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Education for citizenship in Romania and the UK - a comparison

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Citizenship education in the UK

1989 was a significant year in the development of citizenship education in the UK; it appeared as a cross-curricular theme in the newly introduced National Curriculum. Guidance on various cross-curricular themes were developed by the National Curriculum Council (NCC) as part of the 'whole curriculum' (see Crawford, 2000). One such theme was 'Education for Citizenship' (NCC, 1990a): like the other cross-curricular themes, this was to be taught and drawn out through the formally designated curriculum subjects. However, this approach for teaching citizenship was problematic: three significant criticisms were identified:

- fragmented and incoherent learning would result from elements of the theme being slotted into the subject syllabuses;
- citizenship was chosen as a 'safe' alternative to political education, and would simply reflect the voluntaristic dry civics of the conservative interpretation of active citizenship;
- the time and resource pressures on the teaching of the core and foundation subjects would marginalise or exclude the non-mandatory cross-curricular teaching of citizenship. (Oliver & Heater 1994: 163-4; see also Crawford, 1996)

During the 1990s, citizenship education came to be seen as a means of addressing a malaise affecting politics. Its inclusion in the curriculum was considered to be a crucial step in tackling disaffection and cynicism amongst young people, ensuring civic cohesion and a healthy national political culture in the future. These factors led to calls for citizenship education to be made an explicit part of the school curriculum.

The Crick Report, *Education for Citizenship and the teaching of democracy in schools* (QCA, 1998) offered detailed curriculum proposals. Citizenship was defined as having three predominant strands:
- social and moral responsibility - children learning self-confidence and socially and morally responsible behaviour in and beyond the classroom;
- community involvement - children learning about and becoming helpfully involved in the life and concerns of their communities, including service to the community;
- political literacy - pupils learning about political institutions and public life and how they might involve themselves.

The revised National Curriculum (DFEE, QCA 1999) broke new ground by including Citizenship as a statutory subject in secondary schools, to take effect from August, 2002.

Citizenship education in Romania

The transition to democracy in Eastern Europe has been strongly influenced by the political regimes existing before 1989. In Romania, where no consistent opposition existed to the Ceausescu regime, the events of 1989 brought a dramatic halt to half a century of totalitarian control and massive social and political change for which there had been no preparation. Romania lacked the stable social, political and economic foundations for the development of democratic institutions and the period since 1989 has, predictably, been difficult.

The overthrow of communist regimes in Romania and other Eastern European countries posed an unprecedented challenge and opportunity for those interested in citizenship education. They faced various obstacles left by a long period of communist control, including:

* a lack of classroom teaching materials;
* teachers with little or no understanding of democracy;
* teachers with little or no training in appropriate pedagogical techniques;
* teacher educators ill-equipped to teach about self-government.

In February 1999, the Romanian Ministry of Education issued a policy and development programme on 'Education for Personal Values and Democratic Citizenship' (Ministerul Educatiei Nationale, 1999). This document carried strong echoes of its UK counterpart with an emphasis on two key themes of individual responsibility and understanding political processes. However, the training of teachers in citizenship education was recognised as a substantial and lengthy task. The training expertise is not yet in place; appropriate in-service training courses and materials have yet to be developed; the technological equipment in schools and other educational institutions is inadequate. UNICEF's Monitoring Report on Education in Eastern Europe (MONEE Project, 1999) shows that Gross Domestic Product fell by more than 20% in Romania between 1989 and 1998 with extreme consequences for levels of spending on education. The report concludes: "The quality of schooling has fallen. Reductions have taken place in real public expenditure on education. Teacher morale has declined along with pay, with negative consequences for the quality of instruction. Buildings and equipment have suffered disproportionately from spending cuts, and there are schools . that are in a dire state of repair." (MONEE Report, 1999:3) The report also identifies problems of social exclusion facing education in Romania, specifically, the large numbers of Roma children and the continuing legacy from the Ceausescu era of children in institutions.

Two Case Studies

It was hypothesised that one important source of evidence and opinion about the development of citizenship education would be the views and perspectives of teachers and students. A small-scale research project was carried out with teachers and students of two high schools, one in the north-west of England and one in Bucharest. The sample in each school was thirty students aged between 15 and 17 and ten teachers, including representatives of senior management. Participants completed a short, open-ended questionnaire, the responses to which formed the basis of open-forum discussions.

Individual interviews were also held with ten students and five teachers in each school. The questionnaire, discussions and interviews focussed on three main issues:

- what was understood by citizenship education;
- what challenges are presented to schools and students by the inclusion of citizenship education;
- what priority should citizenship education have in the curriculum.

Defining citizenship education

The question of what it means to be a 'citizen' generated lively debate, with UK and Romanian teachers expressing similar views. At one level it was easy to establish a consensus around developing a personal framework of values and accepting a commitment to be an engaged and participating member of society. The UK teachers tended to emphasise the need to educate pupils to be responsible members of society. The Romanian teachers were similarly keen to emphasise that pupils should be responsible citizens, although they also made clear the importance of an understanding of individual rights.

Somewhat different perspectives emerged from the students, particularly on the issues of political indoctrination and of who controls the school agenda. Although there were certain differences in emphasis between the UK and Romanian students, there was more common ground between the two groups of students than between the students and teachers of either nationality. Given their country's history, it was not surprising that Romanian students prioritised the individual's right to choose, although most of them also thought that the acceptance of democratic responsibilities was vital. Profound concern was expressed at the very low turnouts at the UK European and local government elections and many argued in favour of Australian-style compulsory voting. The UK students shared the general commitment to individual rights, but showed much less concern than their Romanian counterparts over the low level of engagement in conventional political processes and also highlighted differences between what they perceived to be adult values and the priorities of many young people.

Challenges presented by citizenship education

The Romanian teachers strongly made the point that adverse economic factors militate against social reforms such as citizenship education. As one of them observed:

> *Without economic means, what choices do you have? Things that we weren't allowed to do under Ceausescu we now can't afford to do under democracy. If you have no money, 'freedom' and 'democracy' are just words.*

UK teachers were concerned that they were being drawn into another minefield of controversial issues with insufficient guidance and conflicting demands from interested parties. Both groups of teachers identified the need for high quality and appropriate teaching materials, and for suitable in-service training. The expectation of the Romanian teachers was that this would only involve a small number of them. They also expressed scepticism that either training or teaching materials would actually appear. The UK teachers thought it was likely to include most or all of them, especially if citizenship was

to be included in the Personal Social and Health Education (PHSE) classes or in the tutorial programme.

The two groups of students were in broad agreement that traditional party politics was not particularly attractive, and citizenship education in school would be unlikely to make it more appealing. There was much scepticism about politicians, who were generally seen as self-serving and untrustworthy. Direct action was seen as a much more popular approach to tackling major issues. Third world poverty and environmental concerns appeared as the most important issues for both groups, with human rights close behind in Bucharest and animal rights featuring prominently in Lancashire. Few students from either group were contemplating joining a political party. Far more either already had joined, or were considering joining, a direct action organisation such as Amnesty International, Greenpeace, the League Against Cruel Sports or the campaign against GM crops.

Citizenship education - what priority should it have?

The place of citizenship education in schools drew somewhat different responses from the two groups of teachers. There was little enthusiasm amongst the UK teachers for citizenship as a subject. It was pointed out strongly that much of what is proposed is covered in existing PSHE courses and in the framework of values and procedures that forms a school ethos. There was concern that yet another subject was being introduced into an already overcrowded Key Stage 4. Reaction from Romanian teachers to the idea of citizenship as part of the curriculum was far more muted. Some of the same concerns were expressed about the demands on students and teachers of important public exams, but there was a general acceptance that citizenship could be included as part of a General Studies course.

The two groups of students shared a lack of enthusiasm for lessons in citizenship. There were, however, some interesting differences in attitudes towards political issues and events. Most UK students were unenthusiastic, with a generally low level of interest in and knowledge of current political events. The Romanians, on the other hand, gave a higher priority to political matters and they showed a lively interest in, and knowledge of, political issues, including people and events in the UK and other Western European countries.

Analysis

The case studies produced a response that corresponds to the findings of more substantial research findings (e.g. Davies et al. 1999). Students need opportunities to develop a personal value system, to show active concern for the welfare of others and to understand and engage with civic and political processes and organisations as a means of achieving democratic change. However, consensus in principle is one thing, bringing about change in practice quite another. Kerr offers this reflection from the UK perspective:

> *The history of citizenship education in England is a curious mixture of noble intentions, which are then turned into general pronouncements, which, in turn, become minimal guidance for schools. The avoidance of any overt official government direction to schools concerning political socialisation and citizenship education can almost be seen as a national trait. (Kerr, 1999:1)*

Romania faces the enormous difficulty of shifting a dependency culture into an enterprise culture whilst maintaining social cohesion. The desire for social and economic change is tempered by a measure of resentment at what is seen as external pressure to comply with western values and assumptions in order to gain admittance to the European 'club'. The following mixture of defensiveness and defiance is typical:

> *It is not reasonable to expect Romania to suddenly 'take off', like a Poland or a Hungary. It isn't in the character of the people, the government or the culture. We have to be comfortable with the idea that Romania is on the right track; it is just moving very slowly. (Editorial,* Romania in Review*, 1999).*

President Constantinescu makes the point that Romanians wish to be treated with respect and dignity as democratic equals, not as second-class citizens to be patronised:

> *The mental stereotypes of the west should definitely be removed, because we need today mutual respect more than any economic, financial or humanitarian assistance. (Speech to the Romanian Parliament, September 1999).*

The lack of clarity about what citizenship education is for, and the lack of any real conceptualisation of what it is to be a citizen, may yet prove problematic. For example, it can be argued that citizenship carries an implication of equal status, yet profound inequalities and uncertainties are evident in both the UK and Romania today. Economic disparities and issues of ethnicity in so-called multicultural societies are just two of the factors influencing the very 'social exclusion' that citizenship education is intended to combat. The Crick Report states:

> *A main aim for the whole community should be to find or restore a sense of common citizenship, including a national identity that is secure enough to find a place for the plurality of nations, cultures, ethnic identities and religions long found in the United Kingdom. (QCA, 1998:19)*

There is a danger that efforts to consolidate a sense of identity or citizenship risk reinforcing the barriers they are designed to dismantle. Dealing with this issue in a way that promotes understanding and acceptance will be a challenge in both countries. The challenge is made more difficult by social pressures for exclusion rather than inclusion, such as the persistent right-wing campaign in the UK against economic migrants and the on-going hostility of Romanians to the Roma people. Schools will try to teach citizenship education, but unless it takes place within a wider frame of social and economic reform designed to create a more equal society, it is unreasonable to expect dramatic results. A further challenge for citizenship programmes is to strike a balance between the individual and community, rights and responsibilities. Duties and social obligations clearly need to be given appropriate emphasis for citizenship education to be effective, but not to the exclusion of individual human rights.

Like any school-based initiative, citizenship education will rely heavily on the commitment and professionalism of teachers. It will need considerable resources, for example for the training of teachers and the development of teaching materials. This is a major issue in Romania, where the methodology needed for a less didactic, more facilitative approach is unfamiliar. Teachers will be faced with the difficult challenge of finding a neutral path through the teaching of controversial and unfamiliar issues whilst maintaining a high standard of teaching and in the face of different and conflicting

demands from various stakeholders. Citizenship education will be expected to contribute to a more positive and participatory political culture. However, there is irony in the fact that the development of a programme designed to promote democratic values, participation and inclusion has been carried out with minimal reference to those people who will be charged with its implementation. The point is made emphatically by Davies, Gregory and Riley: 'There is an extremely disheartening recent history of educational reform in which teachers have not been treated as citizens' (Davies et al. 1999:3)

Such comments apply equally in Romania where teachers are used to being told rather than asked. Yet to draw on teachers' experience, expertise and views to inform the development of policy and practice would seem to be both pragmatic, increasing the likelihood of workable solutions, and principled, showing democratic citizenship in action.

Schools in the UK and Romania face a considerable challenge in trying to implement citizenship education. The present curriculum guidance in both countries emphasises the duties and responsibilities of students to the school, the wider community and those in authority, but has much less to say about the reciprocal responsibilities of the school and the community towards students. Yet what is citizenship really likely to mean in schools where students have little opportunity to identify their own needs, no influence over the curriculum and little, if any, influence over institutional policies and practices? Schools need to recognise that in teaching the benefits of greater participation they must be open to allowing greater involvement of pupils in decision-making processes. This may, in turn, require some re-evaluation of both authority structures within school and current relationships between teachers, pupils and management teams. UK and Romanian schools may have developed in quite different political cultures, but the day-to-day realities of power, how it is exercised and by whom, is strikingly similar.

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