

NECE Conference 2013

The European Union and the Promise of Democracy: What can Citizenship Education and Civil Society contribute?

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Conference Paper (Revised version, 12 February 2014)

More than 200 experts, practitioners and activists of citizenship education from 31 countries, including many member states of the EU as well as Tunisia, Egypt, Korea and Japan, gathered in The Hague to discuss critical challenges for the European Union and its legitimacy, six months before the European elections in May 2014. The meeting was organized by NECE (Networking European Citizenship Education), a European initiative promoted by citizenship institutions and agencies in Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovenia.

Participants discussed major challenges for citizenship education in Europe. The discussions were based on the following assumptions:

1. The societal and political debate regarding the European Union and its future is entering a crucial phase. Many citizens now take a hostile stance towards the EU, as it seems to have nothing to offer them but austerity and social sacrifices. Nationalist and populist movements demonstrate the extent of a great collective uncertainty in European societies. As a consequence, centrifugal forces are pulling European public opinion apart, dividing Europe into North to South; East to West.

2. There is a clear crisis of confidence in the European project and serious doubts about the costs and benefits of further integration. Fewer and fewer citizens are prepared to accept transfer of power and competences to 'Europe'. The democratic deficit of the European Union (once hidden by the 'implicit consensus' of European citizens in the early decades of the EU) contributes to the swing away from support for the EU.

In order to avoid a simple 'scapegoating' of the 'EU', it is necessary to address the current situation as a general crisis of inclusion, participation and democracy through all levels of democracy – from local to national to transnational.

Against this background, conference participants focused on the role and contributions of European citizenship education. They looked at 'democratic deficits' at many levels, discussed practical ways of promoting voters' turnout at the European elections, taking into consideration the growing concerns and frustrations of European citizens in recent years. They agreed on the importance of creating new political spaces for a democratic revival of the European project.

This conference paper sums up the most important conclusions and recommendations of the meeting in The Hague.

1. Experiencing EU Citizenship. Cooperation between Citizenship Education and Civil Society

The Conference participants felt the need to start a dialogue between citizenship educators and the growing number of European citizens who engage in civil society movements and citizens' initiatives. Such a dialogue needs to address democratic deficits and the social divide in member states of the European Union.

The participants concluded that European Citizenship Education should not be taught theoretically but should be based on practical actions concerning concrete issues. Civil society movements and citizenship educators are still disconnected from each other, that's why there is a lack of joint actions, practices and usage of potentials.

As a future perspective, citizenship education and civil society movements should learn to think of and reflect critically on the political and social state of the European Union and try to take action on multiple levels. In doing this, it is crucial to integrate both top-down and bottom-up approaches.

As one of many steps are to be taken, participants suggested that civil society movements and citizenship educators should exchange experiences through mutual learning and social media. One proposal was to experiment with mutual, reciprocal internships between civil society movements and institutions of citizenship education. There was also a clear consensus that both of these groups (and thus citizenship education in general) need legal protection in particular when their activities are considered contrary to government interests.

2. The European Union as a topic of Citizenship

The participants identified several deficits both with regard to the importance of citizenship education and to approaches to the EU in citizenship education.

The transfer of knowledge about European institutions is the dominant approach, whereas it seems to be more difficult to address people's experiences of their daily life, their feelings and their concerns as European citizens today. What is needed is a less abstract, but more concrete and critical debate about the EU, its politics, its goals and its citizens. This should be linked to real daily experiences of the active subjects one is dealing with.

It is essential to address existing challenges and problems and to deal with the European Union as a controversial topic, including its dilemmas and paradoxes. Learning about the EU should become more constructive and action-based, including transnational, regional and local citizens' initiatives. This should give citizens the opportunity to become critical learners and active citizens at the same time.

'European citizenship education' does not require harmonization of national education systems and curricula: On the other hand, issues concerning Europe and European citizenship should become integral parts and pillars of formal and non-formal citizenship education in member states.

3. Citizenship Education on the Political Agenda of the EU

In recent documents on education issued after 2008, the EU puts too much emphasis on aspects of employability, competitiveness and market demands, ignoring the fact that this narrow understanding of education reinforces the notion of the EU as a purely economic area and business entity.

To counter this impression, CE should be put on the political agenda of EU, while at the same time creating and providing funding for CE and CE activities and projects. The new programmes such as ERASMUS+ / Europe for Citizens should be re-developed on the basis of this revised concept.

Funding for specific programmes of citizenship education should be secured as soon as possible.

Both formal and non-formal education should be considered important – and complementary – tools of citizenship education.

Citizenship educators are determined to address the growing gap between the political class and the wider public. They therefore advocate and facilitate a critical and open dialogue between citizens and politicians on local, national and European levels.

The aim of NECE and other relevant initiatives and stakeholders is to focus on lobbying for and advocating accessible citizenship education.

4. Increasing Voters' Turnout in the EP 2014 elections

Participants agreed that in the European Union there is a visible shortage of democratic legitimacy. Voters' turnout is not just a matter of quantity – quality matters, too. Politics on all levels need informed voters. Franklin D. Roosevelt said: "Democracy cannot succeed unless those who express their choice are prepared to choose wisely." A weak turnout of voters in EP elections proves that there is a disconnection between citizens and elected representatives. Voters' interest in the EU might be increased through new formats and content of citizenship education on all levels.

Participants agreed that the current situation requires a new European discourse and narrative. They mentioned (as a possible scenario) that in the near future the increasing disengagement and disinterest of youth from the EU elections might widen support for extreme parties and movements. We hope that in the long-term the EU institutions will wake up and invest in more alternative forms of civic participation and in EU citizenship education.

To cope with all these challenges, the role of the European Parliament needs to be reinforced in order to bring politics back to the people. Political parties should be more open to debates on alternative visions and ideas. The role of the media in this process is crucial as it is in their hands to produce relevant information including controversies about the workings and the output of EU institutions.

5. Investing in European Citizenship Education

On the topic of investing in European citizenship education, the participants discussed the diversity of national models to fund citizenship education inside and outside the formal education system.

On the European level, 'European citizenship' should become a guiding concept for all activities with regard to formal and non-formal learning as evoked in the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). The funding of specific programmes should be secured as soon as possible. (See Section 3)

While national institutions, agencies and foundations will remain the most important actors in the field of CE, the European Union and its member states should actively encourage and support them to internationalize their work by cooperating more closely with partners in Europe.

Finally, an open platform for joint initiatives and programmes for citizenship education in Europe should be founded. The European Parliament is seen as the ideal partner for such a platform.

6. Diversity of Concepts of Citizenship Education in Europe

Due to a multiplicity of identities and perspectives there is no common concept of citizenship and citizenship education. We are faced with a variety of policy frameworks of citizenship education on different levels (national and European) reflecting different goals, aims and interests, which can result in potential conflicts and dynamic responses. Globalisation (international demographic flows, digitalization, etc.) and different national histories contribute to this diversity.

Due to simultaneous processes of globalization and localization (including the diversification of identities), not only different concepts of citizenship will persist but also new forms of citizenship will emerge (e.g. digital citizenship). This will necessitate continuous re-development and adaptation of citizenship education.

Possible responses are: fostering democratic culture, expanding the reach of citizenship education through more diversified tools and mechanisms, bridging the gap between theory and practice, strong responses to exclusionary ideas and discourses (of a political, nationalistic nature) and reflexive comparative research and learning.

Politicians and decision-making institutions need to provide stronger support for citizenship education in dialogue with civil society, individuals, practitioners and teachers. Formal, non-formal and informal learning and teaching environments must become a fruitful framework for fostering participatory, creative and democratic approaches and practices (projects, teacher trainings, peer to peer education).

7. Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning is an all-embracing concept and approach towards educating a variety of target groups in a complex and globalised society. It empowers and involves people, raises their skills and stimulates individuals with different backgrounds to achieve their aims and goals in their lives. In this light citizenship education needs institutional arrangements and participatory methods through which various groups of people and especially disengaged individuals will be addressed and their skills and knowledge will be raised.

We as CE practitioners in formal and non-formal education see a need for a dialogue and cooperation between ourselves and community and voluntary organizations, to ensure that new tools and services be developed on the basis of experience and best practice. In-depth research should be conducted by experts from universities, research organizations and organizations that act in the field of citizenship education. By including community and voluntary organizations at local, national and EU level and including contributions from and participation of informal groups such as artists, journalists and activists, new networks and lifelong learning strategies can be established. The fundamental aims to encourage and facilitate democratic processes at a local, national and EU level.