Citizenship Education in the European Curricula

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Abstract

Recent comparative studies made in different European countries, emphasize the inclusion of citizenship in the curriculum as a specific topic, using different approaches and learning methods. According to Eurydice (2005), this topic can be offered as an independent subject that can be mandatory or optional, or integrated in one or more subjects. It also includes the ability to teach the contents in a cross-curricular way, so that the citizenship education’s principles appear in every area of the curriculum. Likewise, the citizenship education’s objectives are formulated in a different way in each country, according to the national context, traditions, cultural heritage and above all, depending of the curricular approach. In this paper we analyze different European curricula, to know how they work with the citizenship education, and we establish reference frameworks that can be useful to be included in a curricular level.

Keywords: Comparative education, Educational Organization, Competences’ learning, Citizenship education.

1. The importance of citizenship education in the European context

The recommendations made by the Council of Europe in 2002 for the Democratic Citizenship Education, suggest the need of its inclusion in every level within the educational system, either as a specific subject or as a cross-curricular topic. These recommendations highlight the multidisciplinary nature that this education must have, by being linked not only to the contents learning, but also to the development of attitudes and abilities, which will provide to the students the possibility to actively participate within the society.

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In this regard, the latest country-comparative studies reveal the inclusion of the citizenship education as a specific topic within the curriculum. However, there are multiple approaches and learning procedures, which change from country to country, and that vary according to the educational level where it is taught and to the curricular organization. As reported by Eurydice (2005), this subject can be offered as mandatory or optional, or integrated in one or more subjects, generally from the Social Sciences, for example History or Geography. There is also the possibility to teach it as a cross curricular topic, so that the citizenship education’s principles appear in every area of the curriculum, avoiding that the different approaches exclude each other. Also, the citizenship education’s objectives are formulated in a different way in each country, according to the national context, traditions, cultural heritage, the chosen curricular approach – independent, optional or cross curricular subject – and the students’ level of participation (Eurydice, 2005). Furthermore, they can be comprehended in the following three categories, which act as a logic sequence for the contents’ review (Eurydice, 2005, pp. 23-26):

- The first category refers to the theoretical knowledge acquisition –human rights, democracy, political and social institutions, cultural diversity, etc.-, mainly focused on developing a political culture in the students. To that end, we turn to the information’s transmission, where the student is a passive subject whose performance can be easily measured with tests or exams.

- The second category implies the students’ development as responsible citizens –so they learn to respect themselves and others, to solve conflicts peacefully, to develop a global perspective of their society, etc.-. Their participation allows them the development of shared attitudes and values in the society, characteristic of a responsible and aware youth. The students’ attitude is more participative and therefore, the evaluation of these objectives is more difficult.

- The third category aims to promote the youth’s active participation through their inclusion in the social, political and cultural life. We are talking about the development of the necessary competences to participate in a constructive and critical way in their community. For this purpose, it is suggested that the students experiment the democratic principles in a practical way, providing them opportunities to put their civic commitment into practice, inside and outside the classroom. The idea is to combine in this level everything they learn in the previous ones, because their knowledge will help them to understand and improve their active participation.

Even though these broad objectives can be applied in every country, their implementation will vary from country to country, because the idea of citizenship education is different according to the specific characteristics of each educational system, and to the use of different concepts of citizenship, which influence their curricular reality. Thus, we will gather the contents of the Citizenship Education subject – with this name or an equivalent one- in Spain, France, United Kingdom, Finland, the Nederland, and Italy.

2. Citizenship education in the European curricula

Spain promotes a high-quality, inclusive, integrative and demanding educational system, that guarantees equal opportunities and enables every student to develop their highest potential. Thus, with the approval of the latest educational law (Organic Law for the Improvement of the Educational Quality), the Citizenship Education subject changes its name and becomes an optional subject. In primary school the students’ parents or legal guardians will choose between 2 subjects: Religion or Social and Civic Values. In high school, keeping the optionality, the parents or legal guardians will be able to choose between Religion and Ethical Values. In both educational levels, the suggested values seek that the students know the mechanisms of the democratic life, avoiding any controversial matter of the country’s political and social reality, leading to a setback in the legislation.

In France, the basis of the theoretical and practical knowledge for the social and civic competences must complete the continuous training. The construction of their personal and professional future, and make possible the practice of the free citizenship within the society. In order to achieve all of the above, parents and students put their trust in the school as a transmission vehicle which encourages the social life’s effective and constructive participation, provides full rights to the students and consolidates the principles for violence rejection. Therefore Citizenship Education is considered as a school subject with a national, mandatory and universal application. In this regard, the Ministry of Education gives clear guidelines about the schedules, principles, purposes, data and reference documents; starting from pre-school education when it is expected that the students learn the basic civic rules. In the primary education it is known as “Civic and moral education” and it has a cross curricular perspective; one hour distributed in all the subjects from the 3rd to the 5th school year (Eurydice, 2005, p. 72). During this stage the students learn the moral principles, the consciousness of concepts like duties and rights, the social customs, and the
cooperation in the classroom. Besides, they learn to recognize and respect the Republic’s emblematic symbols – the Marseillaise, the three-colored flag, the Marianne’s sculpture, and the Freedom, Equality and Fraternity principles-. It also includes values and symbols from the European Union as the basis for building an individual self-esteem and respect towards the personal integrity, through the Civil Rights Letter (Feyfant, 2010). In the lower secondary level –college- it is known as “Civic Education” and it works with History and Geography as an integrated approach, half an hour a week during the 6th school year. During this school year they encourage the principles of diversity and equality, the conception of individual and collective freedom, the justice, and the basic principles for a democratic citizenship –values, principles and symbols of the Republic and the European Union, as well as the right to vote- (Feyfant, 2010). In the higher secondary level –lycee- is known as “Civic, Legal and Social Education” and it is an independent subject, integrated in a teaching load of one hour per week. Its basis is found in the citizenship notion, which is associated to the civility, the labor integration, the social relationships, the political participation, the citizenship practice, the changes in science and technology, the demands for justice and equality, and the construction of the European Union. Therefore, citizenship in the French curriculum promotes a predominant educative value: the school as a learning institution of political mechanisms.

The citizenship education in the United Kingdom has as purpose the improvement of their citizens’ moral atmosphere, in order to favor the students’ spiritual, cultural, mental and physical development, in their school and community life. Therefore, this subject emphasizes the participation in local matters and in voluntary work, since they believe that the youth’s emotional and interest closeness generates more motivation and better results to make a decision that will affect the rest of their lives. Thus, the Citizenship Education is considered as a non-mandatory subject for students between five and eleven years old, and as a mandatory, specific and basic subject for students between eleven and sixteen years old; the institutes are the ones who decide the organizational method for this subject. During the first years –from five to eleven- the Citizenship Education programs expect to increase the students’ self-confidence, their responsibility consciousness, and their citizen meaning, in order to be able to respect the rules, listen to others and respect the differences (Feyfant, 2010). During the second period –from eleven to sixteen- the objectives of the Citizenship Education focus on providing the students the necessary knowledge and abilities to perform an active role within the society, through the deepening in matters such as the knowledge of parliamentary democracy, the electoral and judicial system, human rights, and the rights and duties for everyone as a particular individual. At the same time, it supports the respect towards the different national and religious identities, ethnical groups, and encourages the critical thinking and the cooperative work (Feyfant, 2010). Consequently, the predominant educative principles and values of the Citizenship Education in the United Kingdom are based on the acquisition of abilities, social skills, self-knowledge and personal development.

In the case of Finland, the Citizenship Education supports the students’ autonomous development, to give a critical vision of the society they are part of. In the curriculum of the lower high school –from seven to nine years-, the Citizenship Education is an independent subject and also a cross-curricular topic, where matters such as attitudes, values and active participation are gathered, but where the political culture is not included (Eurydice, 2005). In the upper high school, this subject’s curricular organization keeps the two complementary approaches, as an independent and as a cross-curricular subject (Feyfant, 2010), by developing educative programs where the youth participation is highly relevant, along with the respect towards nature, and the European culture. Therefore, the educational values that prevail in the school are those that encourage the ability to know the culture and the national values.

Working with Citizenship Education in the Nederland, is through an integrated approach with the environmental subject, and cross-curricular with the rest, keeping in mind three contexts: classroom, school and community. The students must practice their active citizenship in each and every one of them. In primary school and lower high school the Citizenship Education’s objectives promote the politic culture, the citizenship values and attitudes, and the active participation. They work with topics related to the global citizenship and cultural diversity; the students are the ones who select the topics to review during class for a later team work, debate and discussion. Besides, as a method to learn about citizenship, the students have student councils, peer mediation systems, they are responsible for the center’s facilities preservation, they organize and manage the newspapers and sport events, and they can participate in the school’s general policy. Therefore, the idea is to perceive the school as a participation center to exercise an active participation within it and its urban surroundings, in order to develop service experiences for the community and even for work (Nelson & Kerr, 2006).

In Italy the “Education for Civic Coexistence” is introduced as cross curricular topic in primary school and lower high school, and as an independent subject in upper high school with a duration of 5 years and with the purpose of
answering its constitution plans. Starting from this and during the development of the educational training, the institution attempts to develop a political culture that will allow the students to become citizens with full rights and duties. Likewise, they encourage values and attitudes towards the respect for their country and the European citizenship, and they promote the active participation.

3. Reference frameworks to include citizenship education in the curriculum

After being established some of the general guidelines of the Citizenship Education in the European context, Audigier (2006) indicates a clear division between the northern European countries and the ones from the Mediterranean, which supports the idea that the countries from the first category give more freedom to the students and center their educational practices in a better way than the countries from the second category, which are more influenced by the formal curriculum that is mainly ruled by the content.

For instance, Kerr (2002) gathers three important reference frameworks to include the Citizenship Education in the curriculum, which deserve to be considered according to the various European curricular proposals. A first reference framework gathers the values and tensions regarding the realization of the curriculum. In some countries, with Spain among them, there is a discussion about the inclusion of this subject in the curriculum as a way to promote the students’ indoctrination. On the other hand and from different sectors, it is declared that the state’s intervention in the development of certain attitudes and regulations violates the choice of the parents to educate their children according to their values (Martin Cortes, 2006, p. 36). However, the problem does not lie in the state’s intervention, but in the teaching of particular values and the exclusion of others. From this point of view and from all the sectors, they reject the education of specific political ideological values, because they sustain that the purpose of this education is not about ideological indoctrination of students. For this purpose, the agreement of all the political forces is needed, with the intention of developing this subject, avoiding the distortion of its original objective. Kerr (2002) criticizes those curriculums where the values taught in the Citizenship Education are too explicit, because they might indoctrinate the students. However, he also opposes to the presumably neutral curriculums because they do not provide efficient mechanisms for the students, to solve the problems in the real life.

In his research, he classifies the curriculums in three categories: curriculums that make minimal reference to the pluralism and Constitutional values; curriculums where the national values are expressed in general terms and the authorities are responsible of its development; and very centralized curriculums where the values are clearly expressed and in detail. In this way, Martin Cortes (2006) gathers some of the citizenship values that the social and political sectors should agree on:

- A citizenship that gets involved in democratic politics and that is not perceived as indoctrination but as the knowledge, strength and cohabitation in the democratic states by encouraging the tolerance and participation and its power of decision in public matters.
- A tolerant citizenship where the social cohesion, the community coexistence, and the respect for cultural, political and religious differences is encouraged. It is about making an effort to attain the participation of the more disadvantaged sectors and not only of the majority class, by working in the classroom matters as the everyday reality and trying to eradicate social status discrimination.
- A global citizenship that is not exclusively linked to the state reality but that it gathers a universal perspective, in accordance with the globalization processes that we are going through.

A second reference framework to keep in mind for the inclusion of the Citizenship Education in the curricula is the one that gathers different interpretations of the citizenship education and that works with opposite ideas: the small interpretation based on the classic civic education, and the big one that constitutes the citizenship education. The classic civic education is based on the finished and basic school knowledge that includes history, geography and the country’s constitution, and where the student’s interaction is practically nonexistent. It also starts from the subject’s individualist perspective and puts it ahead of the social citizen perspective. Martin Cortes (2006) argues that this model “restricts the political activity to an elite or a reduced group of citizens” (p. 34). With these characteristics the Civic Education bases its teaching in the contents’ transmission, mainly cross curricular, without clear objectives, a lack of student’s participation and giving the teacher the main role.

On the contrary, the citizenship education pretends not only to provide information to the students, but also to offer them citizenship’s participation and comprehension mechanisms, inside and outside the classroom, with the purpose of being able to create projects that they can apply in their community. In such way, he emphasizes in the educational processes and not only in the knowledge, giving priority to the students before the teacher, and whose
relationship must be based on the critical reflection and in the interaction as a comprehension mechanism. Besides, from this approach the citizenship education must be constituted with particular values that are stipulated in the school project, mainly through a specific subject that contains the procedures, values and contents.

Even though the development of both approaches does not happen in a pure state, each one will try to accomplish different objectives; therefore they will gather different implications regarding students’ knowledge, attitudes and citizen values.

The third and last reference framework gathers the purposes and objectives of the citizenship education in the school context and establishes three main guidelines. The first one talks about the citizenship training based on the transmission to the students of the necessary information regarding the country’s history, geography and politics. The second one stipulates the citizenship education through the participation and experiences in the school and the locality. And the third one gathers a citizenship education that contains the two previous ones and its purpose is to provide the necessary tools, abilities, competences and values to the students, which allow them to actively participate in the responsibilities they will face in the adult life. This third guideline would be desirable to understand the concept of citizenship education in the broadest sense.

As it is expected, transferring all these citizenship education’s training perspectives to the classroom, particularly as a subject, implies the emergence of a series of problems in the teaching-learning process that requires the commitment of the political authorities and the social sectors, with the purpose of reverting such problems into a better education and citizenship participation.

References


