This paper is taken from

Identities and Citizenship Education: Controversy, crisis and challenges. Selected papers from the fifteenth Conference of the Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe Academic Network

London: CiCe 2013

Children's voice and participation in all school contexts

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Abstract

This paper presents a case study research based on content analysis of student group interviews that explores democratic experiences and student involvement in school. Fifteen 5th, 7th and 9th label classes were interviewed about their perceptions as students and partners in the decision-making process on matters that concern them, as children/teenagers with rights and justice ambitions. Class-directors were also interviewed to understand their views on how students feel about being (not being) heard in moments and places of decision, which would make them not just passive future adults. Results indicate that students are disappointed with the fact that decisions are made and implemented by the executive council without their participation. Teachers' perceptions show that it is important for children to be heard more and participate in different school contexts but, in fact, school doesn´t yet recognize the relevance and importance of a more active and real participation of students in several contexts, mainly at these ages. It is then argued that citizenship education should promote further research and critical reflection in order to identify a new model of practical sense where students are seen as fundamental elements of a well succeeded educational dynamics in school.

Keywords: *Children's voice; Children's participation; Citizens education contexts; Democratic school experiences*

Introduction

> 'The demands of democracy aren't just theoretical, it can be seen in the structures, in the rules but above all it is embodied in behaviors and in attitudes.' (Guerra, 2002, p. 30)

Nowadays, we live in times of excitement towards our private lives. This has implications such as family relationships, compromising the process of socializing and integration as well as the participation in political issues. And is also an image that describes children's position and disposition to be part of school activities.

Previous research shows that when children feel a sense of belonging and social support they likely to be engaged and more participative in school (Dotterer & Lowe, 2011) enhancing commitment to learning, achievement, academic aspirations, enjoyment in school, self-esteem, and optimism for the future (Covell & Howe, 2008; Covell, 2010).

Engagement describes the pupils' positive perceptions and feeling about their school, teachers and peers, and their active perception in school-related activities and learning (Covell, 2010). And, high levels of school engagement are associated with positive social, behavioural, and academic outcomes (Wu, Hughes, & Kwok, 2010; Lam, Jimerson, Kikas et al., 2012).On the contrary, there is an agreement among educators and researchers that when pupils are disengaged in school the likelihood of academic success is decreased (Wang & Holcombe, 2010; Dotterer & Lowe, 2011).

In Portugal, since 1986 with the Law on Educative System (Law 46/1986, October 14th) curricular plans and education projects involve citizenship education, but after more than a quarter of a century, there still are a disconnection between the so called new formative model of students and teachers and the real school life. Indeed students are almost denied of effective participation in all aspects of schooling, so they can't conceive themselves as moral persons able to shape their environment. In contrast, when students are allowed to participate in the daily life of their school they come to understand themselves as democratic citizens – moral persons with rights and responsibilities who are able to shape policies and make choices that positively affect others (Covell, Howe & MacNeil, 2008).

This study is part of a larger case study research, following a critical and qualitative approach. We start from the base that all and each student has its own personal history as an active subject and assume that school today is still educating citizens with a passive character.

Our purpose is to listen to children/ teenagers and his teachers and to know if in their opinions is school truly facilitating a more democratic way of living? Has school a true established culture of citizenship? Have students time and space (in formal and informal way) to discuss and explain their points of view, opinions and contributes about school decisions that directly affects their school experiences?

Children's rights provide a provocation to think and practice differently but, are teachers ready, aware and 'empowered' to prepare children to become committed citizens, assuming an active role capable of controlling the world that surrounds them by the conscientious exercise of its freedom and responsibility?

We also enhance the fundamental role which is supposed to be done by teachers, in the way that student's actions are not only passive and submissive to what is institutionalized by schools, but otherwise it should be more and more active and committed, promoting its own subject condition.

The results of this study can provide fresh insight into the role that school can play as a source of a more effective citizenship education, provide students more opportunities for being active involved in all school contexts remembering educators and community in general that for being a citizen there's no proper age. But, being taught as citizens since now, children learns and develops their conscience and civic attitudes, practicing, involving, compromising and being more active adults in their future.

Student's voices and democratic experiences in school

'No one learns to listen and understand if not being heard and understood at first'

(Amado, 2007, p.127).

There are several ways to listen students voices and the result is always positive, highlighting the close relationship, the trust and respect between teachers and students (Maitles & Deuchar, 2006). Student voice applies to strategies in which students are invited to discuss/ present their views on school issues (Arnot, McIntyre, Pedder, & Reay, 2004). Student participation in school affairs includes also strategies to provide student opportunities for an active involvement in decision making processes of their schools (Flutter, 2007).

There is growing evidence that when children are respected as citizens they demonstrate the values, skills and behaviours that define active citizenship. Children who are taught about their contemporaneous rights and responsibilities in schools that respect those rights by allowing meaningful participation are children who display moral and socially responsible behaviours and feel empowered to act (Howe & Covell, 2009; Covell, Howe & McNeil, 2008).

It is well known that democratic experiences in school develop children's conscience and civic attitude (Biesta & Lawy, 2006; Covell, 2010; Haste, 2004; Maitles & Deuchar, 2006; Rudduck & Fielding, 2006). Today, curricula and educational school projects have a wider component of civic and citizenship training. According to United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, it's necessary to promote and listen to child/ youth, since 'young people are citizens now, not citizens waiting' (Maitles & Deucher, 2006, p. 250). However, empirical demonstrations of the benefits of such citizenship education are few and have been found in studies of pupils of secondary school age (Mitsoni, 2006; Howe & Covell, 2009).

A meaningful involvement of students implies an awareness of the educational actors, that young people can and should play a crucial role for the success and improvement of the school (Fletcher, 2005). According this, Rudduck & Flutter (2007) suggest that greater attention to student participation (hear them is to put them to participate) can promote the learning process.

Children, being asked to express themselves at/ about decision-making processes and promoting their critical points of view about daily life school problems becoming themselves the ones who promote a culture of citizenship, wanting to be in places and situations, taking care of their rights and not being tolerant towards injustice.

Teachers, being and working with students, have a strategic and fundamental role to foster students with the disposition to be active and committed with school and

promoting themselves as subjects/ actors, rather than into a passive or a submissive disposition imposed by their institutionalized condition. This implies that teachers and students must be seen in a circular and collaborative perspective, rather than in a hierarchical perspective of relationships.

Society and its' formal, non-formal and informal educative institutions (school, family and civil-organizations in general) has, nowadays the great responsibility to be partners in a difficult educative process of young generations that will be the future adults. Promoting educative democratic experiences since young children, make them sure that they have the right to be children, students, individual and social learners for being persons in developed societies.

Student's participation in school contexts

> 'School will assume itself for all, as a place of hospitality, when the process of making children and teenagers becoming "students" turn also into a process of making students becoming individual "citizens."' (Canário, 2008, p.80)

Several authors, returning to school and overcoming any familiarity with that context, have sought perceive as objectively as possible, and from the reports of students, parents and teachers, how school is daily lived by them and how they fulfill their social and scholar roles (Covell, Howe & Polegato, 2011; Gibbons & Silva, 2011 , Lewis, Kim & Bey, 2011; Williams, Hunnell & Sánchez, 2011; Covell, 2010; Teixeira, 2010; Osler, 2010; Rodrigues, 2009; Silva, 2004, 2008; Abrantes, 2003, 2008; Croll , Attwood, Fuller & Last, 2008; Carter, McGee, Taylor & Williams 2007; Gallan & Philippot, 2005; Felouzis, Liot & Perroton, 2005; Swaminathan, 2004; Dubet & Martuccelli, 1996, among others).

All these studies are different and complementary broader considerations that allow us a better understanding of the meaning of school to students, and what are their thoughts and feelings about their schooling. Important data so many times not considered due to the fact that students still remain "invisible" and, therefore, not recognized (Osler, 2010; Covell, 2010) as important contributions to make school a well-being space for everyone in and out school context (family and community).

Successive changes of compulsory education and the curricula themselves, held in Portugal and in other countries throughout the twentieth century, demonstrate the adaptation of models and teaching methods to social changes and to the extension of school education to all. And a new meaning of school must respond to new demands of society (teaching and educating, but also occupy children and adolescents) and of economy (qualifying, but also delay the labour market or, quite often, unemployment).

Students' relationship with school, depending on their contexts of daily living and their personal experiences, has a wide field of analysis. Indeed, in recent decades has been of

common interest and concern to know and reveal the perceptions that students, parents and teachers have about what's the school and his mission. Such interest has aimed to a better understanding of school reality in order to know what to do in order to suppress any negative and devaluated feelings that may exist.

Goals, methodology and participants

This study investigated the students' perceptions as students and partners in the decision-making process on matters that concern them, as children/ teenagers with rights and justice ambitions. There were three key objectives of the study. The first objective was to investigate what students' feelings regarding their absence in certain school spaces and moments. The second objective was to investigate how students react to certain decisions taken by the school decision-make bodies. The third objective was to investigate what are teachers' perceptions relating to the exercise and participation of students in different school contexts and meet the real chances of students in a more participant and active citizenship.

The methodology used in this case study was Critical Qualitative Research, based on content analysis of group discussion interviews of Portuguese Basic School students and individual teacher interviews of the same school.

The participants of the research were three hundred and thirty children/teenagers (students) aging by ten to eighteen years old in three school labels (fifth, seventh and ninth). Civic Education classes were occupied by interviews during forty five minutes.

Fifteen class-directors were also interviewed to understand their views on how students feel about being (not being) heard in moments and places of decision, which would make them not just passive future adults.

As the qualitative research suggests, we chose to formulate some general and flexible questions, allowing us thus to avoid potential biases and eventual loss of important aspects of various situations considered relevant (Carspecken, 1996).

Results

The content analysis of interviews with students and teachers show different opinions, however with a common certainty as to what concerns the relevant and necessary presence of students in school decision-making bodies.

Considering the fact that school should be where students experiment different ways of how to see life, fostering them how to act in different educational contexts, students when questioned about being considered in the make decision process showed

disappointment and resignation about the fact that decisions are made and put in practice by the executive council without their participation.

> 'Usually decisions are made by the executive council and they are put into practice without asking us anything. But ... it has always been like that…' (Student from 8th Grade)

> 'It´s useless, teachers do not hear us. They don't take us seriously, and we express our dissatisfaction.' (Student from 9th grade)

In spite of that, they are also conscious that they could always do more, proposing and suggesting ideas to participate in formal as well as in informal places of school.

> "… for instance, we have made a newspaper, a wall newspaper and in paper to sell to relatives and friends … but we could do more. " (Student from 8th Grade)

Despite of that they feel that school is for them and they are the main reason for school existence.

> '… but I think school should also be our space, above all, because we… students are the ones who spend more time here, we spend our life in school. If school is not our second home, then it isn´t worth it.' (Student from 8th Grade)

This feeling of belonging seems to be generalized among students who were interviewed, but in spite of that it only appears to be real during time and space of some classes.

Student participation is only visible in some punctual situations related to education issues of some subjects (like Citizenship Formation and Project Area) which mostly end up without the impact it should be expected in the community. According to some teachers it happens because these activities are proposed (imposed) without the necessary negotiation with the students.

> "We are having a photography contest with a reward, but nobody has accepted to participate, it is something they even like because they take pictures with their mobiles … but when they are invited to participate in the activity, they don´t. … if we ask, they immediately refuse it." (Teacher A. P.)

Along with that, it can also be explained by the lack of initiative which generally characterizes theses same students.

> 'I asked them if they wanted to perform a campaign in school about citizenship formation. By the end of 1st term they didn´t present any project. I asked: "what about collecting plastic bottle tops?" And they said "yes, yes". They enjoyed the idea, but at the end I asked "Who is collecting the bottle tops?" No one!'(Teacher A. P.)

On the other hand, and instead of that, teachers also describe their students as having a more active participation in some contexts that, till now, weren´t available to them.

"… students from the 2nd Cycle don´t have that ability, they are too childish, extremely childish, they don´t have critical view yet." (Teacher T. C-R)

In general teachers recognize how essential is for children/ teenagers to be more attended and participative in different school contexts and situations, to develop democratic practices in school and society.

'…this is extremely important because they become aware of their role in building the environment and … they are a part of that. So I think yes. I think it would be important for them, if they were more participative and active.' (Teacher M. M.)

But, in fact, school doesn't have a cultural tradition to educate for the right of participation in different school contexts and situations.

'They are the first to say they're not interested they don´t like to participate. (…) And when they are asked to perform any activity, to participate in that, the majority refuses.' (Teacher F.V)

Some teachers also perceived that school doesn't recognize yet the relevance and importance of a more active and real participation of students in several contexts, mainly at this age when, according them, students are fundamental pieces in the engine of the educational system.

'In there, school fails because it isn't in any way prepared to fulfil students' needs. That´s why they aren´t motivated.' (Teacher F.V.)

'But the school system never gave them the opportunity … there aren´t any structures in school in which students can be involved in a much more active way in the school life …' (Teacher D.)

However, we couldn't identify yet a new educational model of practice characterized by a bigger attention to what students have and can give and a new sense of belonging of students in school.

"It's important that they (students) feel they have something to give. There are some kids who have already a great sense of responsibility, at this moment, and that´s where school must develop that sense of responsibility. I think there´re lots of ways in which they can be put as co-workers, (…) they are also pieces of the dynamics organization of school." (Teacher J. F.)

"They are a lot and we can't just forget them, they are part of this place with us and they should also be asked to evaluate and give suggestions." (Teacher J.)

Besides that, teachers are also conscious that they could do more and better in their education action promoting a major participation in informal contexts and more democratic citizenship (in formal and informal moments), but they really feel limited by institutions.

> 'We even think we could do better but we just don´t. There´re no conditions and there's no time and spaces to do that. So, what does this educational system want to teach?' (Teacher L. D.)

When educators work with students, not for students, school improvement is positive for all involved.

> 'Students participation is extremely important, … it gives them more awareness, they are also building the environment they are working, are part of this construction and, therefore, I think it is important for them if there were more participation.' (Teacher M)

Discussion

School doesn´t have yet a cultural tradition of listening children/ students and educating them for their rights of participation. And we're wrong when we think about children's future skills without investing at collaborative practices in their learning processes at school. It's needed a new practices model where students are seen as fundamental elements to a well succeed educational dynamics in school.

It's also known that teachers have a strategic and fundamental role in the way that students' actions are not only passive and submissive to what is institutionalized by schools, and educational policies, but otherwise it should be more active and more committed, promoting its own subject condition.

Children, being asked to express themselves about decision-making, feeding critical points of view about daily life school problems, become themselves the ones who promote a culture of citizenship, wanting to be in places and situations, taking care of their rights and not being tolerant towards injustice.

Society and its' formal, non-formal and informal educative institutions (school, family and civil-organizations in general) has, nowadays the great responsibility to be partners in a difficult educative process of young generations that will be the future adults. Promoting educative democratic experiences since young children, make them sure that they have the right to be children, students, individual and social learners to be persons in developed societies.

Mush more can be discussed and reflected on these and many other aspects that characterize the daily lives of our schools, arousing the interest and the need to intervene so that all school experiences are always significant and promoting greatest good for all involved. Unlike any adult focused design, we point out the importance of making more visible those who are the truly prospects of students about school and their education.

So, we propose that schools should always improve a more participant attitude in other informal situations, like the creation of spaces and places to promote some activities and

creating middle posts which permit a major participation of young people in school decision-making bodies.

Only that way, and according to Canário (2008, pg.80) 'school will assume itself to all, as a place of hospitality where the process of making children and teenagers become "students" will also be a process of making students become individual "citizens"'.

Conclusions

Concluding we can say how important and fundamental is to have a more participant presence of students in formal posts of decisions in school. This statement is corroborated with literature which has shown us that a major participation of students in school corresponds to positive perceptions by them, concerning school activities and of knowledge issues, which are proposed by formal or informal school (Jimerson, Campos & Grief, 2003; Covell, 2010).

So we must move in a process that each of us in our small world, every day, with small steps, with our different thoughts and different practices listen children's voices, promote children's participation and children's rights at home, in school and society. This way we can always do something to ensure and enforce freedom and promote education and the comprehensive development of citizens of the whole world

Living a democratic experience enables individuals not only to produce that in other contexts, but it also will make them more critical to discover or find and report the traps that make it impossible and, on the other hand, make them able to ask for the right conditions that make it possible to happen (Guerra, 2002).

Being participation the most important principle of democracy, this is not just "a right but a duty that all involved people in deliberations, giving to participation not only organic or functional purpose, but also an educational one. That will lead us to a student-citizen committed to the decisions and responsibilities in what school life is concerned." (Guerra, 2002, pg. 67)

As well as Gâmboa said (2004, pg. 42) we consider that "education is not a preparation for life, it is life in itself. As well as the aims of life are identified with the process that serves it (living), education is made by making it happen."

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