

Chapter 11

Civic and Citizenship Education in the European Context: Evidence From Research and Open Issues

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aims at illustrating and discussing relevant and recent initiatives implemented at European level in the field of civic and citizenship education, the findings of research carried out in this area by international and European organizations, and some possible developments to enhance and to strengthen civic and citizenship education at a school level. The focus is on school and on formal education. In the first part of the chapter, the main programs and initiatives promoted by the Council of Europe and by the European Union are illustrated. In the last part of the chapter, therefore, the initiatives related to the so called “competences for citizenship” and the implications of a competence-oriented approach in the field of CCE are examined.

INTRODUCTION

During the two decades since the late 1990s, civic and citizenship education has become a common goal of education and school policies in Europe. At the same time, as several studies have noted, civic and citizenship education (CCE) is one area of education where the gaps among declarations of principles, official curricula, implemented curricula, and school practices are large. A risk of increasing rhetoric about citizenship education has been identified to be a consequence of a lack or weakness of implementation measures of the policies in this field and several challenges that CCE faces, which are mainly related to the relations among formal, informal and non-formal curricula; to school organisation and participation; and to teacher training and teaching methods (Birzea 2000; Council of Europe 2004). This risk becomes even more serious when considering that CCE is not a “neutral” issue but by its nature is influenced by differences that exist across and within national contexts and by social and political conditions.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-7110-0.ch011

The challenges that contemporary democratic European societies are facing, such as growing intolerance and prejudice towards minority ethnic and religious groups and immigrants, increasing support for populism and new forms of nationalism together with the increasing distrust of traditional forms of political participation, represent serious threats to democratic institutions in Europe. School education, in general, and civic and citizenship education, in particular, are still powerful tools for tackling these challenges.

In this perspective, this contribution aims at illustrating and discussing relevant and recent initiatives in civic and citizenship education implemented at the European level, the findings of research performed in this area by international and European organisations, and some possible developments to enhance and strengthen civic and citizenship education at the school level. The focus is on school and formal education.

In the first part of the chapter, the main programmes and initiatives promoted by the Council of Europe and by the European Union are described. Then, the results of the International Civic and Citizenship Study (ICCS) promoted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement are presented in comparison with the results of studies performed by Eurydice on citizenship education in the education systems of the European Union. As the recent study of the Council of Europe on competences for democratic culture noted (Council of Europe 2018), effective civic and citizenship education needs to clarify which skills and competences are required for citizens to actively and critically participate in culturally diverse democratic societies. In the last part of the chapter, therefore, the initiatives related to the so-called “competences for citizenship” and implications of a competence-oriented approach in the field of CCE are examined.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE AND OF THE EUROPEAN UNION IN THE FIELD OF CIVIC AND CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

Both the Council of Europe (CoE) and the European Union (EU) have had and still have great influence on citizenship education in Europe. Both organisations contributed to going beyond a national idea of citizenship and of citizenship education and to affirming some fundamental principles and values that inform this field of study. A detailed description and analysis of the official documents, studies, activities of the two organisations is far beyond the purposes of this contribution. Nevertheless, it is interesting to analyse some peculiar features of their activities and proposals and reflect on various facets of citizenship education as it is conceptualised at the European level. Some common aspects of the proposals of the CoE and EU will be further explored in paragraph 3.

The Council of Europe Programmes and Activities on Education for Democratic Citizenship and on Human Rights Education

Education for democratic citizenship (EDC) and human rights education (HRE) have been two of the priority areas of the Council of Europe since 1997¹. The focus on the democratic dimension of citizenship education is related to the attention paid by the Council of Europe to the processes of democratization involving the Eastern European countries during the 1990s, after the fall of the Berlin wall. The focus also indicates the awareness of the challenges that the so-called “established democracies” were facing (such as the decline of participation in elections and the decrease of people’s trust in traditional forms of political representation).

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