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Students' perceptions of effective citizenship education and schools curriculum

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Introduction

Citizenship education holds a dominant position in recent education micro-level policies, mainly in curriculum and teaching methodology development. The importance that the EU gives to performance in became more obvious when in the 'Report on the Quality of the Education Systems in Europe' the performance of the students in citizenship was considered one indicator of the quality of the education systems (together with performance in language, mathematics, science, ICT and the ability to learn).

In Greece, with the publication of the new Governmental paper on the 'Cross Thematic Curriculum for Compulsory Education' (Alahiotis, 2004; Spinthourakis, Karatzia-Stavlioti & Lambroboulos, 2004), both the content and the methodologies suggested for citizenship education moved away from the traditional content-oriented and teacher-centred teaching methodologies. The paper recognises that primary school students should be engaged in investigative and cooperative learning activities and that schooling in general should contribute to the development and cultivation of competencies for citizenship as well as the values of democracy.

Writers such as Lawton (2001) emphasise that understanding how humans develop within culture and society is very helpful when looking at the demands of education for citizenship. This understanding involves a hermeneutic interest in the interaction and communication systems of societies, the values by which society interprets itself and the ways identities are constructed. In this sense we can identify significant implications for learning and assessment in education for citizenship.

In citizenship education (Lawton, 2001; Erickson, 1999) pedagogy has to be more than the transmission of 'facts', and more than the accumulation of information and its examination. In effective education for citizenship learners need to be engaged meaningfully in real-life learning, including being able to take a critical stance towards their own 'biographies' and 'collective stories' and developing a coherent set of values personally chosen – their personal 'Cosmo-idle' (Alahiotis, 2004). They also need to strengthen their ability to engage profitably and creatively in the complex contemporary world and develop dispositions, capabilities and qualities that will endure beyond formal schooling. In short, they need to become effective lifelong learners. In this case, assessment (Broadfoot, 1999) which is explicitly designed to promote learning is the single most powerful tool that exists for both raising standards and empowering lifelong learners. In this framework the literature outlines the need for a more formative and learner centred approach to the assessment of citizenship education. In such cases a number of dimensions are identified during assessment as the components of 'learning energy' and citizenship education, these being: growth orientation, critical curiosity, meaning-making, dependence and fragility, creativity, relationships/interdependencies, strategic awareness.

These components are closely related to the discourse of the new citizenship education cross-thematic curriculum in Greece. This curriculum sets the main goal (Spinthourakis

et al, 2004) for students towards their intellectual, moral, social, economic, political and cultural development towards becoming creative citizens in contemporary Greek society. On the basis of this, curriculum educational material (textbooks and software) is being prepared which is expected to be in use in schools by 2006. In this sense this is a 'transition' period that is worth investigating and will be used as the basis for a longitudinal review that aims for a closer investigation of classroom pedagogic changes and their influences on pupils.

The study

When research aims at investigating the degree that certain ideas, views and competencies are being promoted in classrooms, a great variety of research methodologies can be used and targeted towards different educational 'actors' (teachers, students etc). The use of discourse and/or conversation analysis of organised group conversations with twelve year old pupils is expected to provide an in depth understanding with regard to the pupils' views on the forms of interaction and teaching, learning and assessment processes in the classroom. This would increase our knowledge of the effect that pedagogy based on the 'old' curriculum may have on citizenship education. Further analysis during the application of the 'new' curriculum might assist towards the identification of the various pedagogic changes that take place in a transition period and throw light on issues that relate to the effectiveness of this curriculum practice.

The choice of a methodology is critical in such studies. The conversation analysis used in this study lies in the domain of cross-cultural communication between people of different socio-cultural backgrounds, although they may have a common origin. Cross-cultural communication is considered in the general sense that takes into equal consideration both linguistically and socio-culturally oriented aspects (Murata, 1994, Tannen, 1984 cited in Karadjia-Stavlioti, 1997); it can include speakers from the same country of different class, region, age, and even gender. The intention was to create circumstances as natural as possible during the conversations as the object was to interpret the speech acts in context. Our contextual context was 'citizenship education and learning'. In this sense we first explored the conversational style or the way that these pupils speak. Such features include intonation, pitch, aptitude, pacing, rate of speech, turn-taking, choices of words and phrases, topics preferred/avoided, genres (story-telling, joking, lecturing) and ways of serving the constraints of these genres.

Researchers (Karadjia- Stavlioti, 1997) realise the importance of becoming aware not only of the knowledge of culturally stylistic ways of speaking but also of the knowledge of culturally stylistic ways of listening. This specific work cannot be particularly concerned with gestures and eye movement although occasional reference can be made if judged necessary in the interpretation of interaction. Two major approaches are used in the analysis in this study: discourse analysis and conversational analysis. There are certain differences between the theoretical backgrounds: discourse analysis originates in linguistics, whereas conversational analysis originates in sociology, especially that advocated by ethno-methodologists.

Practically, the field work for this analysis was planned. One group of pupils from each of three major types of Greek public schools was used as a focus group: School 1 was an experimental school attached to the University of Patras; School 2 an urban area school with one class-one teacher at every level, and School 3 was a suburban school with at

least two classes-two teachers at every level. Enabling questions were prepared to help conversation to minimise problems of power and chance. The subjects in the groups were randomly chosen, their teachers were not present during the conversations, and an effort was made to create a friendly environment in the introductory procedure.

This qualitative work is based on the consideration that through talk and conversation ideas and concepts around citizenship and learning culture are represented so as to be analysable. Discourses are identified and isolation of sets of basic categories or units of discourse takes place. Discourse is identified as a set of assumptions which cohere around a common logic and which confer particular meanings on experiences and practices of people in a particular sphere. Thus formulation of a set of rules takes place which is used for delimiting well-formed sequences of categories from ill-formed sequences; coherent versus incoherent discourses. The topic of the conversation is the identified problem and sets a framework which incorporates all the reasonable judgements being asked about. It consists of elements derivable from the physical context and from the discourse domain.

Analysis and findings

The major question of analysis was to identify the 'stories' of the pupils and the ways they speak about major issues that relate to idea of citizenship education. The sampling procedure and procedure in the group took into consideration the general principles identified in the previous section. The conversations were transcribed knowing that the process always involves some degree of transformation of the data and requires multiple rewordings to assure accuracy. Additionally, since transcription of talk does not capture the many non-verbal communications of such a process, some notes were taken during and/or after conversation. It is true that the process of carrying out these activities creates new versions of the discourse which reflect the positioning of those involved. The intention, however, was not to carry out a detailed language analysis, but rather to look at broad discourses, sketch the range of talk and explore the conversational style of these pupils in relation to the topic.

A contrastive framework is used in this study that involves not only comparison of the physical conversational features but also the value attached to each. Thus, the use of the same features to a different degree in different circumstances reveals the conversational style of each group. From an ethno-methodological perspective we concentrated on the study of natural conversation, discovering how its structure and resources reflect speakers' social knowledge. By introducing the 'category-bound activity' we try to describe how 'our knowledge of social structure is utilised to interpret every day discourse' (Murata, 1994). We dealt with linguistic interests such as 'the coherence of texts' and the 'limitation of semantic fields' but interpreted them giving attention to students' knowledge of citizenship and learning.

An effort was made to identify citizenship-related references that could form a set of assumptions which are coherent and confer particular meanings of experiences and practices in the classrooms and relate to citizenship education. Then we formulated a set of rules for delimiting well-formed sequences of categories or coherent discourses. These categories were formed by considering major issues that a curriculum might include and are important in the pedagogy for citizenship (content, teaching/learning methodologies, pupil assessment). Below, the main findings of the analysis are presented.

The discourse on citizenship education content

Citizenship education is considered, by all groups of students, the lesson in which they 'learn about the laws and constitution, how the State works and what is happening in society' (numeric coding i.e. (1) refers to School 1). The discourse on the content can initially be exemplified as mainly referring to the intellectual development of the pupils through various types of knowledge. The intellectual development of the pupils is usually connected to their social, economic, political and cultural development. The interrelationships among the aforementioned discourses create the following categories of reference under which citations from transcribed texts are used to show the way that these categories are formed. The identified categories on citizenship education content are:

The problems of our society:

> We get to know what is going on the real world …so that we'll not exploit or be exploited (1),

> At least one lesson that teaches us about our society and the European Union …

> (… at this point all pupils in the group nodded that they agreed (2))

> We learn how to walk in the road safely and we help younger students to do so too (3)

The political, economic and social history of our country:

> We learn about our kings and our governors at different times… (2)

> Citizenship education helps us understand how people in the old times lived, how they survived, what they had to create in their societies, how they made their decisions… (3)

> We are urged to think about our future…what are we going to do when we grow up? What occupation are we going to be in? (1)

The laws, rights and responsibilities:

> Citizenship education shows us our rights and our responsibilities and speaks to us about our State (2)

> Young and older people should all know about their rights and responsibilities, they should be prepared to participate in Greek Democracy (1)

> We learn about the Constitution, the State, the society we shall be in … (3)

The moral values:

> In citizenship education we learn about our culture and civilisation (interruption) Every Greek citizen who lives in Greece or abroad has got the right to vote … (2)

> We learn that we should not depend on others … we should respect others (interruption) we learn that we should speak freely, we should all be equal as law says (another interruption) although some people say that laws are made to be broken … I do not believe that (most participants nodded agreement) (1)

> We learn to work together, to respect one another, to be democratic … (3)

The above references describe the content of citizenship education at this time as one that mainly offers knowledge of 'Social and Political Education', as the lesson is named in the Greek national curriculum.

The discourse on citizenship education teaching learning methodologies

As far as the discourse on the methodologies currently applied in the citizenship education lesson is concerned, it was described (directly and indirectly) as one that holds most of the 'traditional pedagogies'. However, in School 1 there appear to be some participatory methodologies.

> We do not analyse what we learn as we do in Language or Mathematics. …Our teacher says the lesson to us, then we open our books and we read the lesson, we understand the meaning so that [when] we go home and study the lesson it will be easier for us to learn it better. (2)

> Our teacher told us to take care of the football field close to our school. So we did, all of us … we worked hard … we organised ourselves (1)

> We visited the mayor and spoke to him on issues related to our school and… (3)

The discourse on the pupil assessment methodologies

The references to their assessment were mainly made as a response to enabling questions such as 'How do you know if you do well in this lesson?' or 'How does your teacher know how you are doing in lessons?' In all groups, the immediate and most common response was 'from our grades'; there were no indications that they might have doubted the validity of the grades. They blamed themselves for low grades, stating that they used them as a catalyst to study more. They would not easily reveal the clear way that makes them know how well they perform. Some participants, especially in School 2 insisted on saying 'we know how well we do, we just do'. More specific extracts show the importance of the grades the teacher gives for all the groups:

> We know from the results: our work (interruption) and it's the grades too. (1)

> We know from the grades, or from the answer we give-depending on how difficult the question the teachers asks is… [interruption] we all do well, somewhere. Everyone has a talent [this reference was accepted from all, though one said] …But some of us do not try as hard as we should…we need to be pushed (3)

Most pupils believed that the teacher should know how well they do, referring (with equal frequency) to the necessity to assist them to improve, and to inform the parents on their status (so that the parents might help towards improvement).

There was a weak reference to the role of assessment in helping them become conscious and efficient learners. In School 1 there was an interesting description of the learning process in school that was clearly analysed. This description took a rather long time during which all the others seemed to agree.

> Our learning in school is like going up a ladder. The school and the teacher help us. But we should know ourselves and try. Try to become better and better … In the end we should be able to become democratic citizens in the contemporary Greek society.

Concluding comments

The brief presentation of our findings indicates that the pupils of our sample have the general notion that citizenship education, as it is now being taught in Greek schools, is just to 'learn about society, the State …' The non-content oriented goals of citizenship education (i.e. developing skills, attitudes, values) are very closely related to the knowledge content. They describe rather traditional methodologies used for this lesson and it is clear that what they say about assessment applies to all school-based lessons.

However, it was obvious in the conversations that the notion of democratic citizenship underpinned all the issues connected to citizenship education. This notion was translated, for example, to the idea of equity: 'we all have some talents', or to the value of helping others: 'taking care of the younger pupils', or to the need for effective learning: 'through learning we can live independently and creatively in our society'.

Democratic citizenship exists as an idea, but whether it is effectively applied requires further investigation. The findings indicate that in the cases where at least some kind of cooperative and investigative methodologies were applied, the notion of cooperation was stronger and the participants expected more from citizenship education than facts. In School 1, for example, they spoke for a long time on how well they do at school as a group and mentioned their group work. It would therefore be of great interest to investigate the views of more groups of pupils in order to identify the main descriptions of the current state in Greek classrooms in citizenship education as well as how their teachers perceive the teaching of citizenship. This more in-depth investigation would give a lot of information about the application of a pedagogic change with special reference to citizenship education.

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