

5th World Conference on Educational Sciences – WCES 2013

Do We Educate Citizens in the Course of History?

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Abstract

In the current educational context, the history of Spain is a compulsory subject which all the students of *Bachillerato* have to study. This fact can be explained by the qualities that this subject shares with citizenship education whenever we presume the students will be able to use the learned contents to face the social problems in a complex way. In this paper, we expose the results of a research in which the students' conceptions related to this topic are analysed, the students' difficulties are made evident, an idea about the possible causes of the difficulties are given and some improvement strategies are presented.

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Selection and/or peer-review under responsibility of Academic World Education and Research Center.

Keywords: citizenship education, teaching of history, secondary education, competency development.

1. Introduction

The fact that the youth knows and experiences the democratic system is exceedingly necessary in the current political, economic and social framework. Among other issues, the development of a democratic society consists of citizens' assessment of the abovementioned system and the ability of active participation, not only from political level but also from social reality. Educating citizens in this regard will be unquestionably needed in order to reach high citizen participation levels in that democratic improvement. For this reason, the different education systems have to spread the cultural capital, concepts and value of the society among their citizens through the learning of the participation forms in the democratic life. Educating children and youth in the exercise of their rights and duties, under the principles of freedom and respect, and in democracy promotion as a political and social development mechanism is the task of the education systems. At this juncture, in the case of the Spanish education system, teaching the history of Spain in the second year of *Bachillerato* (non-compulsory upper secondary education) is an important subject for the development of the personal and social youth training. This is reflected in its goals and targets where acquisition of competencies which promote their citizen and democratic training is a priority.

2. Developing citizen competencies through the teaching of history

Considering history as a vehicle through which we can teach the values of our own society enables the establishment of a close relation among its educational role, its goals and targets with citizenship education. Considered as a specific subject to understand the world where we live, the historical perspective allows us to learn

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about the society problems from different perspectives; namely from the social, economic, cultural or technological ones.

Thus, citizenship education, when it is understood as the training which prepares young people for an active participation in their society, has remained present in many proposals. These proposals conceive the teaching of history as an instrument that enables the understanding of the keys, factors and consequences of the current society problems; as well as, as an instrument that helps to its evolutionary comprehension and explanation and, as a consequence, is suitable to build attitudes related to citizen participation. The teaching of history has to provide the students not only with contents, but also with skills and values which enable their citizen development and offer action and reflection strategies for the present they live and the future they will live. This is only possible by developing their critical thinking, social analysis and reflection (Pagès, 2005).

2.1. Methodology

On the basis of the aforementioned approach, we carried out a research (Navarro and De Alba, 2011) which started from the following problem: *Does the history of Spain subject in Second Year of Bachillerato contribute to the acquisition and development of citizenship education in the students?* We concretised this important question in five more specific problems which shaped and organised our researching process and, at the same time, constituted the variables or categories of our analysis system:

1. What sort of historical knowledge do the students use and how do they organise it?
2. Are the students able to establish connections between past and present history?
3. What degree of elaboration do they present in relation with some citizenship topics?
4. What vision do the students have about their citizen action?
5. What assessment do the students make of their own training as citizens?

We proposed a qualitative “non-experimental descriptive and historical” cross-sectional methodology (Salkind, 2009) in order to investigate these questions. The selection strategy of the sample used was a cluster sampling. We chose 10 groups of individuals for 5 provinces of Spain (Almeria, Alicante, Murcia, Seville and Tarragona) and a quota sampling with a representation of the branches of knowledge (Arts and Humanities, Sciences, Health Sciences, Social Sciences and Engineering) (Salkind, 2009).

In the same way, our study compiled a sample of fifty students in the first year of university from these five provinces. The public universities represented were University of Almeria, University of Alicante, University of Murcia, Polytechnic University of Cartagena, University of Seville, University of Pablo de Olavide and Rovira i Virgili University.

Starting from our researching problems, we estimated that the most suitable gathering information strategy was a semi-structured interview divided into two parts. The first one referred to a declarative procedural and attitudinal knowledge: the students not only expressed their history of Spain knowledge, but also the connection of this knowledge to their own citizen development. The second dimension covered meta-reflection questions about their learning and also the target and utility of the teaching of history and its connection to citizen competencies.

The free-recall memory, four assumptions with different topics and final questions, was used for the development of these two dimensions. Thus, in a test of free-recall memory, the students were asked to summarise the different historical periods studied in the history of Spain subject of the second year of *Bachillerato*. The aims were to know which contents of those studied during the year the students remembered and if they were able to establish relations among these contents.

Then, four assumptions dealing with different worked topics in the subject were shown to the interviewed students. These topics were important for current political, social and cultural affairs of Spain. The main required

condition was to use historical arguments to answer the questions. Our aim with this kind of assumptions was to observe the students' skill to associate the facts they learned with the current citizen problems. The four worked topics were: the right to vote; the constitutional reform of the Succession Act in the Spanish Crown, the Spanish Civil War and the historical memory, and the Spanish economic backwardness.

To conclude with the second dimension, we used those questions which referred to the meta-reflection about the learned issues in the history of Spain subject and also its purposes.

The recorded information analysis through the interviews was made from a category system with five variables divided into three different levels which acted as knowledge progression hypothesis, moving from simple to complex (García Díaz, 1999). The computer codification and processing of the 1690 extracted information units have been made from the use of the specialist software for analysing qualitative data *Atlas.ti, version 4.2*.

3. Results and conclusions of our research

The obtained data has enabled us to answer every single problem of our investigation. Therefore, regarding the kind of historical knowledge which the students had and the way they organised it, the results showed students who did not contribute or who offered little diversity of historical data, with random information about historical contents. They offered answers charged with isolated events, mainly of political nature, which did not incorporate a broader conceptual structure which demonstrated that they understood the aforementioned content beyond the purely particular concepts. Equally, they provided confusing data to answer basic questions such as the acquisition of the right to vote in Spain, or the acknowledgement of the existence of women reigning in Spain.

Moreover, they experienced some difficulties in order to relate the past history events to the current political, economic, social and cultural situations which were present in the assumptions. In this case, the students demonstrated some superficial casual and temporal relations, which were dominated by a too generic perception of the events which the students did not apply to current problems resolution. This circumstance is particularly important in the Spanish Civil War. The students did not recognise the conflict causes, although it is a very present issue in the curriculum. Their answers did not show that the students had learned, and chiefly understand, a political, social and cultural process which has an absolute significance in the recent history of Spain. Even nowadays, there are still consequences such as the historical memory problem or the problems related to Franco symbolism.

Regarding the third proposed research problem, we asked the students to take up a stance in regard to the contemporary history topics directly linked to citizenship. When they answered, they only took a stance in two out of four offered topics: monarchy and the Spanish Civil War. Aspects linked to democracy, universal suffrage or the economic system were absent. Moreover, the adopted position in relation with these two problems was based on topics. The students avoided complex explanations which allowed them to have a more critical and independent stance with respect to those problems. Thus, in many cases, ignorance does not let them be critically aware.

Likewise, as summary of the fourth posed research problem, the interviewed students expressed a simple conception of their own citizen action. We mainly found students who had troubles to feel the aforementioned social problems as theirs. Therefore, they sometimes made some assessments at this respect, but they adopted a superficial and ambiguous stance. They did not show a real commitment with problems and they gave quick and routine assessments of what their implication should be as agents who could contribute to solve these same problems. In most of the solutions they gave, they based their answers and explanations on aspects related to their everyday knowledge, instead of including the historical knowledge they learned in the framework of the subject of the history of Spain.

The answers to the last research problem consisted of the assessment that the students made of their own training as citizens. Although their historical and citizenship knowledge did not present high levels at the rest of posed variables, the students considered themselves as well-educated committed students due to the knowledge acquired through the teaching of history. They argued that the teaching of history permits them not to repeat the past mistakes and to have criteria to make decisions, values to act morally before the problems, as well as to be provided with competencies to analyse the reality, to interpret the world and to think.

3.1. Improvement strategies

The offered results identified a student with a too superficial citizen's awareness in relation with which is proposed in the teaching of history, as well as with knowledge about civic values such as democracy and human rights, equality, participation and social cohesion away from the curriculum and basic approaches about what it is considered as "responsible citizenship" (Eurydice, 2005). For this reason, and with the purpose of modifying the educational practices for this subject, we highlighted some improvement strategies which we could consider if we really want history to promote citizenship competencies among youth. Improvement is based on three aspects: organisational aspects, curriculum aspects and aspects related to teachers and their training.

Concerning the organisational aspects, it is commonly admitted that any change in the curriculum will not have any effect unless this change implies a modification of understanding the educational area –centre and classrooms– where it has to be implemented, and another modification of the moment when the change is organised. With this purpose, and in order to promote a teaching of the history of Spain which encourages citizenship education at the same time, some reflections are necessary. These are reflections about a change of the school structure which opts for "the participation of the educational community in school activities as a basic value in the training of free autonomous responsible committed citizens" (Martínez Rodríguez, 2005, p.11). We have to start from the idea that building citizens requires the direct involvement of the entire educational community. Thus, schools are understood as a more democratic structure. With this aim, we should reformulate their working by developing participation and democratic principles among teachers, parents and students; and by informing them about the decision-making, especially the latter. This modification of the school structures, as conceived today, should achieve the encouragement of the students' participation in the school government. If we really want the school to become an institution which teaches what democracy is, which teaches the students to participate and which instructs them as citizens, we have to achieve this in an equally democratic school. As well as Martínez Rodríguez (2005) did, we highlight the need for every institution –from the school project of a centre to the organisation of the subjects– to include these principles. Consequently, students will live a school experience which takes them into account, teaches them and respects them as citizens with rights.

Regarding the curriculum aspects, we consider that it is necessary to create the curriculum and its elements on the basis of a dynamic construction adapted to the present social changes and to the characteristics that teachers and students are asking for. We have to think about targets, contents, methodology and evaluation of the history of Spain more linked to the work that starts from the relevant social problems.

In this sense, we consider as necessary a change in the curriculum with these characteristics: its general framework is the curriculum organisation through relevant social problems; it consists of the diverse contents that incorporate the school knowledge, and its function is important for the selection and organization of these contents. We believe that, in order to achieve a historical education which trains citizens at the same time, a selection and organization of contents focused on current relevant social problems is needed. In this sense, Arthur *et al* (2001, p. 75) sustain that "for students to give meaning to the political perspective rigorously taught at history lessons, they need to link this learning with the present". In this way, the students overtake their dependence on data and isolate facts, as well as they learn to work through relevant social problems. Consequently, the study of the current reality begins to make sense starting from the knowledge of the evolution of the previous societies, and of the necessary search for the connection between the present we are living and the past we had. We support the necessity of the students to understand the history as a useful method to interpret the current situations. With this purpose, social problems play a central role as a tool for the configuration of the curriculum, and its later development in the classroom.

Finally, we consider that these improvement strategies, which we have already underlined, could not be put in practice without a teacher who is committed to them. Thus, the teachers' role is to facilitate their students' learning process (García Pérez, 2002) by generating the suitable conditions to make learning possible, and to try that the official curriculum does not become a "limited enclosure that defines the territory of knowledge in which we should move" (García Pérez, 2007, p.27). Nonetheless, simultaneously, the teachers have to offer useful experiences for the students' training: more linked to an experimental learning and to everyday experiences. With the aim of achieving

this professional model, Porlán and Rivero (1998) propose a more specific educational training of teachers, that is, a professional training organized around the work on "professional practical problems."

To sum up, we would like to emphasise that the close relation between the teaching of history and citizenship education has to be included in the curriculum through strategies that allow the students not only to learn history, but also to live it and to actively participate of its creation. These strategies have to be based on the knowledge of the present, the work related to relevant problems and the development of a historical conscience. Everything has to be reflected on the curriculum, on its goals and targets and, moreover, on the centre, the classrooms, the contents, the methodologies, the evaluation and the teachers.

Acknowledgements

This paper is the partial result of the research project entitled "Teaching the History of Spain to Youth and its Importance in the Citizenship Competency Development. Study of the found Results to finish *Bachillerato* and *PAU*[†]."(EDU2010-16286).

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[†] N. del T.: título original: "La formación de los jóvenes en Historia de España y su relevancia en el desarrollo de las competencias ciudadanas. Estudio de resultados al concluir en Bachillerato y las PAU" (EDU2010-16286).