

On Teaching Objectives and the Teaching Methodology of Sociopolitical Education Subjects

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ABSTRACT

After we refer to the content and teaching objectives that political education school subjects should exhibit in order to promote critical political thinking and political participatory attitudes among students –to increase the probability of them becoming active citizens, following a democratic path, when they are adults–, we stress that political education can be offered by all theoretical subjects, explaining analytically why this is possible.

Keywords: political culture, active citizen, critical thinking, Curricula, teaching methodology.

INTRODUCTION

About the content attributed to the term “Political Education” today

The term political education is often used in recent years, both in ergography –mainly the one that relates to education–, and in institutional texts issued by different National Ministries of Education. If we consider what we mean by it and the contexts of discourse where its use is included, we will ascertain that it coincides, as a concept, usually unconsciously, with democratic education; and we realise this every time we are called upon to think about the content of the concept political education.

However, what is this identification or relevance due to? Probably it is due to the fact that the first society to be truly and deeply interested in cultivating a political education was that of ancient Athens, which was also a democratic state – even

though the term “democratic” should be conceived within the limits and terms dictated by the sociopolitical discrimination of the times (see how the Athenian city-state treated women and migrants and also the fact that it was founded upon the institution of slavery).

There is, however, another element that connects political education with democracy and democratic education. But it is based on a deeper level of analysis: they both emancipate Man/the student. And in order to perceive more thoroughly the role of emancipation that political education plays, we should mention that this is a “subset” of the concept of education, which is broader. It is, however, widely known that education always strengthens and emancipates the one who acquires it. Therefore, the role of political education to emancipate derives also from this kind of reasoning. Democracy, on the other

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hand, is founded, by definition, upon free-liberated individuals –i.e. individuals who may not be completely emancipated, but they are at least characterised by a significant degree of emancipation– and can be reproduced-sustained active through time only on condition that there are such people in its socio-geographic area. Thus, political education also concerns and formulates such kind of social and political subjects.

THE CONDITIONS TO CULTIVATE ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

2.1 On the ways to teach citizenship

Discussing, next, the issue of how School can offer political education or, given the relevant bibliography about citizenship in recent years, cultivation and education in being a citizen/citizenship (Balias, 2008: 9-14; Karakatsani, 2004:xi; New, 2003: 109-118;Delikou, Papadopoulou, & Papadopoulou & Tsakmaki, 2005: 271-272), and also, more specifically, democratic political cultivation-education among students (or cultivation and education in being a democratic citizen), we should mention that, initially, there were two approaches pertaining to the Didactic theory: On the basis of the first one, this teaching purpose or objective could be achieved almost exclusively through subjects of pure political education (and we consider pure sociopolitical subjects to be those which are entitled similarly – see, for example, Civics).

Barely can the other school subjects contribute in that direction and only in a marginal, fragmented or incomplete manner. And these other subjects are mainly those related with Language and Literature, because the Exact Sciences and Physical Education, and Religion to a certain extent, (see, e.g. in Kapetanakis, 2015), were not considered, due to their nature and content, appropriate to offer even a grain of political education. (About Religion, in particular, we should also remind the view that religion –and also the subject that examines it– involves a kind of authority that is diametrically and qualitatively opposed to secular authority, which relates to subjects about society and politics.)

Note, though –to turn to the issue of Teaching Methodology–, that providing political-democratic education through almost all subjects is reminiscent of interdisciplinary teaching, within the framework of which the teacher approaches each topic he teaches from the perspective of more than one different sciences (Giannoulis, 1993: 151; Theofilides, 2002: 12-16; Agelakos, 2003: 13-14; Gavalas,

2002: 18-20; Chatzimihail, 2010: 213-214; Matsagouras, 2000: 287-288), which may also be of totally different nature to each other (e.g. as part of a project, students can approach the topic of food first from the perspective of Anthropology or Culture – see the scientific field of Cultural Studies– and History, under the guidance of the teacher). It is wrong, however, to think that interdisciplinarity is expressed in a “programming” way in answer to the request that other subjects should often offer knowledge relating to political education (i.e. making full use of all relevant opportunities that arise in the modules taught as part of each subject area) even when those subjects do not relate to politics; because the interdisciplinary perception is associated with a complete teaching method, in other words, with something broader and fully structured, compared to a (simple) claim to make the most of some teaching opportunities within the framework of specific subjects. On the contrary, the aforementioned claim adopts only the basic logic behind interdisciplinarity – thus it adopts it only partially.

But we referred to interdisciplinarity, which forms one of the modern approaches of Didactic Science, mainly to highlight the non-incompatible nature of the aforementioned view-claim with modern approaches of the Didactic theory.

2.2 On the content of teaching citizenship

Let’s mention, however, at this point, the components of democratic political education that the School should offer. So, the School should:

Offer its students

a) information about the operation: i) of the main national and international political institutions and Organisations that exist today and their institutionally established relationship with citizens, and ii) the institutions that serve citizens (see e.g. the European/National Ombudsman, Information Centres and other public services). It is, however, considered useful to inform them about the services offered to citizens by certain well-known organisations which aid those who face serious issues, Non-Governmental Organisations, such as UNICEF and Greenpeace. This objective is today met, in an organised and systematic manner, by almost all political education subjects taught in primary and secondary schools.

b) knowledge of the major political theories that “explain” and/or interpret the operation of the political system and political life on an international level, and among citizens. And we should note that these are theories each of which suggests

a specific governance and development-operation system for the society, economy, and State.

It should also:

c) inspire students to develop dispositions and attitudes that would be “participatory” as regards the political life, the “public affairs” and political processes of democracy (see, e.g. the process of elections/voting, public dialogue and public controversy using arguments) – what we call participatory political culture (Demertzis, 1989: 265-268).

d) urge them to establish values, perceptions, beliefs which are in favour of politics and express the ideals and culture of democracy, and also attitudes of acceptance towards every social, political, national or racial diversity and

e) develop-cultivate skills and abilities necessary not only for their participation in public affairs and political life (see, e.g. the ability to perceive a political speech or the content of a newspaper article or participate in a dialogue), but also for their effective intervention in these (see, e.g. the ability to articulate convincing arguments when they take part in a political dialogue or talk in a way that would “earn” the respect or affinity of their audience).

Having stated the above, we can align them to the three fields of learning which in turn formulate the three kinds of teaching objectives, as specified by the above didactic considerations by Bloom, Gagné and others (Matsagouras, 2000:207, 210; Papas, 1996: 109-111; Christias, 1992: 64), to prove whether and to what extent they are compatible with the modern approaches/perceptions of Teaching. Points a) and b) are aligned with the subject area, while c) and d) with the emotional area (: attitudes, values) and e) with the psychokinetic area (: skills, abilities).

Another realisation concerning the five aforementioned points (: a, b, c, d, e) is that c, d, and e can be served and taught through a broader set of subjects, not only through those that have a purely political content.

However, we need to stress that a determining role for the cultivation of all that we have mentioned under points c and e is not so much played by the content of the syllabus, but by the method, the process, the way and technique of teaching applied by teachers in class. Thus, e.g. using the cooperative teaching method (Matsagouras, 2000: 510-535) and the dialogue technique (Matsagouras, 2008: 427-429) –instead of lectures/(teaching) monologues (Matsagouras, 2008: 391-404)–, when used consistently or, at least, quite often, can

develop the attitudes stated under c and cultivate the skills and abilities noted under e.

On the other hand, using the debate technique –that is, argumentative dialogues or the so-called “debate competitions” guided by the teacher on the basis of rules–, is considered necessary because it promotes a democratic culture (Egglezou, 2015) and also develops the skills and abilities mentioned under e, as it cultivates the ability to use discourse effectively and also develops logical and critical reasoning. (Korres’ reference (2007: 38), according to which the skills necessary to analyse arguments are included in “the framework of skills and dispositions of critical thinking”, on the basis of Halpern’s theory (Korres, 2007:37), is used to enhance our position as regards the role of argumentative dialogues to develop critical thinking.)

However, this ascertainment is associated to the so-called procedural teaching models, i.e. the models whose learning ‘fruit’ is more attributed to the procedure applied in teaching, the process/way students participate in the lesson, as provided by the models, and the way students are self-motivated to act during each teaching session, rather than the content of the syllabus itself. And there are many such models today – see, for example the Project method (Frey, 2012; Mavromara-Lazaridou, 2011: 121-124) which is applied in the “Project” subject of Greek secondary education, on the basis of which students practise in working as members of groups, preparing and making a brief public presentation of their project and also searching for information on the Internet and other information sources, checking, at the same time, how reliable they are.

On completion of this unit, we consider it necessary to note that most subjects through which there is a chance to cultivate certain components of the democratic citizen are those relating to theoretical sciences; perhaps because it is to these subjects that we attribute the potential to develop that kind of critical thinking that the student or citizen needs to have in order to develop critical thinking with a sociopolitical perspective. And we use the phrase “that kind of critical thinking” because it is now known that subjects related to the exact sciences (as is true for all exact sciences) cultivate a very important kind of critical thinking-mindset (Korres, 2007: 83). This note, however, does not mean that critical thinking lacks a central core or a central logic (Matsagouras, 2000: 70-117) that is not promoted by all subjects without exception.

Generally, though, theoretical subjects enhance the potential to develop discourse and use language more effectively. But also the ability to articulate “good”, rational and convincing discourse and the effective participation of a person in any discussion is, as anyone can easily realise, a basic ability of every active and participatory citizen in a democratic State. As Canivez characteristically says (2000: 178),

School should edify active citizens [...] [and] offer [students] education and aptitude for discussion, i.e. assets which will enable them to realise problems, possible policies and exchange ideas about them.

Moreover, theoretical subjects cultivate and broaden thinking, perception, intellectual ability and that kind of student imagination which is necessary for them to be able to perceive visionary political ideas, political-social mindsets and every kind/form of intellectual “perceptions” deriving from a subtractive or idealistic political outlook and also the “central idea” (or core substance) of every political ideology.

For all these reasons, it is certain that the contribution of all school theoretical subjects in shaping tomorrow’s truly democratic citizens has the potential to become significant.

CONCLUSIONS

School Curricula should mainly aim at offering a democratic political education-edification, i.e. offering such kind of education to students that would make them exhibit a democratic participatory political behaviour as tomorrow’s adults. Every such type of behaviour, though, arises from or presupposes a complex of three components:

a) a set of certain special attitudes that derive mainly from one specific kind of (social, political) values.

b) a set of abilities and skills necessary for a citizen to participate in public affairs in a democratic way.

And

c) a particular kind of thinking, which presupposes, on the one hand, an individual who has established a (democratic) political perception of reality/the world and a politically critical way of thinking and, on the other hand, a set of knowledge and information –which is attached to certain informative processes– concerning (i) the current political life – i.e. the national and international political developments–, (ii) the operation of the political system and (iii) the main alternative forms of organisation proposed as regards the State and the

political system –mainly through political theories and ideologies– and also the less radical proposals offered to tackle just a few of the world issues.

Finally, if we accept that teaching or political education offered by the School has two aspects, first, the content of the syllabus and, second, its methodology, we should stress that c derives from its content, b, mainly or almost exclusively from its methodology and a -mainly in an unconscious manner- from the methodology and, primarily, in a conscious way (as many values are, almost explicitly, displayed in schoolbook units)- from its content.

However, we are certain that the educational systems of many countries have not yet managed to serve the aforementioned -sociopolitical and teaching- objectives, both in primary and secondary education. Therefore there is still a need for intense and systematic effort towards this direction, not only by those having the main responsibility to shape students’ political education but also by the teachers of the school class. Of course, some countries may ensure better results, as far as these objectives are concerned, in primary rather than secondary education. But, as anyone can realise, political edification completes its circle and offers all of its fruits only when a young person graduates from the secondary school.

Note, finally, that the case of countries which produce sufficient results in secondary education does not change the unpleasant image significantly. Because primary school is the one that formulates to a great extent, not only the patterns and the structures of perception and intellect, but mainly, the aptitudes, dispositions and skills of children which will provide the basis for all the elements that the secondary school will attempt to impart to preteens and teens after they graduate from primary school. Therefore the “ground” that the primary school will prepare should be “fertile” in order for the educational venture that the secondary school will undertake to bear fruit.

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