

Schooling Competent Citizens: A Normative Analysis of Citizenship Education Policy in Europe

Authors : M. Joris, O. Agirdag

Abstract : For over two decades, calls for citizenship education (CE) have been rising to the top of educational policy agendas in Europe. The main motive for the current treatment of CE as a key topic is a sense of crisis: social and political threats that go beyond the reach of nations and require action at the international and European level. On the one hand, this context has triggered abundant attention to the promotion of citizenship through education. On the other hand, the ubiquity of citizenship and education in policy language is paired with a self-evident manner of using the concepts: the more we call for citizenship in and through education, the less the concepts seem to be made explicit or be defined. Research and reflection on the normativity of the concepts of citizenship and CE in Europe are scarce. Departing from the idea that policies are always normative, this study, therefore, investigates the normativity of the current concepts of citizenship and education, in 'key' European CE policy texts. The study consists of a content analysis of these texts, based on a normative framework developed around the different dimensions of citizenship as status, identity, virtues and agency. The framework also describes the purposes of education and its learning processes, content and practices, based on the assumption that good education always includes, next to qualification and socialisation, a purpose of emancipation: of helping young people become autonomous and independent subjects. The analysis shows how contemporary European citizenship is conceptualised around the dimension of competences. This focus on competences is also visible in the normative framing of education and its relationship to citizenship in the texts: CE should help young people learn how to become good citizens by acquiring a toolkit of competences, consisting of knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that can be predetermined, measured and evaluated. This ideal of citizenship-as-competence entails a focus on the educational purposes of socialisation and qualification. Current policy texts thus seem to leave out the educational purpose of emancipating young people, allowing them to take on citizenship as something to which they can determine their own relation and position. It is, however, this purpose of CE that seems increasingly important in our current context. Young people are stepping out of school and onto the streets by the thousands in Belgium and throughout Europe, protesting for more and better environmental policies. They are making use of existing modes of citizenship, exactly to indicate to policymakers how these are falling short and are claiming their right and entitlement to a future that established practices of politics are putting at risk. The importance of citizenship education might then lie, now more than ever, not in the fact that it would prepare young people for competent citizenship, but in offering them a possibility, an emancipatory experience of being able to do something new. It seems that this is what we might want to expect from the school if we want it to educate our truly future citizens.

Keywords : citizenship education, normativity, policy, purposes of education

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