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Introducing civic and social education in French upper secondary school (*lycées*)

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From the end of the nineteenth century to 1999 there was no civic education in French *lycées* (upper secondary schools). This resulted in a perception that *lycées* were reserved for the bourgeoisie: the bourgeois young were supposed to develop civic consciousness through humanities (Greek and Latin authors), through history, and through their familial education. However, civics did exist in primary schools, and there was also sporadic civics teaching in *collèges* (lower secondary education), most often when the political context seemed to require it. Over the last 15 years changes both in school and in society have altered this situation.

From the 1950s onward there has been a general tendency to democratise secondary education. In the 1980s the Ministry of Education decided that 80% of students *must* reach the level of *baccalauréat* (including the technological or vocational/professional baccalauréat); this objective opened the general *lycées* to young people of different socio-cultural origins, instead of only to those from the upper and upper middle classes[1]. At the same time, several enquiries reported a growing indifference to politics, an increasing critical view of politicians and political debates, and a weakening attachment to common values. Politicians and media displayed anxiety about individualism, communitarism, violence, and incivility among the young and in schools. These attitudes were interpreted as a crisis of social cohesion and a danger to democracy. In this context, teaching civics may well seem a solution to social and political problems.

A further stimulus to a change in teaching may have been provided by a critical reflection of secondary students on their education: in a large consultation of upper secondary students in 1998, they indicated (among other things) their will to study more 'real' social problems and current events, to be given more responsibility, to be more free to debate in lessons.

In the summer of 1999 official texts defining civic, social and legal education for the lycées were published (*éducation civique, juridique et sociale* (ECJS)). This education is compulsory. The curriculum consists of general topics and concepts and the methods are intended to develop the autonomy of students through research and debate. In spring 2000 a study was conducted by the INRP (National Institute for Pedagogical Research) to analyse the first year of implementation and especially the debates. It was a short study, conducted with a small sample, but the results are significant.

The title 'Civic, social and legal education' may be understood as a testimony to the evolution of French citizenship: should citizenship be understood as only political, or must it enlarge itself to embrace a 'social' citizenship? The dominant concept of the period from the Revolution to the Third Republic was of political citizenship: in this period it was thought that the main social problems should be resolved through radical

1 The lycée was of course not legally reserved for those children, but most of the students in upper secondary schools were from these classes because they were the most likely to achieve the necessary qualifying educational level.

political change, i.e. the institution of a republic, of a democracy or of a socialist regime (‘*la Sociale’*). The vote was at the core, and the supremacy of the common interest over those of groups and/or individuals was asserted as the basis of political choice and of citizens’ duties. Within this framework the State was the sphere for exercising citizenship. Even if local identities were important, local and regional issues linked the citizen to the Nation-State and local political issues reflected national ones. Such was the official basis of national unity and solidarity and of public debate.

This conception was reasserted during the twentieth century, but in the last two decades it has been questioned and has evolved.

The concept of the State as the only important body to propose and realise political projects has been challenged by the regions; and not only by those with a strong and ancient identity, but by more recent administrative creations. And of course it is well known (and sometimes deplored) by every citizen that most of political, economical, cultural and environmental decisions are taken at the European or even at the global level. National citizenship is no longer the only one: European citizenship has superposed itself over the national one. The question of the non-French migrants’ vote in local elections is debated, and in some cities foreigners participate in the consultative assembly. This last point constructs a social category (‘migrants’) as a political one, which is not at all usual in France and which contradicts the French understanding of a political society. A change in citizenship practices can also be discerned, especially among young people. The young do not and will not situate themselves as militant in political parties or trade-unions; they are too few to influence elections, and make decisions less with reference to parties and programmes than to their personal understanding of the political stakes (this may be a good thing, but is counter to French tradition); and they support marginal political movements such as ‘*Motivé/es*’ for example. They do, however, take more part in social and humanitarian actions, both at local and global level. Their involvement in associations for solidarity, for management of their district’s interests, for the environment; their spontaneous participation in demonstrations for student rights, migrants’ rights and for human rights is increasing. They seem less interested in a political than in a social citizenship.

These changes are taken in account in the prescribed contents of ECJS. The general themes are

- 1st year From social life to citizenship
- 2nd year Institutions and practices of citizenship
- final year Citizenship and the test of changes in the present world.

More precisely the topics suggested address some of the major questions regarding citizenship, e.g. ‘citizenship and integration’ (explicitly including the question of nationality), ‘European citizenship’, and ‘the different forms of intervention of citizens in political life’. Suggested topics for discussion include European elections, the rights of minorities, political corruption, urban violence, and the unemployed in addition to more traditional themes such as racism and discrimination. These topics are very new in French compulsory teaching - new because they are openly political, and so contrast strongly with a tradition of neutrality in schools. They are new too because there is no consensus in France on these topics: they divide society, and are sometimes inflammatory.

Official texts insist on the obligation to study and to debate in a 'non polemical way', but this may be more a concession to tradition, or a formal opposition between 'polemical' and 'reasoned', than a realistic requirement. The texts explicitly point out that knowledge has to do with political, social and/or economical issues.

The ways of teaching and studying ECJS also reflect the evolution of perceptions of citizenship. The ECJS is not intended as civic instruction to inculcate principles and knowledge of institutions in students who will *later* be citizens. The citizen is no longer considered only as one who observes law and who votes. S/he intervenes in public life; that is to say that s/he is able to form an opinion and to argue, to take part in discussion, to have initiatives. To become a citizen is to exercise competencies through searching for information, through debating, and through intervening in social and political life. Such practices are prescribed for ECJS[2]. The official text of 1999 is very critical of traditional methods of teaching. It denounces as counter-productive for citizenship the passivity of students learning knowledge presented by an authority (the teacher), without having to research, to reflect, or to reconstruct it. What students learn from such teaching methods is that the best way is to delegate choice to Those Who Know: students are 'formed as passive citizens'. The right way to develop their abilities to be citizens is to give them a great deal of responsibility for acquiring and practising knowledge. In this concept, the teacher is no longer the Authority holding knowledge, but a/the guarantee that the debate will be relevant, deep, sensible, fruitful. The main actors are the students. In perhaps half of the debates that we have observed, the teacher do not intervene at all.

To work on social problems or 'real' political questions gives students an opportunity to link life outside the school with knowledge acquired in the school. Several recent enquiries into school sociology and into history and geography didactics have pointed out that this is not very often the case at present. A large proportion of young students, asked to tell what they have learnt and where, omit school, or say that what is really important has been learnt outside - through their family, through their fellows, through everyday life. Speaking and arguing about Europe, 15-18 year-olds do not refer to knowledge acquired at school (even after studying these questions there for weeks or even months) but to news and personal experiences. Referring to some active schoolwork about Europe, students said that it had changed their approach to Europe in some ways but that it was not really useful outside the classroom. Enquiries about students' attitudes to history show that the level of knowledge is not correlated with the attitudes. Such results are very disturbing: school subjects (especially history, geography, and the other social sciences) are legitimated by their claim to provide students with the means to understand the present world and to make links to the past.

It may be that ECJS will act as a catalyst to an understanding that personal experience and news are not enough to provide an understanding of the world; that it needs to be criticised, to be confronted with other sources of knowledge, to be evaluated. However, it may be that what is learned in school through debates and collective work on social, civic and legal topics will be relevant to social, civic and legal life outside, which is why ECJS prescribes the use of current events and of 'reality' although the important political stakes relative to citizenship are the core of it.

[2] Students officially become citizens at 18: for most, that is during the final year of upper secondary school.

Having observed some 15 such debates in 2000, we are rather doubtful. In most cases students had a file, personally constructed or partly given by the teacher, containing information from books and media. However, for the most part in the actual debates they referred to common sense and to their personal/familial experience for evidence. When teachers asked for vocabulary or facts (e.g. the content of a law), students listened politely and then continued without taking into account the teachers' interventions – except in some cases to deny their importance (e.g. the law is not implemented; the law is too far from reality to be useful). School knowledge, at least as presented by a teacher, is apparently not considered relevant for students' discussions. Only a minority of the students we observed quoted textbooks or mentioned (for example) the importance of having a common valid definition of concepts. Let us be optimistic, however: this attitude may perhaps change with practice during the three years of work in ECJS. What we observed was only a beginning.

There is no official prescription as to which teachers should take charge of ECJS. Currently it seems that only those teaching French, philosophy, social and economic sciences or history and geography teach it. Teachers of history and geography have claimed a traditional right to teach civics, although this may prove problematic in practice.

French school history or geography has traditionally been exempt from controversies. These subjects have aimed to encourage political and social identity through teaching a common view of the world and of the past. To teach them (or to learn them) did not imply confronting different interpretations or conceptions, but adherence to one consensual reading. Thus, the burning questions of the day or current political issues were not allowed in the classroom. ECJS is quite the opposite. The knowledge passed on in history or geography was considered apolitical; to be the truth and as such scientific, universal, and neutral, and this assumption of 'truth' legitimates the use of the same documents, the same utterances relatives to the same matters, the same vocabulary, everywhere[3]. What is taught is a 'vulgate' (Chervel, 1988), that is to say the contents are recognised by everyone as necessarily and rightfully to be taught. In this context it is very difficult to accept 'teaching' content which is not consensual, not clearly defined through institutionalisation and textbooks. The concepts and topics of ECJS are indicated, but there is no prescription about the meaning, the main facts, or even the point of view to teach - there is no 'vulgate' in ECJS, and probably no possibility of one except perhaps for methodologies for information-gathering, file construction and the organisation of debates. There is no 'truth' on the questions prescribed, because they are both non-scientific questions[4] and not socially settled. Furthermore history and geography teachers are more used to facts than to concepts, and the core of ECJS is precisely concepts and not facts.

In everyday history or geography lessons, there is no matter to arouse controversy or discussion. The method of teaching these subjects in France is usually presenting knowledge through a 'dialogue-lecture', more or less supported by documents. During the verbal exchanges between teacher and pupils, it is the teacher who asks questions, who

[3] This is not compulsory (the curricula are not that prescriptive); it is social usage

[4] Of course, scientific truth is only that which is recognised by the scientific community at the moment …

accepts / refuses answers, who completes them, who incorporates them in his/her own discourse. Most answers are limited to a word or a sentence. It is exceptional that a teacher requires an argument from pupils.[5] The 'dialogue' is neither a dialogue between pupils nor a debate: it is very directive.[6]. Such pedagogical practices are centred on the teacher as the only repository of true knowledge. The pupils must understand, but they are not considered able to elaborate a sure and true interpretation of the past or of present data: by definition, they have neither sufficient knowledge nor the capability to go beyond brief and limited contributions. In this frame a debate or a discussion is not thinkable except as a motivating introduction to the lesson. History and geography teachers have so few experiences of debate, and less of a debate leading to increasing knowledge, or reflection. They are not used to allowing students to reach their own conclusions or apply their own critical approaches. In the first debates of ECJS several teachers were surprised by the abilities of their pupils in this field. But what is striking is that they do not, even after a year, consider debates as involving knowledge: what they see as the most important outcomes are freedom of speech, respect for others, and the development of personality.

These observations raise questions about teacher training. It seems necessary to train teachers to analyse, to use and to criticise concepts (of citizenship overall) and to link them together. But this is only a first step: they need to be trained to help students to analyse, to use, to criticise, to link concepts … in short, to develop the abilities of students to conceptualise. This requires that a larger place in the training curriculum should be allocated to epistemology on one side and to cognitive and social psychology on the other. Teachers probably need also to develop approaches in their classrooms which are more constructivist and more critical, and to learn to work with students on scientific as well as social points of view, on unsolved questions, on social problems – and not only to learn to teach 'truth'. This may give them more skills in guiding debate and enable them to link historical and geographical knowledge with the ECJS topics.

This involves a change in the conception of school knowledge, and in the exercises to be implemented. Teachers must learn not only to organise but to take part in debates; not to merely pass on 'truth' to ignorant students but to have them think about issues, produce arguments and judge their relevance. Teachers need to be trained in techniques of argument and to be able to train students to use these techniques on social and political problems.

Here I must make three points:

1. the approach developed above are not in use in our universities, where the future teachers are trained over four-year courses;
2. teacher trainers are themselves not used to these practices;
3. the balance between training by experienced teachers and training by professional teacher trainers is always in favour of practical experience, even if it is traditional or reactionary[7].

[5] This may change : the new examination tests include now argumentation.
[6] These teaching practices are (marginally) the dominant ones; some do differ.
7 Currently novice teachers are trained for a year which includes both practical experience (directed by an experienced teacher) and theory taught by teacher trainers.

Further, history and geography teachers have no formal background in Law: it would be necessary to provide this in order to develop their ability to teach 'legal education'. Time needs to be devoted to adding contents and practices to the teacher training syllabi, and this would mean a change in the organisation of teacher training.

There is one last question that I would like raise. As I said above, ECJS strikes directly at the concepts of the school as neutral and non-political, and of teaching as developing a consensus and shared references. The civic function of history and geography is well assimilated by teachers, and is part of their conception of their subject and their job. Nevertheless, a large number are fearful of a confusion between morality and civics, private or public aims. They have been educated in a society which condemns indoctrination as either serving the interest of the dominant class or as subjecting individual to totalitarianism. Taking caring not to trespass on freedom of opinion, and avoiding moralism, often leads teachers to refuse to express values, or to explicitly require students to adhere to values. In this case, ECJS has no real purpose for them, except in giving some more freedom to the young in *lycées*. Can we alter this approach in a society where values are largely considered as a private matter? How can we train teachers to incorporate democratic values and human rights into their teaching, both in content and in practice? Or to put it another way, how can we change the conception that teachers have of school and of their job?

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