



This paper is taken from

*Teaching Citizenship  
Proceedings of the seventh Conference of the  
Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe  
Thematic Network*

London: CiCe 2005

edited by Alistair Ross, published in London by CiCe, ISBN 1 85377 389 1

Without explicit authorisation from CiCe (the copyright holder)

- only a single copy may be made by any individual or institution for the purposes of private study only
- multiple copies may be made only by
  - members of the CiCe Thematic Network Project or CiCe Association, or
  - a official of the European Commission
  - a member of the European parliament

If this paper is quoted or referred to it must always be acknowledged as

***Etienne, R. (2005) The unique class in the urban school: a device for the integration of citizenship education in everyday teaching?, in Ross, A. (ed) Teaching Citizenship. London: CiCe, pp 307-312.***

© CiCe 2005

CiCe  
Institute for Policy Studies in Education  
London Metropolitan University  
166 – 220 Holloway Road  
London N7 8DB  
UK

This paper does not necessarily represent the views of the CiCe Network.



This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained herein.

#### **Acknowledgements:**

This is taken from the book that is a collection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- Cass Mitchell-Riddle, head of the CiCe Coordination Unit at the time of the conference, and for the initial stages of editing this book
- Lindsay Melling and Gitesh Gohel of IPSE, London Metropolitan University
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The SOCRATES programme and the personnel of the Department of Education and Culture of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

## **The unique class in the urban school: a device for the integration of citizenship education in everyday teaching?**

*Richard Étienne*

*Université Paul Valéry Montpellier III (France)*

In France and other French-speaking countries the priority given to the acquisition of knowledge constitutes a major obstacle to the development of citizenship. Traditionally, citizenship has been presented in a form more akin to instruction (knowledge of the state system of political organisation) than to the acquisition of skills (how to behave in a responsible way in one's social and political context) and even more so to attitudes (towards others and towards the planet).

As far as school administration is concerned, such a priority is evident in the way – virtually unchanged since the 17th century – in which pupils are separated into classes: the organisation of classes by regrouping pupils of the same level (virtual grouping). This rationalisation of teaching, theorised by Lasalle in 1688, is rarely questioned by teachers even today. Single-class schools (one class constituting a school) or classes of mixed years and levels (two or three levels in the same class) are only found in primary schools in rural areas. Contrary to expectations, several studies have shown that school results are higher in single-class schools or in mixed-level classes than in single-level classes, everything else being equal. But these studies have not led to any change in the system. The introduction in 1990 of cycles (from the age of three to eleven pupils study in three cycles: early learning, fundamental learning, and consolidation) has not met with success in France, for such cycles are counter to 'pedagogic credibility', according to which pupils must be grouped in classes by age and level.

In areas of activity outside schools, the organisation of work has changed since the era of industrial manufacturing in the 17th century, with the introduction of mass production at the beginning of the 20th century (Fordism) and the questioning thirty years ago of a return to a less fragmented form of work (Toyota-ism). But in schools the class is still thought of in terms of maximal homogeneity, which goes hand-in-hand with the search for the maximal efficiency of the traditional teacher-to-pupil lecture.

This paper describes an experiment that challenged this hegemonic orthodoxy. One part of a teaching team in a school based in an education priority zone in Montpellier (four teachers of Cycle 3, which groups pupils of eight to eleven years) decided to make a complete change in the structure of the classes of one level, which had been both traditional and omnipresent in the town. Their pupils entered a multi-aged *single class* (from six to eleven years) in a structure which aimed to emulate the City. What were the principles on which this was founded? What can observations made in class bring to research? How can a system of accompanying assessment be put in place? How would these teachers manage the uncomfortable situation in which they have had to invent everything, with no outside help or resources other than their own membership of a pedagogic movement which has always declared its own citizenship and political commitment?

### **The founding principles of the mixed age, mixed level urban class: cooperation and discussions of a philosophical nature**

The principles on which the teachers of this school are working can be fairly simply presented. Adopting Freinet's approach (1950) and the developments from his school cooperative movement, they suggest that the acquisition of knowledge and attitudes of citizenship are not antagonistic. On the contrary, their intervention is based on the fact that it is only through democratic institutions that pupils learn. In this approach to teaching knowledge can only be transmitted in an institutional framework. For Freinet the question of class-based organisation did not arise, because he taught in a single-class school. In a suburban area of Montpellier (La Paillade) dating from the beginning of the 1960s, these teachers work in an urban framework in which the buildings form a square that hems in a school built on the standard model: a playground and two stories of classrooms with a central corridor.

Their pedagogic convictions (whether they belong to the Freinet movement or not) and their practice (they were trained seven or eight years ago) did not fit with the division of the school into fifteen classes (three per level of six to eleven years) which underlined the industrial approach to the organisation of schools. Satisfied with the setting up of classes by cycle (one class for each of the three levels) they suggested setting up mixed-cycle classes.

To make this innovation work they used the best-known tools of cooperative pedagogy, such as the class council: pupils decide their work for the week and follow up their current projects as well as dealing with daily problems such as discipline. The session is presided over by a pupil and the noting of decisions, such as the assessment of their execution, is carried out by a secretary. The teacher takes a background role and intervenes only by asking permission to speak, except where there is an immediate danger, something I have never witnessed. Other tools such as philosophical discussion are less well known (Connac, 2003): the object is to put into place, through this new device, a common reference to values not necessarily shared by the 'new public' of school (Etienne, 1999).

Here there is a reversal of models: instead of the project of transmitting knowledge imposing its form – the submission to the teacher and declarative knowledge, from education towards citizenship – it is on the contrary the education of the citizen which plays a dynamic role, providing a new paradigm for the transferral of knowledge, the creation of problem situations and discussion.

### **The results of observation of class practice**

Attractive in principle, this search for a harmonisation of educational objectives and the methods used requires a scientific approach, so that the school can visualise follow up in three areas:

1. inherent good practice is discernible, and its use can be recommended, but it should be detailed as finely as possible
2. misconceptions can be detected and immediately abandoned
3. finally, and this is the most frequently adopted solution, real scientific analysis should be carried out to find out what helps pupils progress and what prevents their success.

It is on Mondays that two important events take place during our observation. We went into Cédric Léon's class on three Monday mornings to observe these two key institutional tools and to highlight the most pertinent elements. The first element which caught our attention was the diversity in the pupils' ages. We noticed that the 21 pupils in the class were evenly distributed (four CP, four CE1, four CE2, four CM1 and five CM2).<sup>1</sup>

Pupils start off with 'what's new?', another device which facilitates the transition from the outside world to school. Most pupils speak Arabic at home and today a linguistic constraint is imposed: to explain what they did on Saturday, the pupils must use temporal connecting words (so, and, then, next, afterwards). A double-sided board is used to establish the level of each pupil. The average length of their narrative is one minute 20 seconds. The connecting word 'afterwards' is used more frequently than any of the four others; this shows the usefulness of the exercise, which leads to the development of logical thought and the generation of complex sentences. Two remarks: Cédric does not speak to launch this task and the class is rather noisy during the accounts; this explains the noting of warnings on the board for five pupils (of the 20 present that day).

**Bibal:** It's Saturday the 29th. First I did my homework; afterwards I went outside and I went back home. Then I played on the Play.<sup>2</sup>

**Ayoub:** You're interrupting me! My mother and my mother's friend made cakes. Next, afterwards, we ate the cakes. So, in the evening, we looked at a magazine. Then I fell asleep.

During the class council, it was decided by vote to hold a philosophical discussion on religion. Cédric did not approve the topic but respect for democracy means that majority decisions are paramount, all the more so because the Ministry of Education has just included the study of 'religious facts' in the school curriculum (BOEN, 2002). Cédric launches the task:

**Cédric:** Religion is an interesting topic for which speaking is not the best thing. First of all, I ask you to take your writing books<sup>3</sup> and note down individually everything that you can say on the subject, which I will write on the board. 'What is the truest religion?' You chose the topic unanimously. We'll take five minutes for that.

**Ayoub:** There's only one true one.

**Cédric:** In your book! The light has changed to amber<sup>4</sup>. I'm waiting for those responsible to do their work.

---

<sup>1</sup> In France, classes go from Cours préparatoire to Cours moyen passing through Cours élémentaire. This is equivalent to Year 1 to Year 5 (6 to 11 years).

<sup>2</sup> Playstation: an electronic game.

<sup>3</sup> All the pupils have different tasks, including the most prestigious; thus the school plays its educational role in careers orientation and the preparation of a choice of job.

<sup>4</sup> When there is a green light, the pupils can talk freely. The amber light means only whispers and the red light means absolute silence.

About fifteen minutes later, all the comments are collected.

It's Islam.

Why?

Because God created it.

It's Islam.

Why?

Because it's Mohamed.

It's Islam.

God invented it so that men would say it.

Allah gave the Koran to the Jews. They didn't accept it. The Arabs accepted it.

Cédric passes round the following text and asks who wants to read.

### **Which religion is the truest?**

'Which religion is the truest?' is a very dangerous question.

There are people who are sure that their religion is the only true religion. That their God is the only true God. And often, they terrorise others to make them believe in their religion. They are dangerous people because they think of themselves as soldiers directly sent by God, they think they have the right to do anything.

'Which religion is the truest?' is also a question which doesn't mean anything.

How can you decide what is true and what is untrue when no-one can prove it or know it? It is a stupid question, just as stupid as asking for example if English is a truer language than French.

Cédric relaunches the discussion with the pupils:

Carole asked what a religion was.

It's a belief: there is Islam, there are the Jews, Christianity, the Catholics. It's beliefs.

When you talk of France and of the French (*cf. below*) you're mixing nationality and belief.

Teacher, can you buy a belief?

Why are there several religions?

Can you change religions?

Today we'll stop there. Next week I'll organise two homogenous groups of about the same level.

The following week, the philosophical discussion will continue on a more organised basis with three rules (no mocking, say why, those who have had three warnings are not allowed to participate further). The amalgam of religion and nationality and the conflict between the president-technician and an intervening president who takes over, have given the impression that they are going round in circles and that participation is restricted to the boys and one single girl among the speakers.

### **The usefulness of an accompanying assessment**

The first element apparent in the analysis carried out with Cédric concerns the philosophical discussion. During the research stages, when they are working on their

writing books, the pupils are at tables of four and the mix of ages is respected and gives rise to intergenerational work. Cédric is a little surprised at the remark I make about the girls, all but one of whom were outside the discussion group. Undoubtedly the researcher's detachment makes observation easier and allows the objective highlighting of the question of the place of pupils, especially where there is a task involving mixed participation: there is a risk of leaving them to act and speak. A sociogram<sup>5</sup> shows where the pupils sit and who is speaking.

A second element is the group dynamic in this class which will be profitable in the long term. The philosophical discussion was prepared by the teacher setting a specific task. In this, we can confirm what François Audigier said (Perrenoud, 2003: 184): 'School is neither a democracy nor a metaphor for society'. This means that the teacher establishes him or herself as an organiser of learning situations; this is not the case in the life of the City where he or she is a citizen like anyone else. This asymmetry is found in Cédric's attitude. A consequence of the democratic management of the class means that he has to deal with the topic proposed by the pupils. On the other hand, he takes care to think of an original didactic device commensurate with the emotional importance of the theme. The writer's book ensures a time for solitary thinking. The decision to use the amber light, and the vigilance with which he seeks to avoid influencing the discussion, show the attention he has paid in his preparation to the empowering of the pupils whose families, blatantly favourable to Islam, develop religious culture and verbal manipulation of a revealed truth.

However, the relative failure during the collecting of opinions shows the limits of the didactic preparation of a situation. The regularity with which peremptory affirmations are made leaves little scope for the correction of representations, all the more so because, being convergent, they cannot set off a socio-cognitive conflict which would be the result of divergent views. It is here that the photocopied document intervenes. It will sway the course of the discussion. It seems to have had two effects. The first is argumentative, based on the text which denounces the stupidity of the question, and there is no trace of the pupils' reactions. The second encourages a diversion from the initial question, which concerns the truthfulness of a religion, in order to address the changing of religion. The origin of these reflections is to be found in the shock provoked by the familiar market situation.

This familiar transposition makes the pupils think and reflect on another question, that of proselytism, but it is only considered in the sense of conversion to Islam, with persistent confusions between nationality and religion:

**Mohand:** You can change religion. There are some French people who have been to Mecca.

Lastly, discussion with Cédric allowed us to establish that the younger pupils (6-8 years) are not those that speak least and that in this unique urban class girls and boys help each other. There had been a clearly marked separation when the class worked in separate cycles: girls and boys came with rigid stereotypes and teaching was unable to modify

---

<sup>5</sup> The sociogram allows a visualisation of the placing and the displacement of people, and also of verbal actions and interactions between speakers. Analysing it allows the teacher to see what has happened during the philosophical discussion.

these relations of separation, even of domination. We consider that the teaching team could be helped by an analysis aiming to an action and modifying it insofar as the scientific approach lets us repair and analyse it. This is, moreover, what the team of teachers has asked us to do and what is under discussion with the inspectors anxious to benefit from the help of research which cannot be considered as a measure of control.

In conclusion, in this class the teacher becomes a 'zero institution', meaning that he or she is there to institute class work and that the school functions with reference to the cooperative pedagogy of Freinet; its composition mirrors that of society even if it is not a metaphor for society. This action is particularly innovative in France since it is situated at the opposite end of the division into strata by age and level which characterises urban school organisation. The choice of the duration is explained by the necessity of carrying out coherent and persevering work before representations coming from the suburb, but especially from the sabotage work of the Republican agreement, is solidified. This is carried out by religious movements that intervene outside school and ruin the Republican principles of equality, liberty and fraternity.

Our research team is following what happens in these classes using clinical research methods (Fumat, Vincens and Etienne, 2003). According to our hypotheses, interaction between democratic socialisation and learning (Amiel, Etienne and Presse, 2003) can be organised by making education towards citizenship a priority, which presupposes that pupils will be enabled to hold debates, accepting ideas that are on the face of it far removed from their own. Every day, pupils establish links with knowledge and with the law. This situation has also shown that without any work on the link with religion, the Republican school could be doomed to failure. Implementing this teaching of citizenship necessitates rethinking the way classes and the school function, to avoid the pupils' capitulation to the image of the omnipresent teacher (Connac, 2003), but also by truths imposed by the family which does not yet know the evolution which led, within a century, to the appeasement of conflict between secularism and the Catholic church in France.

## References

- Amiel, M., Étienne, R., Presse, M.-C. (2003) *Apprendre et vivre la démocratie à l'école*. Amiens: CRDP, collection *Repères pour agir*
- BOEN (2002) *Nouveaux programmes de l'école primaire*. Paris: Ministère de l'éducation nationale
- Connac, S. (2003) *La discussion philosophique comme institution de la pédagogie institutionnelle*. Montpellier 3: thèse sous la direction de Michel Tozzi, unpublished
- Étienne, R. (1999) Les 'nouveaux publics', un concept européen. *Cahiers Pédagogiques*, n° 378, p. 49-51
- Freinet, C. (1950) *Essai de psychologie sensible appliquée à l'éducation*. Cannes: Éditions de l'École Moderne Française
- Fumat, Y., Vincens, Cl., Étienne, R. (2003) *Analyser les situations éducatives*. Paris: ESF
- Perrenoud, Ph. (2003) *L'école est-elle encore le creuset de la démocratie?* Lyon: Chronique sociale