challenges. If, as educators, we cannot reach some level of consensus on these, we will not be able to communicate meaningfully. For a well-informed discussion we will also need to better understand the on-going processes that effect education at a number of levels: society (including international developments and agreements), 'majority' and 'minority' communities, schools, school curriculum and teaching methodology, teachers and teacher training (pre-service and in-service), the students themselves, etc. At the most macro level, the level of society, education will be envisioned differently if policy makers refuse to acknowledge that we are living in a multicultural society and that this is something positive. At the most micro level, the level of the students, we can expect very different educational outcomes if students suffer from discrimination, low self-esteem, low expectations, low need for achievement, a sense of alienation, etc. All levels are complex and interrelated – they therefore defy easy solutions.

What are our aims?

In my many years of working with students, teachers, parents and policy makers, I have found that a good starting point is to focus on how they define the aims of education. Too often when I ask the question why we send young people to school, it takes quite some time for people to arrive at responses such as 'to become responsible global citizens', 'effective communicators,' 'to be a confident lifelong learner', 'people who are interculturally competent', 'creative problem solvers', 'critical thinkers' , etc. The 1998 Delors report refers to the core of these aims when it talks about: learning to be, learning to know, learning to do, and learning to live together.

　　Most often, the responses I do get are along the lines of 'get good scores', 'good preparation for

higher education and societal success'. These are then defined quite narrowly. In the USA, I often hear 'to prepare young people for economic success' and too often in Eastern Europe 'because it is the law!'.

It is not only the 'Delors-like' responses that can lead to discussions about how best to educate our young in a multicultural society. The tendency for large achievement gaps between 'majority' and 'minority' children in most European societies, as demonstrated by PISA scores, give cause for reflection on how things can be done better. Those 'stakeholders' who DO mention the 'Delors aims' (at some point) invite the question whether we are succeeding at reaching those aims and how to better structure learning environments to reach these aims.

Is multicultural education dead or dying?

There has been much debate about the most appropriate way to deal with the existing diversity in society. The debate does not only rage between ethnocentric, nationalist and deficit model proponents, on the one side, and those who favor a more appreciative and accommodating approach to diversity, on the other side. There is also, in my view, a destructive debate within the education community about how best to accomplish what is referred to in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as 'the full development of one's personality'. Perhaps terminology framed as 'citizenship education' and 'human rights education' is a viable way forward and can connect those advocating anti-racism, multiculturalism, reflexive multiculturalism, multicultural antiracism, critical multiculturalism, and interculturalism. The concept of 'tolerance' has already been abandoned it seems.

The United States, due to the civil rights movement of the 1960's, has seen the emergence of a forceful movement to implement multicultural education in schools. The emphasis is on 'diversity for diversity's sake', getting to know one's past (defined in an ethnic community sense) and empowerment of minority communities. At the micro level the aim has been to raise the self-esteem of young people from minority communities. The most radical representatives of this movement, like Beverly Tatum (Why are all the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria) even advocate separatism as a necessary development to gain full access to societal rights.

European developments have been different and focus on the 'intercultural' or the 'living together' aspect that Delors refers to. The emphasis has been on communication and interaction. The European Commission's 'Year of Intercultural Dialogue' (in 2008) fits well.

What about the classroom?

At the level of the classroom and in teacher preparation, many of these debates are unknown and feel uncomfortable. Studies throughout the European Union show that teachers feel ill prepared to deal with the diversity they encounter in their classrooms and that they would like the training and education to better address this diversity. This willingness to know more and be trained cannot be underestimated. The reality of European classrooms shows that too often teachers have to cope with a situation where 'minority' students indeed have low esteem, low educational expectations, are de-motivated, sometimes feel alienated and marginalized, and are somehow disconnected from the learning process. Too often there is indeed tension between 'majority' and 'minority' student groups. Too often, teachers are unaware how pervasive the situation is. They are also unaware of how their own biases, expectations, religious and class beliefs, etc. impact their students. So neither multicultural nor intercultural approaches should be abandoned. Instead, it is more useful in my view to strike a balance. And this balance can vary from place to place and time to time.

A similar discussion in the educational realm has been waged regarding whether to focus on similarities or differences, when it comes to culture and religion, for instance. In fact, both need to take place if we are to improve inter-group relations. Fortunately, there is much research that shows that focusing on commonalities and similarities first is the most promising way forward. Such a focus will help foster a key starting point to address controversial issues and existing tensions and distrust – a safe space for all where they and their opinions are respected. Without that safe space, it will be difficult to go beyond anything more than superficial and abstract discussions. Perhaps this is one of the most urgent first steps at the classroom level and a real challenge for teacher education – how do we best create the safe spaces that will allow all young people to have their voices heard and needs met in the multicultural classrooms of today and tomorrow?