

Citizenship education in kindergarten and primary school: Experiences and conclusions from the Greek environment¹

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Abstract

Citizenship Education as a mean to approach the educational process is gaining significant ground in the Greek Education System. Researches were developed in educational networks to leverage this approach as democracy education tool, social justice approach and multicultural classroom management. In this paper, we present data and conclusions from 5 dissertations prepared in a postgraduate program in the Pedagogical Faculty of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki.

These tasks are action - researches from teachers, which brought important lessons for the management of the class and the professional development of teachers. In this framework, national holidays, historical events, education for social justice, the relationship of the crisis, the problems of rural society and human rights were used as basic themes of teaching.

The survey data, as derived through the attitude and actions of children showed that by utilizing the reflection dialogue and social action, through the approach to the problems of daily life, the children gained a clearer picture of the characteristics of the active citizen and active problem solving and teachers through reflection of their educational practice gained greater competence in relation to their role in relation to the management of social vulnerability.

A question some research papers are trying to answer is the extent to which citizenship education in kindergarten and at the first classes of primary school is possible. An important objection is that young children do not have civil rights, which can enable them to use these rights. A crucial aspect is the participation of children in social issues. Child participation is considered when children have a say and get involved in decisions having to do with activities for their everyday life.

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As sociopolitical practice, citizenship is lived citizenship that means active participation, which contains discussion and actions to combat social inequality. It is very important for young children to be recognized. It has also recognized that children have the right to participate in decisions that affect them and where they can make use of these rights (Theobald-Kulttix, 2012).

Children should develop the necessary skills, attitudes and behaviors that will empower them. Citizenship involves children doing and thinking about their actions and reactions (Baker 2013). This involvement begins with birth and grows with the development of skills behaviors and attitudes, which are fostered through respectful, empathetic and inclusive interaction in home school and community (Nutbrown-Clough 2009, Baker 2013). Children recognize the feelings of others and can begin to negotiate. The participants think for themselves, take collective responsibilities, and want to be treated as citizens (Nicols 2007).

It is suggested that adults view children as citizens so that they be treated as citizens, see themselves as citizens and participate as citizens. They can have the opportunity to develop skills for active citizenship. They learn about democracy and strengthen their political identity by expressing their views and making decisions.

It is accepted that active citizenship is very important for early childhood because it forms a basis for civic engagement in the later years. Children can develop skills, attitudes and behaviors, which can help them to be responsive citizens in the future. It should be noted that civic involvement begins with birth and grows with time. Young children can recognize the feelings of the others and negotiate their problems. The basic components of citizenship are the following:

Membership: Development of a sense of belonging and thinking about the way to exercise those rights respectfully.

Obligations: Having a sense of duty in society and thinking about others.

Participation: Being a thoughtful contributor with own voice.

In order to develop active citizenship, the pedagogical approach is very important, which should be participatory, cooperative and pay attention to interaction. The teachers should motivate and stimulate the children and help them to be autonomous and to make decisions on their problems. In this sense, it is very important to teach them to be responsible by teaching responsibility and discipline. Democracy requires critical participation and tolerance of diversity. It is essential to be aware of political principles, to develop social responsibility and community commitment.

Decision-making is also considered a central variable in solving certain problems. It is also very important to consider that the context plays an important role in the development of children's capacities. Children seek, gain, are excluded or use the power from active citizenship. They can also recognize the basic needs, rules and the need for group organization (Diaz-Meneses 2014).

It is suggested that children should be treated as young citizens. They learn in kindergarten basic skills, which will be useful for them for their future citizenship. According to Phillips (2011), active citizenship for young children refers to expressing opinions, making decisions and enacting social actions to show their social responsibility.

It is accepted that young children possess some kind of political identities and beliefs. They act in the public sphere and it is important that they are treated as “little” citizens with their own expressions and their rights.

In order to promote social responsibility the actions of young children can be storytelling, use of scenarios for problem solving, approaching of local problems etc.

By initiating social action, children insert themselves into the public sphere. The individual begins something new, which has a risk. It is important that adults recognize children’s rights and give them access to social resources. It should be noticed that a strong limitation to children’s active citizenship is that they are economically dependent and that they need care for their survival.

It is also very important that adults listen to children and try to understand and acknowledge the democracy in the children’s world (Phillips 2011, Prout, 2002).

The material of this paper derives from 1 research paper and 4 action researches investigating the extent to which citizenship education can help kindergarten and primary school children to exercise democratic citizenship, through dialogue, problem solving and social action.

The first action research was carried out in a multicultural kindergarten in a rural area of Central Macedonia, where the economic crisis in Greek society was visible. The main aim of this intervention was to involve children in activities related to their own local problems, to cultivate dialogue and collaboration and help them to exercise democratic citizenship. The purpose of the first activity was to prepare active citizens and to lay emphasis on discussions and argumentation. Children discussed the problems of their playground, searched for playgrounds all around the world on the internet and made collages. They talked about similarities and differences. They took on roles, one group noticed the games and their state (destroyed or not), another group took photographs, another one searched the presence of benches. The children followed up with discussions and they hung them on the discussion board.

It was also discussed how opinions of children would be communicated. In the formative evaluation stage, they proposed solutions to the problem. They spoke about the memory day of the “Technical University”. The main aim of the activity was for the children to understand the concept of democracy and to develop social responsibility. They used rich photographic material and approached the facts of this period, the pictures and they made paintings to show their images and discussed about the importance of democracy, social responsibility and social action.

They read stories about bad leadership and dictatorship and they followed discussions on the similarities and differences between the two histories.

A dramatization of the story followed. The children took on roles and were emotionally involved. They played games having to do with slavery and liberty. They showed their feelings through dramatic play. They played puppet-theater based on the other story and gave their opinion and their own perspective. They made paintings for the young people in the Polytechnio, they painted upon poems and they prepared a book on this topic. The activity of elections was an opportunity for the young children to understand the concept of democracy, to develop social responsibility and to take part in developments, which affect them. They looked at pictures and videos from elections and commented on them. The kindergarten children formed parties, made proposals, prepared elections and they performed them. They took particular roles and they changed them. The elections in the country were also combined as a part of the current reality. The children looked at pictures from the mayoral council.

The children made paintings to introduce their friends. Children read the story “It doesn’t matter if you are different”, took part in the discussion, expressed their views. This activity helped the class to show its empathy towards the “other”. The young children did not pay much attention on stereotypes and took a friendly stance. They saw the film “Irene: The story of a refugee child.” They became aware of her situation and had the opportunity to learn the rights of the child. They further dramatized the story and took active part in it, showing that they were strongly affected by it.

The next intervention was implemented in an urban multicultural kindergarten. The purpose of the action research was to help children understand democracy, freedom of speech, justice, equity and to maintain social responsibility, personal commitment in community issues

- To be active on social issues
- To respect diversity
- To take part in dialogs
- To combat injustice
- To take actions to change community’s attitude.

The first story titled “My power” had to do with a king who did not have a positive self-image. He drank a magic filter and was helped by some people to overcome his fears and he understood that his power was himself and the others. Each one of the children examined their own flaws and virtues and worked on their self-image.

The first activity had to do with the lack of material in kindergarten. They discussed that due to the economic crisis there were limited materials in kindergarten and they spoke about the reasons of this situation and the presence of similar problems in other kindergartens. They thought that recycling would help to find a solution to this problem. They made a poster for the parents asking them and their classmates to bring material, they invited the other class to inform them about the problem, had a round table discussion, played parents teachers and classmates and there was a journalist who moderated the discussion.

The second activity was the reading of the story *Banananomia*. The purpose of the activity was to help the children to understand the importance of rules in their lives and to express their opinions. The particular referred to a situation where there are no rules, the kings do what they want, the children play games without rules and there is no organization. The heroes called the people to have elections and to elect their leaders and make their own rules. A discussion on the rules and on democracy followed. A further dramatization helped the children to get emotionally involved in the bad consequences, which may emerge.

The next activity was the reading of the story *The wise olive*, a story about bad and good leadership. The people rejected the bad leadership and elected the wise olive as leader to overcome the problems, which have been created by the bad leadership. The young children discussed their feelings and possible actions to take against unfair treatment. Another activity had mostly to do with the development of empathy and respect. It was a letter to a child who did not go to school, because it needed to work, it had not the opportunity to have good clothes and games. The class discussed why it sent the letter as well as the role of UNICEF in similar problems. The activity 'my school' aimed to train the pupils in managing their problems, cultivating critical thinking and responsibility and showing respect to others and collaboration for problem solving. They looked to old schools and new ones and they approached all the parameters related to their function and after that they said their opinion on the issue: are the things getting better or worse? They also pointed out what they would change in their school, made dreams about their school and expressed their feelings. The next activity was called *The yard of our school*. This activity aimed at empowering children to deal with their problems and to take action to solve them. The yard was in a bad state. The children discussed their views about it and about the problems it posed for the school. The children discussed the situation and views of children from other countries. The children closed their eyes and they dreamed of another world. They wrote and sent a letter to the Mayor.

The pupils formed groups and created a poster to show the problem with the lawn in the yard. After these actions, a man from the municipality came and mowed the lawn. The last activity had to do with the cars, which were parked outside the school. That was a problem for the children who could not move easily and were not happy to see this situation. The children were asked if the parked

cars caused a danger for their health and they answered positively. When asked what could be done, the children responded that they could place banned marks for parking and messages on car windows etc. The young children took action and collaborated with each other, with their teachers and parents, to solve a problem in their daily life. The last activity was called "right or wrong" and it referred to a case of a girl who stole a chocolate without saying anything. The class commented on the girl's action and made suggestions on what could be done.

The action research showed that children could understand the concepts of democracy, justice equity, freedom of speech, and could discuss and try to solve problems. It also showed that they can take action on social issues. When asked how we understand the rules, the children responded: "They tell us what things we should or should not do", "help us do the right thing", "they placed some limits on us". "What I mean by voting and deciding on some rules," "Everyone says his opinion and then we decide", "we put some limits..." When asked when we say we have democracy, they said: "When we listen to others talking," "when everyone can say what he thinks," "do not bother others with what we do." With regard to the observance of the rules of dialogue: "we do not talk all at once", "we do not shout in our neighbor's ear," "we do not interrupt those who speak." The children generally agreed that whoever does not follow the rules, should be punished. Regarding the activity letter to a child who does not go to school, the children asked some of the following opinions: "he did not get to write why he left for work", "he thought we would be ridiculed", "he cannot write". In connection with the problems of the courtyard the children noted: "It is bad to see cars outside your school!", "I do not like to breathe fumes". "My school", "my school yard", "school outside" helped children cultivate their critical thinking and responsibility and see that their actions can affect their everyday lives. The activities helped the children to work on their self-image, to solve a problem in their everyday life, to collaborate, to raise awareness on sensitive issues, to discuss about the importance of the rules and about good leadership. They cultivated empathy, critical thinking and social responsibility. They developed social action and saw the positive results of their intervention.

The next action research had been carried out in a village of the area of Thessaloniki and centered on the impact of historical events approach to the development of citizenship education. The historical events had been used as an instrument to maintain social responsibility, critical ability and social action.

The action research began with a puppet theater. The children condemned the Germans. According the scenario of the theater, Germany wanted to be the best and said that it would drive them away if they could not elect a leader of their choice. At the end, Germany and Italy asked for forgiveness and the children accepted it. After the end of this activity, questions on the story followed, and the children were asked what could have been done so that war would not begin. On the question, what they would do if they were in Italy's position, they said that

they would refuse to take part in the war. After the children studied Europe's map, they discussed with the teacher on the maps necessity. The basic symbols were explained and the group wrote the basic terms of geography. The children observed the distance between Greece and Italy and searched internet for maps of the countries. The teacher printed photos of monuments of these countries. They used Google Earth to gain a better picture. At the end of the day, the children of Albanian origin were asked to say the Albanian words for the countries. The young children of Greek origin were asked to write the Albanian words.

In the next phase, questions were asked about the war. One boy said that he learned from his father that Italy was in war (with Albania?). The young children tried to find information about the Greek-Italian War. After that, the children read the book "The war of '40", because the books helped them to learn interesting things. The kindergarten teacher asked the children a lot of things and among them how can people learn about the war. They looked at a picture of a soldier, who read a letter. They were asked what the soldier could be thinking. They further discussed about the bad state of soldiers in war. The young children looked at newspapers to discover if the book told the truth and they proposed other books. The class watched a historical film.

During the second week, the discussion focused on the negative consequences of the war. The children watched the film "The barefoot Battalion" and they experienced for the first time the problems of food, home, drugs and the raids of the conquerors. They saw children without shoes and they discussed about hunger, poverty, lack of schools etc. and expressed their views and comments. The children followed a discussion on further developments reading another book "The resistance of Greeks". The book referred to the sharing of Greece after the Greek-Italian War. The children found the countries and the regions on the map. The pupils of Albanian origin were asked to write the names in Albanian but they replied that they didn't know.

The children also searched for material about the period of Occupation and they said that they could ask someone who knew and prepared questions about the tale of children during this period. An important experience was the watching of the film "The barefoot Battalion" after which they discussed about the children's situation. The class had an e-twinning connection with a school in Italy and they discussed the reactions of both sides on the war. At the end, the class watched the film "Irene: The child refugee". They discussed her tale and they wrote a letter to the UN and asked to end the war. The main aim of this intervention was the management of an unfair situation, to speak about injustice and work on it.

As far as civic education is concerned, we see that history helps to develop basic political education, social responsibility and can enhance the students' critical thinking if there are corresponding motives. Collaborative management is here an important dimension. Critical thinking is the goal of all three fields, and empathy.

Regarding the meaning of war, the children replied: "They kill the bad guys", "They shoot the airplanes and they are good and bad", "I'm crying because I think someone is killed." Regarding the question "How can we stop the war?" their responses were: "Let them tell them to stop fighting", "Stop the big ones from waging war. It is not fair," "Stop waging war because people are good". Regarding the question "Do you want to learn about the old?" the students replied, amongst other things: "Yes, why do we need to know?", "yes, in order to learn and remember", and the stereotypical "yes, because I want to kill the Turks ". Regarding the question "how we can learn more?" some of the answers were: "Finding a person who can help us", "ask the grown-ups", "from television" "from other people who know." Finally, regarding the question "How do we know what we have learned about the past?" They replied: "because we saw it on TV", "since they tell us that it is true, then it must be" and the most exploratory attitude: "We will first ask someone, then we will ask him again and then we will ask someone else." The children were involved in reading the headlines and recognized the names of Italy, Germany as well as the article on for the torsion of the Greek cruiser Elli. They asked the grandmother about her experiences and her anxieties. During her presence, the nursery teacher sat down with the Albanian children.

The progress of children can be assessed through the expression of their views during the activities. The young children gave interesting answers to questions and made ingenious comments on situations in question. On the question about the consequences of war, they said:

"Broken houses, dead people", "demolished houses, children without parents, killed people", "war is bad", "no, because people are killed and homes and schools are being destroyed", "no, because it kills people, they do not have home, food, and clothes." Regarding the question "what we can do?" the students gave the following responses: "Let's insist that the war kills all the children," "those who have a home should accommodate those who do not have one", "let's make posters about what evil does and hand them up everywhere." It is important to notice that the young children understood the consequences of the war, got emotionally involved and proposed actions for its management.

The following action research aimed to show the role of differentiated pedagogy for working on social justice. The teacher the teacher tried to cultivate the appropriate skills in children in order to fight injustice.

The first activity had to do with presentation of others. The class read the story *It's unfair*. The young children formed 5 groups: The first group discussed an unfair situation, which affected one member of it, the second discussed the unfair situations in class, the third discussed unfair situations during the breaks, the fourth discussed similar situations in family, and the fifth discussed unfair cases in social environments. They pointed out the unfair actions and proposed solutions to combat inequality. They were divided into groups and recorded the injustice.

In the next activity, the pupils put on a play with balloons, each one of which had half of a picture and were asked to search for the other half. They formed groups, talked about their feelings and proposed solutions to help children at risk. In the balloons, there were pictures with consequences of the war. The children broke the balloons and discussed each problem they found. It seemed that they liked the game. They stated what children are deprived of and what they have been deprived of themselves. Another activity had the title *The one who orders*. The purpose of this was to experience rejection, discrimination, exclusion. Each group had a leader. The red group made orders, the green group performed, and the yellow group was isolated. The young children discussed what they felt and explained what they would do in each case. They prepared and performed elections to elect their leaders.

They further read a story that referred to the replacement of good leadership by bad. The children expressed their negative opinions about bad leadership and positive opinions about good, democratic leadership. The fifth activity was a story about rejection, which aimed to develop children's empathy. The children discussed the situations and began to develop empathy. Children played a board game with pictures where each hides a social problem. The children presented it and commented on it. The children liked the game. They watched the film *Irene*² (the refugee child) and talked about her needs and their personal needs. At the end, the children chose between white and black and were asked to show the problem of their picture and think about solutions, which would help manage the problem. In the end, the children presented their ideas.

The findings showed that the differentiated pedagogy could help young children to develop social responsibility and critical ability and to discuss social problems and take actions to resolve them.

The kindergarten teacher proposed to the class to move outside the village boundaries. She spoke to the children about the UN project and explained that the videos they were watching were the result of this effort. They went to the UN website and watched advertising spots. The children were asked what they wanted to say to these people and talked about the feelings of the war and the actions they would like to take to stop the war. An Albanian mother even undertook to translate the letter into Albanian. Regarding the questions, "what would you like in the playground," the students gave the following responses: "To have toys and woods," "we want sand and other things and games," "to have all the little children there". Regarding what they would do for with the broken cots, the students gave the following responses: "do not break the swings" "call the mayor and tell him our plans." Regarding dictatorship, the students gave the following responses: "dictatorship is evil," "In prison there are people because they read books," "the police were arresting people because they were singing." Regarding

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WQJhuAfVTqo>

Irene (the refugee child), the students gave the following responses: "She was different and not the same as me," "she was poor and had nothing. Nor food, nor parents, nor friends. She was mourning, crying, and afraid." The young children showed interest in public participation and were willing to take part in such activities. Interestingly, a significant number of teachers referred to the day of memory of the students' revolt against the dictatorship (1967-1974). The main purpose of the study was to investigate how teachers approached the event and the extent to which this affects their teaching about citizenship. The sample comprised 30 educators, 18 elementary teachers and 12 kindergarten teachers. Qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the data.

The focus was on this historical event, in values such as democracy, freedom, dictatorship, collectivity, equality, and love for the homeland. The teaching time devoted was a few hours for teachers and some days for kindergarten teachers. A significant percentage of them focused on concepts such as struggle, resistance, and struggle for rights. The narrative dominated the teaching approach and there was talk of a group of soldiers, who orchestrated the dictatorship.

Regarding the pedagogical approach, teachers used discussions and collaborative learning, group co-operation, and roleplaying. It was obvious that the kindergarten teachers are more familiar with collaborative learning methods. The teaching material were photographic documents (65% of elementary teachers and 83% of kindergarten teachers), other documents, videos (41% elementary teachers and 16% kindergarten teachers) and literature (29% elementary and 75% kindergarten teachers). Most teachers attempted to link historical events to modern reality (75% elementary and 42 kindergarten teachers). The educators (of which 65% were regular teachers and 50% kindergarten teachers 50%) stated that they face instructional difficulties (59%).

The processing of the results showed that teachers were not sufficiently informed about citizenship education because they underestimated the ability of young people to cope with political concepts and considered this difficult and divisive. This affected their teaching approaches, and, thus, they were unable to teach democratic values. There are also several cases where teachers did not have sufficient knowledge.

Conclusions

In conclusion, one can observe that civic education can have very good application and pedagogical effectiveness in kindergartens and elementary schools. The children became aware of social and local problems related to their own local environment. The young children discussed these problems and expressed their views. Addressing specific problems and making decisions help students develop greater accountability and enhance their imagination and creativity.

Engaging in social action contributes to the development of attitudes and skills, becoming more responsible citizens and resolving issues. Involving an entire class in such issues is essential for the professional development of teachers, but also for the activation of the local community when pedagogic interventions touch upon its problems.

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