Ethics, Sustainability and Responsible Citizenship in High School

Joel Haroldo Baade;Joel Cezar Bonin;Vera Lúcia Simão;Levi Hulse;Adelcio Machado dos Santos Santos

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Abstract

Citizenship defines the belonging of individuals to the society in which they live. It is understood that the complementary notions of ethics and sustainability must permeate citizenship today. Citizenship will gain greater expression when the individual leaves the household to be inserted in society through the vote and professional action. For this reason, the analysis of the profile of young people who are graduating from high school is representative. Thus, this analysis aims to characterize citizenship experiences in the city of Caçador-SC by looking at the reality of students of the third year of high school from the perspective of sustainability. Methodologically, the research is qualitative-quantitative as it uses mixed techniques. It is concluded that many young people are aware of the need for an ethical and sustainable life, but some habits still prevent them from engaging in committed actions towards the society expressed by these concepts.

Keywords: Ethics; Citizenship; Sustainability; High school; Education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Citizenship defines the belonging of individuals to the society in which they live. By representing

involvement and commitment to social causes, citizen actions lead to the construction of broader concepts such as active citizenship. There are, on the other hand, people who have little involvement in actions of collective interest; these individuals experience what is understood as passive citizenship. Another notion complementary to the idea of citizenship and is of interest to this research project is the one that expresses the concept of sustainability. Said otherwise, citizenship is not just engagement with collective causes, but the commitment towards collectivity based on the perspective of the development of a sustainable society. Citizenship, therefore, goes much beyond voting from time to time, it is rather a way of life that occurs in different spheres of existence, in public and private life, at home, at work, at school etc. Among the above-mentioned spheres, school stands out as an important social institution of collective life. Hans Jonas's notion of responsibility has been chosen as a theoretical base for this study.

Jonas is incisive regarding his formulation of a new ethical imperative for our time: "an imperative responding to the new type of human action and addressed to the new type of individual agency that operates it that might run thus: 'Act so that the effects of your actions are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life on Earth'" (JONAS, 2006, p. 47).[1] In other words, Jonas himself explains that "[...] the new imperative says precisely that we may risk our own life, but not that of humanity. [...] We have no right to choose the non-existence of future generations for the sake of the current existence, nor have we the right to endanger them" (JONAS, 2006, p. 48).

Hans Jonas provides this study with our first premise while the second one is the city of Caçador. Caçador is the largest city of Midwestern Santa Catarina. This city has a population of 75,812 people, according to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics – IBGE (2015). The same document shows that Caçador is an important cultural, economic and political center, having developed its economy through the extraction and industrialization of wood as well as through reforestation. However, this city presents development indices that show a need for attention. The last documented register dates from 2010 and shows that the city's Human Development Index is 0,735 (IBGE, 2015). This index may be improved with social agency and research aimed at citizenship and sustainability.

Caçador currently has approximately 2000 students enrolled in eight different schools, with two of those being private and six being public institutions. All schools offer regular half-day education. One of them offers Adult Education Programs and two offer full day education. Most students are enrolled in three public schools, with an average of 500 students per school. The others are enrolled in the two private institutions and in the three remaining public schools.

Caçador is not a reality isolated from others, yet, according to Santos (2005, p. 27) "globalization processes are phenomena with economic, social, political, cultural, religious and legal dimensions intertwined in a complex way." Thus, it is necessary to understand and assimilate the implications that the new world order imprints on individual and collective behavior in order to, thenceforth, grasp the meaning of what affects and happens in the society we live in and which we seek to understand and change with the aim of living well. Our current globalized world separates societies unequally: there is disproportional access to means of information as well as to means of education. Nonetheless, this reality is not completely perceived by people, although they are directly or indirectly victims of its consequences. By contextualizing such reality,

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1   Translator's Note: as there is not full access to the English version of Jonas's book, most quotes are free translations of the quotes in Portuguese, presented in the original article.

this research project aims to analyze experiences of citizenship by looking at the reality of the high schools of Caçador – SC with the purpose of (1) supporting future actions of the Ethics, Citizenship and Sustainability Research Group of Alto Vale do Rio do Peixe University and (2) suggesting public policies aimed at these students in municipal and state contexts. With the proposed analysis, we aim to recognize the way in which people, teachers and students of high schools of Caçador, behave and react when exposed to inequalities of opportunity and how they respond to and integrate themselves into offered opportunities. This research is especially justified because it concerns education towards citizenship from the perspective of sustainability in Midwestern Santa Catarina, specifically in Caçador – SC. However, it is necessary to consider that human incompleteness always maintains room for improvement, and citizen education from the perspective of sustainability is allied with that purpose.

Therefore, for a person to develop themselves, there must be the conscious search to become a historical, associative and cooperative individual. The practice of cooperation educates people and replaces individualism with a participative, solidary and humane mentality. According to some authors, human beings are by nature individualistic, weak and unable to develop on their own; for this reason, individuals need to associate, cooperate and collaborate with each other in democratically making a better life in solidarity. As humanity joins together to achieve progress, history is also build and cultural bonds are outlined. "Human history is the account of the development of emerging formats of both cultures and societies" (POUTIGNAT; STREIFF-FERNAT, 1998, p. 226).

Social change stems mainly from the influence of cultural factors, the environment context and political organizations. Cultural factors are the most important ones, since they include the effects of religion, communication systems and leadership (GIDDENS, 2003). Therefore, regarding the reality of Caçador (compared with other cities in similar conditions), we see that this scenario can be improved; in this sense, the aimed evolution is only possible as long as there is empowerment. Here, empowerment is necessarily linked to the idea of education, that is, if people want emancipation (and, in this case, evolution/progress), they need, undoubtedly, to have formal education.

Consequently, we consider that the present research project is correlated with the central idea of formal education, knowledge, empowerment and life change. In addition, sometimes we may infer that this goal is too vertical. For that reason, we aim to reduce this assertion as much as possible, for we want to start from principals' and students' experiences. Thenceforth, we seek to implement our project based on Paulo Freire's thoughts: it is necessary to know what people know first and then help them analyze their own life more clearly. Thus, in terms of research justification, we state its relevance because it addresses and links emancipation, education, ethics and sustainability in a single and collective research task.

2. OBJECTIVE

This analysis aims to characterize experiences of citizenship in the city of Caçador – SC by looking at the reality of third-year high school students from the perspective of the problematics of sustainability.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research population encompasses all high school units of Caçador – SC. The research subjects were

students of the third year of that level of education. Data was collected from a structured questionnaire.

The questionnaire was developed based on the fundamental categories of the project: responsibility (JONAS, 2006), sustainability (LOBE JUNIOR, 2014) and citizenship (CANIVEZ, 1991). These were divided into specific or variable questions in order to understand the practices of high school students and teachers and transcend a merely conceptual understanding of terms. Therefore, it was fundamentally important to observe the reality of these institutions; this task was predominantly done by members of the Research Group who are high school teachers in Caçador. The questionnaire was elaborated on *Google Docs* software, which allows for an automatic tabulation of results in an electronic spreadsheet. This type of archive format let us analyze and compare variables instead of merely quantifying results. Statistical knowledge allowed for a greater level of depth in the analysis and, consequently, for the acquisition of more meaningful results regarding the object of study. Quantitative models orientated this section of the research.

The documentary analysis was based on critical models of interpretation, in which doubt and the observation of the unsaid were present. The comparison with different sources was also an essential resource for the documentary analysis.

Lastly, to build the research results, we carried out a data comparison, which encompassed documental sources, observations, interviews and questionnaires. We understand that different research methodologies contribute to the understanding of the research object in different ways.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 267 students took part in the research by answering a printed questionnaire. Electronic questionnaires could not be applied due to the poor maintenance of the computer labs in public schools. Regarding the private schools, the major obstacle for electronic questionnaires was a conflict of schedules and the use of laboratories for other school activities. Moving entire classes to the laboratory could also cause dispersion and delay, for that reason, school coordinators recommended applying printed questionnaires.

4.1 Participant Profile

Third-year High school students of six institutions of Caçador – SC took part in the research. Five of those were public institutions, and one was a private school; their participation corresponded to 91% and 9% respectively. Fifty percent (50%) of the students were enrolled in the morning shift, 46% study at night and 4% in the afternoon. Fifty-one percent (51%) of the participants were male, and 49% were female. One participant did not answer that question. Most students (80%) were under 18 years old, 13% (35) were 19 or 20 and 7% were over 20 years old. Seventy-six percent (76% – 204) of the participants were born in Caçador; sixty-three (63) students (24%) were born elsewhere. Forty-nine percent (49% – 130) of the participants are full day students and have their expenses paid for. On the other hand, 47% of the students work and are financially independent, and 26% of those students are responsible for their families' sustenance. Only 4% of the students work and are not financially independent. All private school respondents are full day students, while many public school students work *and* study. The family income

of 31% of the respondents is less than two minimum wages a month; ninety-five (95) individuals (35%) have a family income between 2 to 4 minimum wages a month, and only 16% of them earn more than 5 minimum wages a month. Eighteen percent (18%) of the participants did not know the information about their family income. Fifty-five percent (55%) of the students live in households with 4 or more people.

4.2 Political Engagement

Twenty-six percent (26%) of the students became registered voters when they turned 16 years old, and 120 students (45%) have not been registered yet. In public schools, the percentage of students who hold a Brazilian Electoral Title was sensibly higher, which may be related to the need for this document for work purposes. Thirty-three percent (33%) of the respondents watch and pay attention to electoral propaganda, but the remaining 67% of them do not.

Regarding this topic, there was another open question to have participants manifest their understanding of politics. In order to analyze the results of this specific question, we used Wordle.net software, which builds word clouds based on text blocs. By inserting the answers into the software, Graphic 1 was created:

Graphic 1. The definition of politics.
Source: Research Data.

The results highlight the word "corruption", revealing feelings and attitudes of dismay at the political scenario of Brazil on the part of high school students. This dismay may also be related to the large number of students who have not registered to have an Electoral Title yet. Fifty-nine percent (59%) of the students have also stated that they do not discuss politics with their peers. On the other hand, 68% of them talk about and are concerned with social problems that afflict society. When it comes to the open question regarding the importance of taxes, the words "steal" and "money" appear very often. According to their understanding, taxes have been unidirectional, that is to say, citizens must pay taxes to the State, but they do not get what they are entitled to receive in return.

4.3 Consumption

The research found that the 61% of the participants eat animal origin products daily (meat, fish, eggs and dairy), while 38% of them consume those in a reduced rate, but at least once a week. Only 1% of the respondents (4) affirmed they are vegetarians. Participants use personal vehicles (50%) or public

transportation (27%) as means of transportation. Only 23% of them stated they regularly walk or ride a bicycle for their daily commutes. Only 15% of the participants take 5-minute showers (or less than that); the remaining students spend 5 to 10 minutes (42%), 10 to 20 minutes (35%) and more than 20 minutes (8%) in shower. The shower temperature is for the most part kept in the "hot" position (90%). Seventy-four percent (74%) keep the water running while they are using soap. Over half of them keep the lights on in empty rooms (55%), although it does not occur all the time. Some maintain their personal computers on when not in use (27%). The practice of reusing water is present among them, but it is far from being a daily reality. Twenty-one percent (21%) never reuse water, while 46% affirm they sometimes reuse it. The practice of waste sorting is done by 55% of the participants, but 22% still does not recycle or sort waste. Only 4% of the participants affirm they have no mobile phones, while 86% own *smartphones* and 30% consider they may change their phones within the maximum period of 12 months. In terms of consumption, no significant difference was found between public and private school students.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, we can affirm that, in general, participants have life habits that could be considered characteristic of a more sustainable citizenship. It is noted that there is greater care concerning waste sorting and disposal. Few participants would throw garbage on the floor or in inappropriate places.

It is understood that these habits are influenced by activities developed by school and focused on the development of politically appropriate behaviors. Results show that this work is more effective in the private schools that took part in the research.

However, students do not seem to be very conscious of these behaviors. Therefore, it is concluded that this set of actions is performed by the participants as a *habitus*, according to Bourdieu's concept. For Bourdieu, *habitus* is a predisposition to act in a lasting way and is beyond one's awareness. Bourdieu's *habitus* functions as a structured and structuring structure of the behavior of social individuals. Based on that, it was also possible to infer that behaviors which are not stimulated by school are usually less developed in terms of sustainability, for example, the shower time. Thus, we reiterate that conscience does not suffice to change an individuals' behaviors. There seemed to be little willingness to relinquish the amenities offered by technology and the lifestyle of today's society in favor of behaviors more closely aligned with a more sustainable lifestyle.

On the one hand, private schools seem to foster habits of sustainability more efficiently, but, on the other hand, private school students seem to depend on their parents or legal guardians for a longer time. Public school students, for instance, are more frequent users of public transportation and need to seek problem solving on their own, which is considered an essential element of active citizenship.

It cannot be categorically stated that public school students have greater autonomy than private school students. The matter seems to be relative. Thus, in some areas, the former seem to be more autonomous, while in others, the latter seem to be more independent. In all cases, public school students register to vote sooner than private school students. This research could not establish a reason for this. Eventually, the early registration of public school students as voters could be linked to their working needs. Private school students have not engaged in any paid activities yet and are full day students. At the same time, public

school students start working earlier, which, in some cases, may lead them to obtain their Brazilian Electoral Title earlier.

With respect to the students' gender, the participants were predominantly male, unlike official statistical data on population numbers. It was also observed that male students engage in paid activities earlier than female ones. In terms of gender, no significant difference was observed concerning the other questions of this research.

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