

Promoting Democratic Citizenship: an exploration of the current educational debate about what students at the beginning of the 21st century should be encouraged to understand by the concepts of 'democracy' and 'citizenship'

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Abstract:

The study refers to two main theories in the field - the theory that promotes citizenship education for national identity, and the other theory that foregrounds citizenship education as shared fate. This study proposes reflections and conclusions as a result of the exploration of the foregoing theories. In this way the study synthesises the positive elements of both theories and proposes recommendations to improve the effectiveness of education for citizenship.

Introduction

This paper sets out to explore the current debate in education of the concepts of 'democracy' and 'citizenship' in education. The main research method is a theoretical analysis of the main issues involved in the debate. The reference to the concepts of 'democracy' and 'citizenship' should not be taken as an end in itself but as a means to come up with reflections, conclusions and recommendations for a more effective curriculum for democratic citizenship. In this way the study attempts to formulate what the students should understand by these concepts and, more importantly, to use these concepts as tools to acquire skills that will enable them to live more fully and successfully as democratic citizens.

The exploration of the concepts is being performed by the researcher as part of an ongoing research in the context of the Maltese education system, and mainly referring to a small part of the syllabus of Systems of Knowledge, a compulsory subject followed by post secondary students who intend to continue their studies at the University of Malta. The overall aims of the programme of Systems of Knowledge is to introduce different values to students, and to start them thinking about these values and the role of these values in making them better citizens.

The research will initially focus on why there is a need to define or redefine the concepts of 'democracy' and 'citizenship'. When one defines democracy one is obliged to define citizenship, since one can be considered as a by-product of the other. If democracy is threatened then the status of the citizens in that society is threatened. The need to define democracy and citizenship is particularly felt when citizens experience a crisis in the way they are living. One of the main causes of such a crisis is the lack of participation by the younger generation (an example might be the lack of participation in general elections and MEP elections in the Western World), the dissatisfaction of the same generation with the current state of affairs, and the obvious present and future repercussions of this stalemate.

The first part of this paper identifies the need for a contemporary definition of the concepts of 'democracy' and 'citizenship'. The second part constitutes a philosophical analysis of the current debate. Special reference is made to two major trends in philosophy of education with particular emphasis on education for citizenship. The study explores a theory that foregrounds a definition of citizenship as that ingredient that promotes national identity. The study explores another theory that argues that the effects of citizen migration from one country to another, the effects of globalisation, and the need for a global stand on international issues (foremost in the list could be the movement of citizens in the EU), have reduced the possibility of a clear cut identity for every nation. The second theory promotes a definition of citizenship as shared fate, where citizens work together for a common positive goal, notwithstanding their differences.

In the final part, the study will propose reflections and conclusions. It will seek to synthesise the key elements of both theories within this debate and, rather than choosing one theory over another, the study will propose to adopt an open-minded approach to the situation, taking the positive elements of both theories, with the aim of improving the effectiveness of education for citizenship to prepare democratic citizens in a better way during the first decades of this new century. This reflection is made in view of the fact that changes in societies and therefore in concepts, is an ongoing process, and research should be seen as a tool rather than an end in itself.

Why define 'democracy' and 'citizenship' in education?

When one reflects on the different governments of the world, one is likely to conclude that most people in the world favour democracy over other types of government. In some countries citizens are trying to consolidate or improve democracy, while others aspire to achieve it. In this process one cannot but affirm the importance of education; an education of the people in principles and practices of democracy. If citizens are responsible for the upkeep of democracy, they should

acquire the values of the system and at the same time citizens should know about the shortcomings and the dangers that face democracy, first and foremost that of living in a democracy when it is not really a democracy, but a 'dictatorship' of the majority in parliament.

It is for this reason that when designing a new syllabus for democratic citizenship, one should ask questions like 'what are the basic concepts that citizens must acquire and use to know what democracy is, how to make it work, and why it is desirable?' Citizens should be able to distinguish democracy from other types of government, and in order to do this, citizens should be able to think critically and evaluate the extent to which their government and other governments of the world do or do not function authentically (i.e. as close as possible to the basic norms and values) as democracies. It is especially important in a democracy (as opposed to other forms of government) for people to understand what a democracy is so they can play a proper part in it as democratic citizens.

One of the most important tasks for any group, whether they are experts in education or politicians, and one that should be tackled as a priority although it might seem impossible, is to find consensus on definition and approach to this important issue. Davies (1999) has counted 300 known definitions of democracy associated with citizenship education. Kerr (2003) emphasises the "differing views about the function and organisation of society" (p.2). He further emphasises, the importance of redefining concepts like democracy and citizenship, which is "a by-product of a much larger, wide-ranging debate concerning the changing nature of citizenship in modern society and the role of education within that society" (p.2).

Kerr (2003) argues that towards the end of the twentieth century academics and commentators started arguing whether "a watershed has been reached, namely the end of modern, liberal democratic society and the onset of a less certain post modern world. They have begun to redefine the concept of citizenship in this post modern world (Kymlicka 1995; Callan 1997; Giddens 1998; Crick 2000; Beck 2000)" (p.2). This task of redefinition creates challenges, as Kerr continues, that are associated with diversity, location, social rights and participation. This study argues, that participation is critical. As society has evolved it requires every citizen to be responsible. Citizens should be encouraged not to leave everything to the government to decide and carry out. Every citizen should feel morally responsible for one's actions at the same time being aware of the needs and views of others and motivated to contribute positively to society. However in many societies one is likely to detect what Kerr (2003) calls "the worrying signs of alienation and cynicism among young people about public life and participation, leading to their possible disconnection and disengagement with it" (p.3).

Evans (1998) argues that "young adults are experiencing uncertain status and are dependent upon state and parental support for longer periods than would have been the case a generation ago...people have to find their own ways of reconciling personal aspirations with available opportunities and their own values in the domains of education, consumption, politics, work and family life" (p.105). This situation has created a generation of youngsters who lack a sense of security. This uncertainty, Evans argues "is not the result of knowledge itself – it is 'manufactured uncertainty'" (p.126).

After focussing on the main reasons why one should seek to define or redefine the concepts of 'democracy' and 'citizenship', and also to recognise their complex nature, this study will proceed to explore the ongoing debate in education about these two important concepts. The study will further explore the emerging schools of thought, and then different ways of defining the concepts, keeping in mind the continuously changing multicultural and global dimensions of societies in the world in the beginning of the 21st century.

The concepts of 'democracy' and 'citizenship': broadening the debate

As has been mentioned above, there are hundreds of definitions that one might refer to when exploring these concepts, and it is for this reason that this study will refer to definitions that are most adhered to in the west. It is well recognised that the European states, individually or as a European Union, have in these last years intensified their concern and effort to devise curricula that would be best suited to promote values within their societies, and to promote societal cohesion where the main topic of the day is federalism (e.g. Italy) and the dismemberment of nations (e.g. the Balkans), as we have known them during the last century.

The last decade of the twentieth century has seen atrocities committed in the Balkan conflicts in Europe that remind many of the holocaust of the Second World War. All this had obvious repercussions on the international community, and democracy has become even more a main focus of discussion and study, and therefore the need to redefine what has been taken for granted for many years. It is this same attitude, of "taking things for granted" that makes democracy so vulnerable.

Patrick (2000) argues that any debate about democracy should start with "minimal democracy" where one goes back to the roots of democracy, in Athens where it all started, studying what makes Direct Democracy, the positive and negative aspects, and move forward historically until our times, where today's Representative Democracies "are inclusive; [and where] most inhabitants of the realm may possess or acquire the rights and privileges of citizenship" (p.4). Huntington (in Patrick, 2000) defines minimal democracy as a political system "democratic to the extent that its most powerful collective decision makers are selected through fair, honest and periodic elections in which candidates freely compete for votes and in which virtually all the adult population is eligible to vote" (p.7). This definition implies an emphasis on popular sovereignty, or government by the consent of the governed, where the government is directly or indirectly accountable to the people.

With all the positive connotations of the above statements, one should point out therefore how important it is to prepare the populace for democratic citizenship. A government should strive to move democracy away from the type experienced in Plato's time, when "the 'democratic' system whose highest offices were allocated by lottery, and which had shown itself in the later stages of the war disquietingly vulnerable to the persuasive voices of irresponsible demagogues" (Melling: p.6). Those in power should strive to keep democracy away from the Machiavellian stance, calling the masses "the vulgar" and would cherish this political ignorance as breeding ground for more acquisition of power.

Following a survey (March 2004) by the researcher amongst five hundred undergraduate students in Malta, at the Junior College of the University of Malta, it was found that a significant 10.8% of these respondents who in fact had studied democracy in the course of their studies still think that our system is a Direct Democracy. This goes to show that even the students who were taught basic content had not grasped the main features of democracy, let alone all those who had no teaching about the subject at all.

With respect to the accountability factor, recent events in international politics, namely the Iraq War, have yet again shown that those who are in power many times try to give the impression that they are acting in the interest of the people in their country, and/or for so many different reasons and not necessarily in the interest of the people who elected them in power. These latest events have shown on the one hand that the electorate is likely to forfeit its powers once a government is elected, and on the other hand, that there are still political leaders who think that there is one type of democracy, and that this type can be exported to other nations through military intervention without even passing through the normal channels namely through the channels agreed upon by the United Nations. Democracy survives when the people choose it as their system of government, and it is always given a different moulding, depending on many aspects including the culture of the country where it is put into practice.

Notwithstanding this, it seems that many democracies in the world meet what Patrick (2000: 7) calls the “minimal standard” i.e. the basic requirements that are needed for a country to be truly a democracy. In a liberal democracy, protection for individual rights extends beyond political rights to fundamental personal rights, such as freedom of conscience and free exercise of religion, to mention a few. In liberal democracy the government is empowered by the people and limited by the supreme law of the people’s constitution (the same can be said for the new EU constitution), for the ultimate purpose of protecting equally the autonomy and rights of everyone in the country. Furthermore, in a liberal democracy there is majority rule with extensive protection for minority rights. According to Plattner (1997, p.180) a necessary transition from minimal democracy to liberal democracy is constitutionalism.

Constitutionalism is rooted in the use of a constitution, usually a written document, which Patrick (2000) adds “legitimizes, limits and empowers the government, which if democratic, is based on periodic election of representatives by virtually all the adult population” (p.7). The danger of liberal democracy lies in the fact that the representatives may become tyrannical for five years, as has been pointed out above. This is the worst thing that can happen in a democracy, i.e. for one to think that one is living in a democracy when in actual fact one is not. All this places a lot of responsibility on the electorate, the importance of choice and therefore the role and responsibility of citizens and the preparation of citizens through citizenship education, or education for democratic citizenship. It is no use giving rights of participation to citizens if one does not teach citizens knowledge, skills and understanding to be able to use that right. It is true that constitutionalism provides for the creation of institutions such as trade unions, but one must also be aware of what could happen if institutions become satellites with leaders and directors being appointed by the representatives in power. In this situation Herman Schwartz (1993) affirms, “whatever chance these countries have to continue developing into constitutional

democracies depends on strong, independent courts that can reel legislative and executive encroachments on their constitutions” (p.194).

It is for reasons like the one quoted above that Kerr (2003) argues “it is essential that citizenship education becomes a strong, evolving and lasting feature of the curriculum experience of all pupils in the 21st century” (p.7). And Evans (1998) refers to “the new forms of active citizenship” i.e. “to promote the highest forms of learning with understanding, critical skills, and above all, lifelong learning and inquiry centre stage. Knowing how is *not* the same as knowing why, and the social dynamics of the time demand that we know ‘why’ as well as ‘how’” (p.131).

Citizenship education should prepare students to understand, analyse and appraise democratic governments and to compare and contrast them with others who are not democratic. They must learn about the idea of separated and distributed powers, with an attention to an independent judiciary with the power to declare unconstitutional, when warranted the acts of government officials. Democracy also helps in building a national identity and at the same time gives citizens the rights and freedom to adapt and change if the need arises. Most democracies in the world help to create and preserve an identity, and citizens in these countries are used to having this identity. In fact this question of identity was a topical issue in 2003, when Malta was voting in referenda to join the EU, because euro-sceptics argued that by joining a union of different countries one tends to forfeit one’s identity. At the same time it is difficult to imagine how a society can maintain the same identity with all the movements of citizens, globalisation, and the way the world is evolving.

Heater (1999) affirms that this movement in favour of nationality and identity goes back two hundred years when “citizenship was an assertion of freedom from arbitrary power, and usually intimately bound up with patriotism” (p.95). And further states that, “modern citizenship became a coherent package containing rights, duties and a sense of tradition, community and identity” (p.99). Heater (p.103) argues that the emphasis on identity is felt “if a country is culturally homogeneous”.

Williams (2003) questions to what extent liberal democracy accommodates particular identities, and to what extent must they focus, instead, on inculcating a shared identity of democratic citizenship. Williams (2003) casts doubts on the implicit premise that meaningful citizenship and stable constitutional order must be grounded in a shared identity among citizens. She challenges the idea that we should understand citizenship in terms of allegiance to certain moral commitments, and the function of democratic education as the inculcation of these commitments.

Williams (2003) further proposes instead that because we see “a model of citizenship as shared identity, we should move toward an idea of citizenship as membership in a community of shared fate. [This community] of shared fate can yield a pragmatic conception of citizenship that is freed from the pernicious tendencies that are inherent to notions of citizenship as identity” (p.209). Modern multicultural societies are made up of people coming from different cultures who cultivate most of their culture as part of their identity, but at the same time they also forfeit some of that identity especially when it comes to values to belong to the dominant culture where they are residing and one value system. Contemporary democratic theory begins from the supposition that meaningful democratic citizenship

requires citizens that share a subjective sense of membership in a single political community (Kymlicka & Norman 1995).

One understands the commitment of writers who are in favour of the theory of citizenship for national identity, because it refers to values such as loyalty, but at the same time societies in the world are becoming so multicultural that one cannot think only about one identity but rather in terms of a community of shared fate. Carens (2000) affirms that “to belong to a political community is to *feel* that one belongs, to be connected to it through one’s sense of emotional attachments, identification and loyalty” (p.116). One should understand what one’s responsibilities are and work to fulfil these responsibilities. And Williams (2003) argues, “there must be some substance (such as culture and values) that binds them together in order that individuals should have a reason to identify with *this* political community rather than any of the other communities in the world” (p.210). Furthermore, media and information technology have reduced the globe to one whole, and created, Heater (1999) argues “a feeling of universal identity and the acceptance of universal morality” (p.137). Citizens in a country feel cosmopolitan, since they travel the globe and they feel at home in a number of countries. Then there are global issues, such as, man’s impact on the environment, that have created a new sense of what Heater calls “ecological interdependence” and “humankind’s stewardship of the planet” (p.137).

Having presented this debate, one must emphasise again the importance of citizenship education. Macedo (1995) argues that “liberal citizens do not come into existence naturally” (p226). It is important to emphasise the importance and need, as was pointed out above, of having a critical mass of citizens with appropriate moral commitments and affective attachments, and this cannot be left to chance. Macedo (1995), Callan (1997) and Feinberg (1998) argue that a just regime must not merely adapt itself to its citizens, but must consciously mould citizens who share a sufficiently cohesive political identity. Now, ‘to *mould*’, for some, might be questionable ethically, and others might ask if this is one of the aims and roles of education. This study affirms that ‘mould’ should be taken in a positive connotation, presenting curricula compiled democratically, and away from any form of indoctrination. Macedo (1995) points out that

“[t]he civic health of liberal democracies depends not simply on a clear division of spheres but on a deeper convergence of public and private values: a convergence of individual conscience and the public good powerful enough to ensure the political supremacy of public values and institutions against competing imperatives” (p.33).

Macedo continues, “a liberal polity must not rest on diversity, but on *shared political commitments weighty enough to override competing values*” (p.146). Culture shapes ideas and values, or these might themselves arise from a particular culture. It might also be both ways. Although one acknowledges diversity, one should also look for common ideas and values arising from different cultures that unify society.

For this reason citizenship education should aim to develop skills, capacities and virtues on which a healthy liberal democracy depends. Of special importance is the development of a capacity for critical reflection on matters of public concern, and individuals must be able to judge whether or not public officials are acting justly and

in the public interest. Those in favour of citizenship as identity, Williams (2003) states, “might argue that the price [of choosing this theory over that of ‘shared fate’] is worth paying if inculcating citizen identity yields the promised fruits: a loyal citizenry, ready to make sacrifices for fellow citizens, and stable democracy” (p.223). Having said that Williams argues “globalisation pulls apart those spheres of human activity whose boundaries have coincided with the boundaries of the nation state. The increasing dynamism of population flows mean that boundaries of political and cultural identity are no longer exclusive and singular” (p223).

Williams (2003: 229-30) moves on to propose a citizenship of shared fate, because we find ourselves in webs of relationship with other human beings that profoundly shape our lives. There are so many ways, especially through the media where we are continuously influenced by different norms and values. One acknowledges the fact that this is an automatic process that cannot be halted. It would be detrimental to try to ignore any changes that occur around us and seek to remain loyal to an identity that definitely includes negative elements and which at the same time could be improved in the process of continuous change, whether on an individual or national level. An example from the Maltese context might be that of people working in the tourism industry who come in contact with people coming from different cultures and who are undoubtedly influenced through observing and interacting with other ways of life, norms and values.

One may also argue that in the concept of promoting a national identity there is nothing that actually leads to a shared cultural identity or heritage and which in reality links human beings in bonds of interdependence and mutual accountability. This is especially the case when referring to the young generations. It appears that since the younger generations have been born in societies that are relatively prosperous, they cannot understand what the same societies went through to safeguard the rights and prosperity that they possess today.

At the same time, one may argue that for a country like Malta, with a history of colonialism and different dominations, it is still very early and more challenging (Independence 1964, British Forces left the Island 1979) to develop such a sentiment of a strong national identity and real responsibilities of citizens in society. It may in fact take much longer to evolve. Indeed, although one should attempt to safeguard a national identity, which is always automatically changing, one should not put aside the fact that it might be more beneficial to follow a community of shared fate, after analysing the implications of such a stand. Williams (2003) lists a number of advantages for this new type of citizenship, namely

“it does not presuppose that any particular community is the privileged or exclusive site of citizenship” (p.232)

“Although the idea of citizenship of shared fate implicitly affirms a specific set of citizen virtues, it does not require that we inquire into the content of an individual’s identity or the commitment of her conscience to know whether or not she is capable of good citizenship [...] Citizens should see themselves as participants in a project of cooperation that includes others who are different and distant from them” (p.233).

“The idea of citizenship as shared fate does not presuppose that all individuals’ and groups’ understandings of their place in a community of shared fate need to be the same as those of all other. [...] [I]ndividuals identify with the community in some way, it does not require that they identify in the same way” (p233).

These considerations on the various advantages, as they have rightfully been called, are appropriate since there is no one relatively prosperous country in Europe or in the world, that is not experiencing an influx of legal (from other European member states) or illegal immigrants (from Third World Countries), that ask to be integrated and become part of that same society. Most political leaders consider this movement as a financial problem. However they are urged to consider this also as a far more serious challenge, that of integration, and that of continuous change in society.

All individuals should rightfully learn about their civil and political rights, and that these rights are the product of struggles, ideas, experiments and more struggles. They should learn about the structure and process of the institutions of government, about the mechanics of political participation in the form of voting, lobbying, peaceful demonstration, petitions, and grassroots organising. Heater (1999) traces these struggles from antiquity to modern times, with emphasis of the American and French Declarations in the eighteenth-century and in the twentieth-century, the UN International Bill of Rights. Heater further emphasises that “a citizen, however, owes duties as well as enjoying rights; and we must ‘think globally’”. And further down quotes an Australian Cabinet minister Gareth Evans who in the 1980s “articulated the idea of ‘good international citizenship’ as ‘an exercise in enlightened self-interest’” (p.138) instead of plain egoism.

Children should particularly be encouraged to develop a sense of political agency, to understand themselves as contributing to an ongoing story of democratic self-rule with other people of different cultural and religious background, who form part of the society they live in and that they are able to work on projects of cooperation aimed at prompting shared ends. Here one could mention the role of individual or group community work or projects that give students the feeling of working on one’s own, and with others, and for oneself and for others. In this way one would be integrating the individual with the communitarian feeling, with a feeling of sharing and giving rather than only receiving.

Williams (2003) concludes that it is important “to highlight the connections between local diversity and shared national institutions of self-rule, and self-protection, though not to the exclusion of local, regional, global and trans-national institutions. [...] Ideally children will emerge from this process with common knowledge and realised capacities that will enable them to act together as citizens” (p.241).

Reflections and Conclusions

A number of reflections arise as a result of this exploration. A key reflection of the concepts of ‘democracy’ and ‘citizenship’ is that there is a great need for continuous reflection on these concepts. Research in this field should be seen as ongoing rather than as a finite issue. The more one delves into the subject, the more one understands that there cannot be one definition of any concept over time, and that

there are theorists who are redefining concepts and coming up with new ideas and studies that update already existing work with contemporary situations.

Evans (1998) emphasises the need for 'future-oriented' education. The responsibility lies on those who are formulating curricula, here with special reference to democratic citizenship. Evans asks, what do we have to do to live in a world of

“‘manufactured uncertainty’. We must constantly use information to engage with the world and we have to deal with the flood of information and views with which we are daily bombarded. In particular, more critical engagement with science and technology is needed” (p.130)

Evans (1998) also argues in favour of a transformative, not reproductive type of education. The role of education should be at all levels “to develop educated attributes. These incorporate core skills, key skills and transferable skills” (p.130). And Evans continues, “being useful and being virtuous are important – but the overriding aim of education must be to produce a society consisting as far as possible of persons who have independence of mind and who are morally free. The health and long-term preservation of the democratic state is dependent on its members” (p.135).

It is important that students learn about the historical and theoretical content of the origins of direct democracy in antiquity, and about the present day representative democracy, but they should also learn and truly understand what their responsibility as democratic citizens is, not only in elections but all year round. The Crick Report (1998) suggests political literacy as one of the fundamental skills to help students learn about effective participation and how to make themselves effective in public life through knowledge, skills and values. Crick (2000) further defines the term 'political literacy' as “a compound of knowledge, skills and attitudes, to be developed together, each one conditioning the other [...] a practical understanding of concepts drawn from everyday life and language” (p.61). With respect to political literacy, Osler (2000) argues that students require “an appropriate pedagogy based on active participation and active learning” (p13).

The challenge lies, as has been quoted above, in teaching students to become democratic citizens. One of the issues that can be taken as an example is to question whether in a democracy citizens should be free to vote or not to vote in national elections or for elections for the European parliament. An interesting emerging debate could evolve around the question whether citizens should be free to vote or not for a European Constitution, in view of the fact that this study has emphasised the importance of the role of the constitution in a democracy. This research is in agreement with the statement that every right carries a duty with it and the duty here is to safeguard popular sovereignty, especially when one knows that decisions will always need to be taken, and that they will always affect the citizens directly or indirectly whether one votes or not. If citizens do not take up their duty to vote, they are forfeiting their responsibility in upholding popular sovereignty as has already been argued.

One might argue that there are more ways of showing disapproval to government policies than adopting a laissez-faire attitude including deciding not to exercise the right to vote, that will get no one anywhere. Kerr (2003) while listing the

Key Challenges for Citizenship and commenting about the “transformative challenge”, points out that the challenge here is two-fold: “to understand our roles and responsibilities as citizens in a modern democratic society, but also to think about the consequences of our actions” (p.8). In this regard Evans (1998) points out that

“[o]nly education which develops citizenship and competence in their maximal senses, and promotes favourable conditions for their practice, will ensure empowered and participatory communities able both to support the successful pursuit of individual projects and to play their part in the social and political processes which will shape the socio-economic scenarios of the future” (p.135).

Therefore, in line with the debate about the concepts of ‘democracy’ and ‘citizenship’, particularly where countries or schools could seek to mould students through education for citizenship, whether towards national identity or a community of shared fate, one may again refer to the Crick Report (1998) which argues that in developing a national identity, there are new opportunities to develop a more rounded curriculum, where questions of identity and cultural development are balanced with a knowledge and understanding of human rights and democratic practice. While one should work hard to create and safeguard a country’s national identity, students should also be increasingly prepared to accept an idea of a community of shared fate since there are many influencing agents that emphasise diversity in our evolving societies. In this way citizens would be urged to look for unity in diversity.

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