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The political development of adolescents: the impact of family background, opportunities for participation in and out of school, and the implications for citizenship education projects[1]

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In recent decades citizenship has become a 'myth that appeals to our political imagination' (Ignatieff, 1995, p. 53), generating the magical feeling that a mere allusion to it could serve as an antidote to exclusion, anomy and lack of participation (van Steenbergen, 1994). However, citizenship is anything but a concept with a clear and fixed meaning (Carter & Stokes, 1998; Ferreira & Menezes, 2002a; Gentilli, 2000; Torres, 2001): the least one can say is that several interpretations of this 'myth' are possible.

To begin with, citizenship is conceived and balanced very differently depending on the political tradition (Eisenstadt, 2000; Janoski, 1998; Kymlicka & Norman, 1995). For instance, 'active citizenship' can be conceived as 'mostly a passive role' (Walzer, 1995, p. 165), particularly under constitutional views of democracy, or under communitarian perspectives, as an essential right that involves a diversity of contexts and whose exercise is vital for the quality of democratic life (Santos, 1998). Furthermore, citizenship is 'from its inception ... an exclusionary category, justifying the coercive role of the included over the excluded' (Ignatieff, 1995, p. 56): it implies a distinction between 'us' and 'them' (Santos, 1998; van Steenbergen, 1994), based on criteria that are circumstantial and conventional, which ignore individual or group 'feelings of belonging' to a community, and which might even collide with basic human rights (Benhabib, 1999). Finally, although is it important to acknowledge the formal dimension of citizenship, i.e., legally-based equality of rights and duties granted to all recognised citizens, this ideal of universality has been questioned (Kymlicka & Norman, 1995; Torres, 2001; Young, 1995) on the grounds that justice might not always imply 'equal treatment for all groups' (Young, 1995, p. 176), and that it could entail a pressure for homogeneity that denies and represses difference. Therefore discussion about citizenship should consider its sociological dimension, related both to our daily experiences and our feelings of membership and taking into account that the formal project of equality of rights is contradicted by tangible (social, economic, …) inequalities that interfere with the exercise of those rights (Ignatieff, 1995).

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It is obvious that any discussion of citizenship education – its meanings, contents, and methods – should not overlook that the emphasis on the role of the school in this domain is value-laden. However, when educational policy documents declare citizenship education as a central goal of schools, are the multiple dimensions of citizenship recognised? We shall consider briefly the evolution of the stress on citizenship in educational policies for basic education across Europe since the 1980s.

During the 1980s and early 1990s, citizenship appeared as a topic of personal and social education (PSE). PSE was a common designation in various European countries (for example, Belgium, Finland, France, England and Wales, Holland, Italy, Ireland, Norway, Portugal and Spain) for dealing with social concerns with the role of the school both in the prevention of youth problems (such as drug abuse or intolerance), and the anticipation of relevant life tasks (whether work-related, consumerist, environmental or interpersonal) (Campos, 1991). In general, curricular strategies involved cross-curricular dissemination of themes, values or skills, and/or the creation or reorganisation of specific subjects (e.g., ethics, civics) or project areas (Menezes, 1999). After the mid-1990s, however, growing concerns with social exclusion and political apathy together with the recognition of diluted feelings of social belonging and cohesion, of increasing phenomena of discrimination towards minority groups, and of the political disengagement of youngsters (and also adults) (Torney-Purta, Schwille & Amadeo, 1999) emerged as a central topic in political and social discourses across Europe. Citizenship was now the motto (and the 'new' myth) that invaded educational policy documents - with little or no discussion of its relationship to the 'old' PSE. For instance, in Portugal the curricular reorganisation of basic education defined citizenship as a transversal goal, both the object of a non-disciplinary curricular area coordinated by the class tutor and of the whole-school experience, in and out of the classroom (Menezes, in press). However, even if there are obvious similarities with the former PSE, citizenship appears to have a face value, obvious and consensual – with former intensive discussions around the creation of PSE, opposing conservative and emancipatory perspectives, being completely ignored.

The tendency to hold the school accountable for social crisis is probably as old as education itself (Beane, 1990; Roldão, 1999). This is why educational reforms generally contain the elements for innovation and empowerment but also might play a role of compensatory legitimation (Bento, 2000), both from a political and a curricular point of view; used to promote the state's legitimacy (Weiler, 1985) but leaving the (traditional) curricula intact (Galloway, 1990; Sultana, 1992). Once again one might wonder whether citizenship education emerges more as a legitimation strategy for dealing with educational (and social) crisis than as an emancipatory project. However, research shows that contrary to optimistic beliefs about the impact of school education in political socialisation and development 'apparent education effects are usually diminished when wealth, income, leisure time and (…) membership of social networks are included in the models' (Emler & Frazer, 1999, p. 253).

Therefore the organisation of citizenship education should take into account what research tells us in terms of the political development of children and adolescents, including both the relative impact of the school and the common features associated with desirable results. Our discussion here will be based on the results of three research projects conducted in Portugal in the last four years. The first is the IEA Civic Education Study, an international project that involved the testing of representative samples of Portuguese students from grades 8, 9 and 11 about civic knowledge, conceptions,

attitudes and behaviours. The second is a study with adolescents from academic and vocational schools and explores the impact of both in and out of class experiences and significant events (the process of East Timor independence, which raised a systematic and cross-generational political mobilisation in Portugal) on political attitudes and behaviours (Ribeiro, 2002). The third study considers the quality of participation experiences within the civil society (voluntary associations, political parties), both in terms of opportunities for role-taking and personal refection/integration, and their impact on political reasoning complexity within secondary school students (Ferreira & Menezes, 2002b).

The analysis of the IEA Civic Education Study data for Portuguese students shows that, in addition to school variables (educational expectations and academic success), family cultural background (parents' educational attainment, books at home) and to a lesser degree, political interest and experiences (frequency of participation in voluntary associations) are the most significant predictors of civic knowledge (Menezes et al, in press). This suggests two things. The first is that cultural background does have a significant impact, and that therefore education does not appear to counterbalancing previous disadvantages among students. The second is that schools alone cannot make all the difference: citizenship education must be acknowledged as a responsibility shared with other social institutions and contexts.

It therefore makes sense that that citizenship education should pay special attention to students' actual participation experiences within their communities, and should even promote their involvement in their community's problems, as proposed by service-learning projects (Barber, 1991; Naval, 1995; Yates & Youniss, 1998; Yowell & Smylie, 1999). However, it is important to stress that participation does not have an intrinsic value, and that its potential for developing student competencies and empowerment depends both on the organisational structure of the context where participation occurs (Putnam, 1993; Stewart & Weinstein, 1997) and on the quality and the meaningfulness of the experience (Sprinthall, 1991). Our own research with secondary school students has shown how opportunities for authentic and significant actions balanced with systematic possibilities for integrating the meanings of the experience in the context of interaction with others (with whom one might disagree) are crucial for the impact of participation in terms of political development. Moreover, when the quality of participation is low: when there is seldom an opportunity occasion to do relevant things, and there are few opportunities for personal integration, the impact of these experiences is non-existent (Ferreira & Menezes, 2002b; Ribeiro, 2002). Ribeiro (2002) shows that students who have experienced active participation within the class, the school, and the civil society tend to value conventional citizenship activities more highly, to be more politically active, and also more predisposed to become politically involved in the future. Ferreira and Menezes (2002b) observe that quality of participation is related significantly to political reasoning complexity; students who have balanced and frequent opportunities for action and reflection are less dualist when they consider political issues.

If experience is to become a relevant educational tool for citizenship education it must be deliberately designed to promote political development. This means that participation experiences should provide:

- opportunities for *real and meaningful action*, giving students the possibility of being involved in the solving of actual social and political problems. However, it is essential that the complexity of the task is adequate to the age and developmental

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status of the youngsters and that it provides the opportunity for them to ‘enact plans and strategies that lead to success’ (Yowell & Smylie, 1999, p. 480).

- opportunities for *interaction with (different) others*, since action should involve interaction with other people who might have diverse perspectives. Diversity is an essential feature in the sense that it promotes alternative visions of self and the world: ‘narrow networks of community encounter – that is to say ‘ghettos’ – have the effect of narrowing and impoverishing conceptions of selves in futures’ (Law, 1991, p. 159) and might even reinforce in-group bias and prejudices (De Piccoli, Colombo & Mosso, 2002).
- opportunities for *personal reflection and discussion with others vis-à-vis the personal integration of the experience*. Systematic reflection is essential if students are to ‘integrate [the] everyday concepts with which they started the project with the more organised and systematic knowledge gained in interactions’ (Yowell & Smylie, 1999, p. 480).
- *support* since ‘growing ... is painful. The emotions must be acknowledged and supported as a means of moving toward relaxed reflection and the ultimate incorporation of a new system of thinking and feeling’ (Sprinthall, 1991, p. 37). A movement towards growth implies close interpersonal relationships with adults supervising the process who both validate and defy students’ achievements.
- *continuity*, since experiences should be continuous and long-term for real changes to emerge.

Finally, political involvement – as other forms of human involvement (Campos, 1992) – is not the outcome of information and rational decision-making, but involves emotions and affections. In our research with Portuguese adolescents we addressed political attitudes and participation in relation to the processes of independence in East Timor (Ribeiro, 2002), and concluded that this event had a significant impact on youngsters' political interest and involvement. The implication for the development of citizenship education projects is that affection and emotions should not be considered as a negative side effect to be eliminated and controlled through rational debates; they are inherent to and essential for political deliberation between conflicting and plural perspectives of the common good (Arendt, 1958) – and is this not what democracy is about finally?

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