Active citizenship: critical approaches and the teacher's role in social and political education

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Introduction

Since the mid-90s, great emphasis has been placed upon citizenship education and education for democracy in line with the demands of the European educational policy (Missira, 2019). At the same time, the concept of active citizenship (Steenekamp & Loubser, 2016), as the full and rigorous participation, especially of the youth, in public affairs has been placed at the heart of the political and educational agenda (European Commission, 2018; Ortiz, 2020). The need for an informed active and responsible citizenship has also been stressed along with the decisive role that education can play in this process. However, the remaining gap between public discourse and common educational practice has also been underlined. Particularly, in the field of teacher training, a gap appeared not only in their education in democratic citizenship, but also in the teaching practices of Social Sciences. Recently, questions have also been raised on the interpretation of citizenship (both as a status and/or as a practice), the signification of the term "active citizen", its correlation with the efficient and democratic citizen, but also with the pedagogical approach to and the implementation of this specific goal.

All the above are apparent in most theoretical frameworks of 'active citizenship', which emphasise that is a popular term in political and educational discourse, but also highly contested, as it is hard to be defined under a universal perspective (Prerna et al., 2015). The term is bound to its local context; thus, it means different things to different democratic societies (Kennedy, 2007). Individual perceptions of the term, particularly of young people, are influenced by the family, the educational system, the media and public actors/agents (Prerna et al., 2015; Sivesind et al., 2022) and may shift across time and space. However, most theorists agree that 'active citizenship' refers to a role and a legal status, involvement (World Bank, 2014), engagement, participation, influence, social and civic responsibility and most importantly knowledge or political literacy combined with action (Prerna et al., 2015). Others, focusing on the educational field, are referring to choice, empowerment and external influence (Sivesind et al., 2022), while OECD (2018) stresses that active citizenship is fostered in young people when they are involved in decision-making processes and their concerns can reach to the upper political sphere, something that re-

sults in cultivating the sense of autonomy, empowerment and increased aware-ness, the capability of making informed decisions and in social wellbeing, in general (OECD, 2018).

Concerns have also been raised concerning the educational settings as spaces in which social, political awareness along with democratic culture are developed and promoted. Lately, educational discussions have been widened to include the formation of an ethos that encompasses respect, recognition, intercultural awareness, democratic and global perception, and understanding. The need for the comeback of politics in education as a kind of political engagement on the basis of plurality, of processing and analysing controversial issues, of cultivat-ing critical thinking, aligned with law and ethics, has received increasing sig-nificance. Thus, the paradigm shift in social and political education has opened broader discussions whether political education should be limited to simply conveying information and knowledge, or whether it should raise awareness through a more experiential and empirical approach.

Democratic Education in school settings, critical approaches and the transformative role of education

Education plays a key role in the promotion of the core principles of the Council of Europe, namely democracy, human rights and right of law, as well as in the prevention of any kind their violation. Democratic education should constitute an integral part of a complete and coherent vision for education, an education that perceives people in a holistic manner. Furthermore, education is considered to be a means of defence against the rise in violence, racism, xenophobia, discrimination and hatred. The increasing concerns have already been reflected in the adoption of the Charter of Education for Democratic Citizenship and Humans Rights (Council of Europe, 2010).

The promoted political and social education takes three directions (Karakat-sani, 2004; Bhargava & Jerome, 2020):

1.   Citizenship education, which is an attempt to gain insights into the his-tory, politics, government, and political procedures.

2.   Education through citizenship, which includes empirical knowledge, a learning process through the consolidation of citizenship education which aims at developing knowledge and understanding tools as well as instilling values, and cultivating skills and abilities which grant students the opportunity for ac-tive, sensitive and responsible participation.

3.   Education for citizenship, which is linked with the democratic and ethi-cal education and development with knowledge and practices.

Biesta (2020), in his prolific work, adopts a critical perspective and challenges normative, depoliticized, and functionalist perceptions of the notion of citizenship based on individualism, consensus and uniformity and supports a radical and transformative approach of resistance for the enhancement of political agency through education. Similarly, Battistoni (2002) has highlighted the importance not only of skills which promote and develop critical thinking in line with the challenges and experiences of the educational community, but also of communicative skills which are important for effective political and social participation, as well as for the promotion of values, such as political ethics, public participation and discussion. Such skills involve solving problems in the public sphere, political judgement, political imagination and creativity, collective action, establishing collaborative relationships within the community. Participatory processes can both increase autonomy on an individual level and extrovert participation at a public level.

Furthermore, we should take into account that although students participate actively in actions and practices within educational and community settings, they remain indifferent to traditional policies of involvement and action, thus manifesting a type of political and social apathy. Western societies although have with a long democratic tradition, they are failing to connect individual citizens with larger institutions and core democratic concepts, and foster interest, involvement and active participation in democratic processes both in local and international levels (Idea, 2019). Thus, it has been suggested that effective education for democratic participation should involve transformative processes that connect the individual with the world and its problems. In other words, a framework that encompasses the values of 'critical civic education' (Wheeler-Bell 2014; Miller, 2017; Navarro & Howard, 2017; Swalwell & Payne, 2019; Hawkman, 2020), an educational approach that acquaints children and adolescents with crucial societal problems, critically enables them to seek solutions while developing a sense of activism. In general, within this framework, young people develop awareness of crucial social justice issues by forming perceptions on social injustice (along with its sources), perpetuated within their respective communities, the ability to express and reflect upon their own interpretation of an ideal and a more humane society, and, finally, specific strategies to realize their ideas and visions.

As school forms an integral part of society, it is hypocritical, pretentious, and deceptive to teach young people that institutions operate ideally and social/public policies and practices in everyday civic life are normal and function upon the ideals of fairness, equity, and justice. Instead of introducing students to a set of civic strategies that assume that formal macro-structures and insti-

tutions operate as promised or benevolently and justly, civic education should portray them more realistically, critically reflect on contemporary societies, whose democratic traditions and institutions operate oppressively and manifest themselves in different ways (racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, whiteness, ableism), which, in most cases, is omitted or not openly discussed in formal education settings (Knowles & Castro, 2019; Gailey & Knowles, 2021). Children should become aware of hierarchical divisions, disproportionate distribution of wealth, and of inequities as the outcome of both individual choices and structural operations (Knowles & Castro, 2019). Young people should be alerted and prepared to identify, challenge, and disrupt the mechanism of oppression along with injustice, regardless of whether they belong to those who benefit or those who are marginalised due to systemic structural inequalities.

This perspective, also, deconstructs the notion that children and young people are not developmentally mature enough to be exposed to such social/political disparities and grasp the unequal distribution of power. However, such a perspective ignores the fact that many children or adolescents have already experienced the consequences of oppression, poverty, social and/or political discrimination, limited access to social welfare or health services, as they, along with their families, have been affected by the current economic crisis; the same is true for children who belong to ethnic, racialized, or indigenous minorities in various global multicultural settings (Swalwell & Payne, 2019). Therefore, they carry different identities, which draw on their diverse social experiences, which, in turn, are often either not portrayed or excluded from national curricula. Teaching strategies and tools ought to respond effectively to their complex narratives, give voice to those who are silenced so as to be empowered to formulate and perform their own perceptions of civic engagement.

Wheeler-Bell (2014: 273) argues that the most effective mechanism for students is "to realize their moral power when social arrangements are not well-ordered". However, fighting against social injustice and endorsing active civic engagement is also tied to the notion of critical consciousness, which involves understanding how inequality in power dynamics, rooted in dominant socio-political ideologies, and normalized through hierarchical systems, affects life experiences of both marginalized and dominant social groups. Therefore, raising critical consciousness can empower those afflicted by oppression that has multiple manifestations and forms based on the divisions of gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, sexuality, age, ability etc. (Adams et al., 2016; Pliogou, 2021). However, teaching to raise critical consciousness is not a simple task, as it involves the examination of three key aspects attributed to individuals: 1. Identities, 2. Positionalities, and 3. Standpoints; this examination is an ongoing

intriguing process, but without it, individuals, and especially the young, cannot effectively achieve civic engagement and social change (Knipe, 2020). Finally, raising critical awareness so as to identify and critically approach populist and anti-democratic discourses are also central to social justice education and pedagogy (Hackman, 2005; Bell, 2016; Navarro, 2018; Moore, 2018).

Active citizenship, democracy and the teacher's role

Concerns are also raised to the crucial role of teachers in the process of promoting democratic knowledge through active participatory approaches. Additionally, we should also consider that teachers' beliefs, ideologies and perceptions impact and influence the way in which they approach problematic discourses in Civic Education and Social Studies classes; in other words, teachers' perceptions on democracy will determine how and what students will learn in such classes (Hostetler & Neel, 2018; Gailey & Knowles, 2021). Furthermore, empirical research highlights that teachers' identity can largely guide their various teaching styles (Sampermans et al., 2021), which can be teacher-centred, based strictly on textbooks and lectures; learner-centred that promote the active engagement of students in the learning process and involve participatory activities, discussions, debates, cultivation of critical thinking, multimodality, conflict management activities, raising students' own voice etc. (Bickmore, 2022); oriented toward community involvement, where students can expand and strengthen their socialisation outside the school ecosystem, participate in community service activities and elaborate leadership roles (Bickmore, 2022). Toward this direction, The Expert Subject Advisory Group for Citizenship (2015) has elicited an analytic list of teaching strategies for dealing with controversial issues. These strategies involve: distancing, compensation, empathy, depersonalisation, and engagement.

Also, awareness and consciousness of the aforementioned, a complex and difficult process, is a crucial aspect of teachers' professionalism, something that cannot be taken for granted. Central to this is the holistic concept of pedagogical professionalism, which encompasses teachers' professional ethical competences (teachers as moral agents and role models), academic and educational competences (knowledge, theories and skills which function as a prerequisite for teaching citizenship education) (Willemse et al., 2015). It also, involves the self-reflection of teachers who have to reconsider and self-examine their own perceptions of their role and whether they will act as participants, obtain a neutral stance, adopt commitment or a balanced approach, become the devil's advocate, align with the official line as outlined by formal institutions, become

instructors, interviewers or observers (The Expert Subject Advisory Group for Citizenship, 2015).

More specifically, democratic debates in the classroom can be proved useful and create opportunities for establishing a community, for elaborating in new light and constructing citizenship through political processes and practices. Involvement in democratic decision-making, analysis and resolving of conflicts, and settling disputes are part of what has been characterized as "difficult citizenship", which is tightly connected with critical citizenship. A satisfactory involvement of educators in managing "difficult citizenship" requires critical knowledge about power and authority, and collective participatory action in culturally and politically significant learning activities (Merry, 2018; de Vries, 2020).

Hence, new types of education, teaching but also of professional mentality are put forward: experimenting with new teaching methods, exploring different, alternative ways to work, and forging wider, deeper and more meaningful professional relationships. In this regard, the role of dialogue as a fruitful analytical way of discussing problems and controversial subjects within educational settings is extremely important. To this end, inspired by institutional and Freinetian pedagogy, students' boards have an important role to play in resolving everyday problems within the school community. Democracy and social change require proper management, mainly dealing with conflicts efficiently. It is more likely that students will acquire management and survival skills through democratic procedures, when granted the opportunity to apply, examine and discuss them in the classroom. Therefore, not only teachers are expected to develop pedagogical skills, but also more complex ways of understanding and handling complex and sophisticated information in an open, constructive, and confrontational way (Pliogou & Karakatsani, 2022).

Teachers' competences and civic professionalism. Challenging traditional perceptions of educational professionalism

Given the current educational and social demands for quality in education, teachers cannot be confined to merely communicating knowledge and values. They have to adopt a more flexible approach, so as to be able to contribute to the development of students as critical and active citizens with full rights and responsibilities (Banks, 2017; Styslinger et al., 2019; Lash & Sanchez, 2022). This latter kind of professionalism manifests itself in a collaborative, activist, ethical and flexible form, and is self-defined as being oriented towards exploration, research, and construction of knowledge (Luguetti & Oliver, 2020;

Gilbert, 2022). Additionally, we should also consider that teachers' beliefs, ideologies, and perceptions impact and influence the way young people are socialised (Osler & Starkey, 2006; Sampermans et al., 2021; Starkey, 2021) and the way they approach problematic sociological discourses in civic education classrooms. In other words, the way teachers perceive democracy and citizenship, which is indicative of how they reflect on citizenship norms, will determine how and what students will learn in such classes (Hostetler & Neel, 2018; Gailey & Knowles, 2021; Sampermans et al., 2021). Therefore, their pedagogical approaches (teaching styles and tools) are not neutral, but they rather reflect hidden norms of "good citizenship" (Sampermans et al., 2021: 433). Current research on this topic has revealed three aspects of teacher's identity, which along with their worldview impact consciously or unconsciously their teaching; professional identity ("teacher's educational background"), their institutional identity (relationship with the institution they work for) and their own personal identity (Sampermans et al., 2021: 433). Also, it is important to acknowledge that professionalism in general culturally and socially susceptible (Mezza, 2022).

In terms of educational professionalism, political and social responsibilities can be considered as part of a civic professionalism. Social and political professionalism is not concerned with political issues. It rather means becoming involved and taking action in political and public affairs with the aim of restoring and preserving democratic values that determine and define a particular lifestyle. At the same time, it is a type of resistance to the values that undermine democracy. This sort of new professionalism could be perceived and developed as part of the teacher's overall development as a professional, an individual and a citizen. According to this perspective, teachers should not spend time only at school, but they should instead get more closely involved in social and community agencies and associations, which deal with youth and adults, in community projects drawn up to help and empower the community, and deal with local issues concerning social justice, interest in and care for all citizens. They should also be equipped with political knowledge, skills and values which will allow them to help their students become more active, informed citizens who will assist and stand by their fellow citizens (Styslinger et al., 2019).

Teachers and students seek the necessary tools and skills to be able to express appropriate judgements. And herein lies a crucial function of professionalism with further political and social dimensions and implications. It is necessary that educators must be involved not only in the acquisition, preservation and safeguarding of a particular technical knowledge (content knowledge), which lies at the heart of professionalism, traditionally constituting one of its aims,

but also in their profession's wider social goals, by educating students in values and principles considered indispensable for a sustainable democracy. When we opt to merely apply our knowledge and skills, then we risk becoming "technical professionals" and, admittedly we have lost the true professional path, our meaningful professional orientation (Mezza, 2022).

We might all agree that teachers have a moral and political responsibility, and it is imperative they take on responsibilities as political educators, but we will definitely disagree about the commitments and obligations this role and mission entails for their professional practice, education and training. It is also important that as educators we should have a strong political and social sense of our role, so as to promote and consolidate a strong democracy, disseminate and apply democratic principles across institutions, and further secure a fully developed citizenship for each and every individual. It is interesting to attempt to see and develop the educator not only as a political agent but also as a political educator (Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Knowles, 2019). It is crucial that this discussion should be linked with the meaning and importance we attach to the concept of democracy itself, inevitably aligned with political and ideological views and attitudes.

However, although we all support the promotion of democratic citizenship through education, we rarely do discuss the pedagogical implications (Pliogou & Karakatsani, 2022) and the specific teachers' competencies aligned with this goal. How is, though, the competent and efficient teacher defined in practice? The teacher's competence profile must be planning, scientific, communicative, technological, focused on design, monitoring students through tutoring, teamwork, reflection and research. Generate strategies to get to know the student body. Elaborate innovation proposals coherent with the learning objectives. Complement active methodologies that involve Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) and expand digital professionalism (Gardner-McTaggart & Palmer, 2018; Pliogou et al., 2022; Mezza, 2022). In other words, resources, tools, equipment, networks and media such as the selection of bibliographic sources of data, texts, videos, images, etc., should be used in the classroom so that teachers can foster students' understanding of the content. Create participative and collaborative environments and introduce learning experiences that promote mental activity. Collect opinions and make relevant informed decisions. Engage actively with research, integrate knowledge and set relevant challenges (Suniaga, 2019).

Recent studies stress the importance of the teachers' training in a manner that challenges normative and traditional conceptualisations and shifts towards autonomy, participation, career progression, the continuity of professional learn-

ing, research, collaboration (Mezza, 2022), active learning, task-based activities, interactive methods (Gollob et al., 2022). Additionally, teachers' training within and for the community should be liberated from the bureaucratic character often seen in teaching practice. Teacher education and training should not be limited to providing opportunities in the context of the curriculum and experience within the school and the wider community. It is imperative that the initial formal teachers' education and training be linked with training in informal education settings as well as in alternative teaching systems.

Teachers must constantly update their training to offer quality education that upholds the principles of democratic, active, transformative and responsible citizenship, and to strengthen these skills, capacities and abilities, the 2030 Agenda is closely linked to human rights, as an intrinsic element of global citizenship. The current Agenda sets out the now well-known seventeen goals with one hundred and sixty-nine integrated and cross-cutting targets covering the economic, social and environmental spheres. Under the all-encompassing phrase of "leaving no one behind" (UN, 2017), the aim is to protect the planet and ensure prosperity for all. To achieve these goals, everyone has to play its role: governments, the private sector and civil society. Specifically, the 4th Goal for Sustainable Development (SDG4) refers to: "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (UN, 2023). Quality education is a fundamental right, essential for building a critical, conscious, aware to form a critical, conscious and engaged citizenry that fosters real social transformation. If we connect it to global citizenship, teachers must promote respect for diversity, environmental awareness, responsible consumption, human rights, gender equality and democratic participation. Today's major global challenges require a global citizenship that is aware, committed and capable of addressing them (de Vries, 2020; Dyrness, 2021). Amid a fast-paced world, it is necessary that, through education, new paths of humanism are sought, different routes of thought and action lead to a renewed and committed concept of citizenship and deliberative democracy (Frye, 2021), based also upon respect for those universal ethical values that stem from the deepest dignity of people, and which are embodied in the core of the universality of human rights (Espinel, 2017).

Conclusions

Lately the concept of the teacher has undergone profound changes. No longer it is linked solely with teaching, but it also includes the development of educational activities, engagement, and involvement within and outside

educational institutions, going far beyond the school and the classroom. Hence, it is considered necessary that the teaching profession takes on a wider role and is transformed into a kind of political and social professionalism. However, its success is contingent on and determined by the wider educational and social contexts, the opportunities for change and the plans implemented. If teachers are to fulfil their obligations and respond to their responsibilities as political and social professionals, then the school is also required to have less ambiguous, more clearly defined political and social goals and orientations. In other words, there is no reason why teachers should be prepared to be politically aware and active, if schools are to remain bureaucratic and authoritarian institutions. Therefore, it is imperative that the educational institution changes its goals and the way it operates, starting to operate as a democratic workplace, thus allowing both the teaching staff and students to take action and initiatives. Suitably designed syllabi for teacher education and training can be efficiently implemented if the schools themselves and the wider education communities feed back into those syllabi. Hence, it is necessary for teachers to be involved in their communities, in order to have opportunities for community action both at the local and community level.

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Περίληψη

Το άρθρο διαπραγματεύεται ζητήματα που σχετίζονται με την ερμηνεία της πολιτειότητας (ως θέση/υπόσταση και/ή ως πρακτική) και επιπρόσθετα με το περιεχόμενο του όρου «ενεργός πολιτειότητα», από την οπτική της παιδαγωγικής, συζητώντας τη σχετική εφαρμογή της. Η κριτική προσέγγιση είναι ιδιαίτερα σημαντική, καθώς οι μαθητές/μαθήτριες πρέπει να έχουν επίγνωση των ιεραρχικών διακρίσεων, των ανισοτήτων και της άνισης κατανομής πλούτου, ως αποτέλεσμα τόσο ατομικών επιλογών όσο και δομικών διαδικασιών. Ο διάλογος, η επίλυση προβλημάτων και οι συμμετοχικές διαδικασίες ενθαρρύνουν τον κριτικό, λογικό, διαβουλευτικό και δημιουργικό τρόπο σκέψης. Η συμμετοχή σε δημοκρατικές διαδικασίες λήψης αποφάσεων και διαχείρισης συγκρούσεων αποτελεί μία διαδικασία ανάπτυξης και ενίσχυσης της κριτικής πολιτειότητας. Ο ρόλος των εκπαιδευτικών όπως και οι ευθύνες τους έχουν ενισχυθεί, καθώς δεν πρέπει μόνο να μεταδίδουν τη γνώση και να καλλιεργούν δεξιότητες, αλλά επιπρόσθετα να λειτουργούν ως ηθικοί εκπρόσωποι και ως πρότυπα προς μίμηση, επιδεικνύοντας, επίσης, παιδαγωγικό επαγγελματισμό. Η επιμόρφωση των εκπαιδευτικών είναι ιδιαίτερα καίρια στην ενδυνάμωση του εκπαιδευτικού επαγγελματισμού και του επαγγελματισμού, που σχετίζεται με την πολιτειότητα προς την ενίσχυση και διατήρηση της ποιότητας στην εκπαίδευση.

Λέξεις-κλειδιά: ενεργός πολιτειότητα, κριτικές προσεγγίσεις, επίλυση συγκρούσεων, ρόλος εκπαιδευτικών, παιδαγωγικός επαγγελματισμός, μετασχηματιστική εκπαίδευση

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