Promoting "Active Citizens"? The Critical Vision of NGOs over Citizenship Education as an Educational Priority across Europe

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Abstract
In the last decades, Citizenship Education (CE) has been at the forefront of both educational policies and international research regarding curriculum design and impact on pupils' knowledge, values and skills. However, not only what citizenship "is" is diversely conceived by different democratic traditions (Eisenstadt, 2000; Heater, 1999) but, obviously, CE also involves organisations beyond the walls of schools. This paper confronts educational policies with the views of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in 20 European countries. Results suggest that the vision of CE as a priority in educational policy documents is questioned by NGOs that consider schools are too focused on formal democracy and overemphasize respect for rules, values and responsibilities, rather than promoting critical, informed and active citizens. Especially in countries with an authoritarian past, NGOs consider that models of conformism and submission are still dominant, and emphasize the role of CE in promoting a strong civil society.

Keywords: citizenship education, educational policies, non-governmental organisations

Introduction

Democracy is sustained both by civic and political participation and acceptance of diversity (Sullivan & Transue, 1999), but young people are frequently being accused of lack of commitment, interest and participation in their communities (Theiss-More & Hibbing, 2005; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 2002; Putnam, 2000; Russel, 2004; Menezes, 2011; Fahmy, 2006; Amadeo, Torney-Purta, Lehman, Husfeldt, & Nikolova, 2002), while many authors defend that youth civic and political participation is a good predictor of political knowledge, interest and engagement in adulthood (e.g., Azevedo & Menezes, 2008; Osterle, Johnson, & Mortimer, 2004). Flanagan and Sherrod (1998) argue that political participation is the basis of a democratic society, making it impossible to sustain if citizens are not free to participate in the governance system – as Verba et al. (2002) would say, voice and equality are central in democratic participation, that involves a variety of behaviours beyond voting in elections. But the growing signs of political disaffection and distrust explain why, "in established democracies (…), in new-established democratic states (…) and in countries taking steps towards democracy, there is a recognition that democracy is essentially fragile and that it depends on the active engagement of citizens" (Osler & Starkey, 2006, p. 435). Therefore, it is not surprising that the promotion of active citizenship has entered the public and academic discourses and that Citizenship Education (CE) was affirmed as a central role of school.

In Europe, particularly after the fall of the Berlin Wall – that Huntington (1992) has considered the third (and last) wave of democratization in Europe –, CE has emerged as a priority for school curricula across Europe, with many formats, strategies and denominations. The need for a formal education in this domain was certainly reinforced by the process of democratic transition that many European countries were experiencing, together with signs of growing intolerance and xenophobia both in transition countries (with the Balkan wars being the most impressive and dramatic sign) and in well-established democracies (with the rise of extreme-right parties in countries such as Holland or France, where, in 2002, Le Pen reached the second round of the presidential elections). Simultaneously, the significance of CE was underlined by international studies such as the IEA Civic Education Study (Torney-Purta, Lehman, Oswald, & Schultz, 2001) or the Council of Europe project on Education for Democratic Citizenship (Bîrzéa, Losito, & Veldhuis, 2005).

However, this apparent consensus is not without contest. In fact, even the concept of citizenship was disputed as problematic and exclusionary (e.g., Beiner, 1995; Benhabib, 1999), while defining that *what a citizen is* varies immensely not only across history (e.g., Heater, 1999), but also across democratic traditions (e.g., Eisenstadt, 2000; Janoski, 1998), ranging from passive (existence) to active (participation) rights (e.g., Ross, 2008), and varying in the intensity and contexts where these rights are exercised – from minimalist versions that expect citizens to vote and pay taxes to maximalist perspectives that view citizenship as a right to be exerted in diverse and multiple daily settings. For instance, Kallioniemi, Zaleskiene, Lalor, and Misiejuk (2010) understand active citizenship as "participation in civil society, community and/or political life, characterized by mutual respect and non-violence and in accordance with human rights and democracy" (p. 7) that can involve "individual and/or collective act of social responsibility towards others or on behalf of others (…) [and also] participation and involvement in decision-making processes that affect the wider society" (p. 8). Ekman and Amnå (2009) go further to recognize both latent and manifest forms of civic and political participation, from engagement to activism, including life-style and identity anti-political discourses. From this point of view, the *crisis* of participation means, simultaneously, collapse and expansion (Menezes, 2011) as it exposes the decline of conventional forms of participation (such as partisanship in political parties or unions) and the emergence of unconventional forms of civic and political participation (such as demonstrations, sit-ins, e-participation, political consumerism …). Even if these newer

forms of civic and political participation can be characterized, in tune with our post-modern societies, as more fluid and self-expressive (Ferreira, Azevedo, & Menezes, in press), they surely defy a deficit model of young people as *citizens in the making* (Marshall, 1950) and challenge us to recognize youth daily life civic and political agency.

This is in line with Biesta and Lawy (2006) argument that, even more important than teaching citizenship, is that young people actually learn about democracy. Biesta and Lawy consider that young people are frequently unaware of their role and position in society and that they feel that they lack a voice and political knowledge. However, "the inclusion of citizenship in the formal curriculum has served to mask a deeper and more profound problem concerning young people's citizenship (…) [and] represents no more than a partial response to the alleged 'crisis' in democracy" (Biesta and Lawy, 2006, p.64). Schools have important limitations as contexts for CE and "citizenship and democratic learning may require more practice outside school than any other subject (…) being more a way of life, and being a step into participation in real life and experience" (Park, 2007, p. 3). McCowan (2009, p. 25) goes further by saying that "citizenship education is by no means confined to the school grounds" and "in fact, there are reasons to believe that experiences outside school may be more important than those within it".

The recognition that CE involves "real-life" beyond school walls explains why various NGOs are actively involved in this process, not only as providers of citizenship experiences for young people, but also as interfaces between schools and communities and, finally, as actors within the school context by developing materials that teachers can use or organizing teacher training in specific areas (Kallioniemi, Zaleskiene, Lalor & Misiejuk, 2010; Park, 2007). Obviously, across Europe NGOs have a variety of roles, even if Kallioniemi et al. (2010, p. 9) highlight some important commonalties: first, NGOs share an ideal, they "collect citizens together to act upon issues of social concern and are (usually) independent from governments of states"; second, in spite of having "several purposes (…) [g]enerally their basic function is to promote their members' political or social aims" and "can be seen as active participants in open, democratic societies". Moreover, "in many countries NGOs have made special material for schools [and] because of their activities NGOs have lots of opportunities to show examples of a living Active Citizenship" (Kallioniemi et al., 2010, p. 12). This makes of NGOs not only contributors for the citizenship education curricula, but also contexts for citizenship education, throughout their everyday activity.

Hence, for many years, NGOs have been key actors in the field of CE: for instance, in Holland, since the sixties, NGOs were actively pressing the Ministry of Education towards the inclusion of specific cross-curricular themes and were very active in the development of curricular materials (CIDREE, 1994). With the institution of the European Union this role was reinforced, not only because the EU actively supported the creation of European networks of NGOs but also endorsed a vision of NGOs as essential partners of the 'Europeanization' of civil society (Warleigh, 2002) – and therefore consultation and involvement with/of NGOs became central in Europe.

This paper departs from this reality to consider how CE is conceived by educational policies and how NGOs evaluate existing policies and practices of CE across 20 European countries. More specifically, we want to address the following research questions: How is CE operationalized in educational policies across Europe? What visions of citizenship are expressed in CE topics and contents? Moreover, what kind of citizens are schools and civil society organizations, such as NGOs, advocating for? How do NGOs view their roles as CE providers? How do they perceive current CE practices in schools and how do they envisage their engagement with schools regarding the promotion of CE activities?

Method

Given the diversity of Europe, especially in terms of the institution of democratic regimes and political historical past, we felt it would be important to include a diverse sample of European countries to consider not only their emphasis on CE in educational policies but also the perception of existing NGOs regarding the policies and practices in the field of CE. Table 1 describes the participating countries and the number of NGOs involved.

Table 1
Participating European Countries: Current Political System, Time of EU Integration And Number of NGOs Involved

	Country	Current political system	EU integration	Number of NGOs
1.	Austria (AT)	Federal Republic	1995	5
2.	Belgium (BE)	Constitutional Monarchy	1957	3
3.	Bulgaria (BG)	Republic	2007	5
4.	Czech Republic (CZ)	Republic	2004	5
5.	England (ENG)	Constitutional Monarchy	1973	8
6.	Estonia (EE)	Republic	2004	4
7.	Finland (FI)	Republic	1995	3
8.	France (FR)	Republic	1957	4
9.	Ireland (IE)	Republic	1973	4
10.	Italy (IT)	Republic	1957	3
11.	Luxembourg (LU)	Constitutional Monarchy	1957	2
12.	Poland (PL)	Republic	2004	3
13.	Portugal (PT)	Republic	1986	12
14.	Malta (MT)	Republic	2004	2

15. Netherlands (NL)	Constitutional Monarchy	1957	4
16. Romania (RO)	Republic	2007	4
17. Slovakia (SK)	Republic	2004	2
18. Slovenia (SI)	Republic	2004	3
19. Spain (ES)	Constitutional Monarchy	1986	5
20. Sweden (SE)	Constitutional Monarchy	1995	2

It is important to underlie that we have included countries that are representative of Huntington's (1992) three "waves of democracy": the first wave that occurred from 1828-1945, i.e., until after the Second World War (e.g. Italy); the second wave that happened during the seventies (e.g., Portugal and Spain); and the third wave in the nineties, after the fall of the Berlin Wall (e.g. Estonia, Slovenia, Czech Republic and Poland). The case of the UK is also stressed as an exception once it is frequently characterized as the "oldest democracy" in the world. Within this historical and political framework, all of the countries in our sample are members of the European Union, including both founders of the former European Economic Community (e.g., Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy) and the more recent members (e.g., Bulgaria and Romania). Moreover, there are significant variations in indicators of the quality of democracy such as trust in political institutions, levels of civic and political engagement and participation, degree of media control and freedom of speech or female representation (Diamond & Morlino, 2004; Lijphart, 1999; Morlino, 2004).

Our research involved a policy analysis of principles, intentions and key-concepts of CE and a survey of NGOs broadly working within the CE field.

Policy Analysis

The policy analysis entails a comprehensive analysis of principles, intentions and key-concepts of CE which are present in national policy documents (e.g., laws and regulations). This information was complemented using a multi-level approach with a range of other resources (e.g., articles, databases, and European surveys), thus combining direct and secondary sources. We aimed to understand what kind of CE educational policies are advocating for, by performing thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79), a qualitative analytic method that provides a flexible approach for "identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data". The statements allowed us to reach a total of 56 different categories that reveal concerns towards CE in educational policy (e.g., number of hours, curricular strategy), as well as its definition (e.g., goals and contents).

Survey of NGOs

The inquiry of European NGO's through an e-mail survey took place between August 2010 and February 2011. Contacts were drawn from existing databases of European NGOs broadly working within the CE field – e.g. Networking European Citizenship Education, Democracy and Human Rights in Europe, European Network of Political Foundations, and

Euro Partners Development. An invitation letter in five different European languages (English, French, Spanish, Portuguese and Ukrainian) was e-mailed to a sample of 424 NGOs from 41 European countries. Approximately 30% of the European NGOs that were involved in the study answered the e-mail survey; if we exclude from the initial sample the 27 NGOs that refused to respond (because they were currently not involved in the topic, among other reasons) the response rate was 32% – a value that is quite positive if we consider the tendency for the decline in email surveys response rates (Sheehan, 2001). As mentioned above, this paper presents the results for a subset of this sample that consists of 83 NGOs from 20 European countries, as shown in Table 1.

Once the NGO accepted to participate in the study, an e-mail survey was sent to them. The e-mail survey consisted of the following six open-ended questions including a description of the NGO and the respondent's role; the dominant vision of CE in educational policies; the barriers regarding its implementation; positive experiences; the evaluation of the work done in the field of CE in and out-of-school; and the significance of a promoting critical citizens both regarding the authoritarian past (if existed) and existing democratic institutions. Data was analysed using qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278), "a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns". In this paper we will address roles, activities and target groups of NGOs; perspectives of the NGOs regarding CE and school's role on it dominant vision in CE; and evaluation of CE, highlighting the barriers to implementation and positive experiences in national and international CE.

Because the questions were open-ended, it was possible to obtain a rich and extensive database on the visions of European NGOs regarding CE. Data was organized by grouping together similar views, while retaining the specificity of the opinions. The NGO was used as unity of analysis.

Results

Policy Analysis

CE is referred as an educational priority in the curricula of all 20 countries, but there are important variations. For instance, the number of hours per week assigned to CE varies from non-defined (e.g., Bulgaria and Italy), 1 hour/class per week (e.g., Estonia, Ireland, Malta, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia and Sweden), 2 hours/classes per week (e.g., Austria, Belgium, France, Luxembourg and Spain), 3 hours/classes per week (e.g. Romania and Finland) or 4 hours/classes per week (e.g., Poland and Check Republic); de-centralized education policies in both Finland and England implies that schools can autonomously decide the number of hours they allocate to CE. The designation also varies with Civics appearing as the most frequent (e.g., Austria, Bulgaria, Estonia, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia and Sweden) and CE being explicitly mentioned in England, Belgium, Check Republic, Portugal and the Netherlands. Moreover, as CE is linked to a variety of compulsory and optional subjects, it can adopt more than forty different types of designations; the more common are "Personal, Social and Health Education" (e.g. England and Ireland), "History and Social Studies" (e.g. Austria and Finland), "Ethic Education" (e.g. Finland and Slovakia), "Civic Education" (Poland and France) and "History and Geography" (e.g., Italy and Luxembourg). Finally, CE can be implemented as a cross-curricular theme, as the object of a specific subject in the curricula or as an optional or compulsory subject (or other type of curricular space); the option for a cross-curricular strategy is the most frequently adopted at both primary and lower secondary education.

The vision of CE in educational policy documents is very diverse and includes "commitment to the democratic state", "knowledge of human rights", "active participation in the democratic process", "respect for diversity", "responsibility", "social coexistence", "tolerance", and the development of "social skills and competencies" or of "critical consciousness and reflection". On the whole, most countries emphasise "individual development" (e.g. Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, England, Estonia, Finland, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Sweden, Slovakia and Spain) and "active participation in the democratic process" (e.g. Austria, Belgium, England, Finland, France, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia and Spain) that involves politics within different spaces such as school and community, as well as "responsibility" (e.g. Austria, Czech Republic, England, Estonia, Finland, Italy, Luxembourg, Portugal, Sweden, Slovakia, Slovenia and Spain) and "social skills and competencies" (e.g. Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, England, Finland, Ireland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, Slovakia and Slovenia) (Figure 1).

Category

Social Skills and Competencies ▬▬▬ 12

Responsibility ▬▬▬ 12

Active Participation in democratic process ▬▬▬ 12

Individual Development ▬▬▬▬ 15

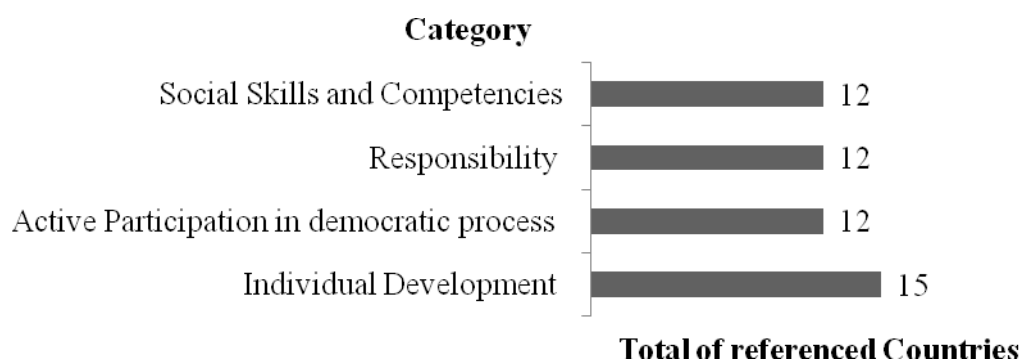**Total of referenced Countries**

Figure 1. Higher level of referenced categories in 20 countries

Less frequently, but mentioned in various countries, are associations between CE and "equal opportunities" (e.g. Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Malta, Slovakia and Spain), "critical consciousness and reflection" (e.g. Austria, England, France, Ireland, Luxembourg, Portugal, Slovenia and Spain), and "respect for diversity" (e.g. Belgium, Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Malta, Portugal, Sweden and Slovenia). Similarly there are references to "social development" (e.g. Czech Republic, England, Finland, Ireland, Portugal and Slovakia), stressing notions of integrity and ethics, "lifelong education" (e.g. Belgium, Czech Republic, England, Luxembourg, Malta and Spain) and "creativity" (e.g. Ireland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Slovakia and Slovenia), "decision-making" (e.g. Austria, England, Ireland, Italy, and Slovenia), "freedom" (e.g. Austria, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia and Spain), "gender equality" (e.g. Czech Republic, France, Luxembourg, Romania and Sweden) and "sustainable development" (e.g. Czech Republic, France, Luxembourg, Sweden and Slovakia) (Figure 2).

Category

Total of referenced countries
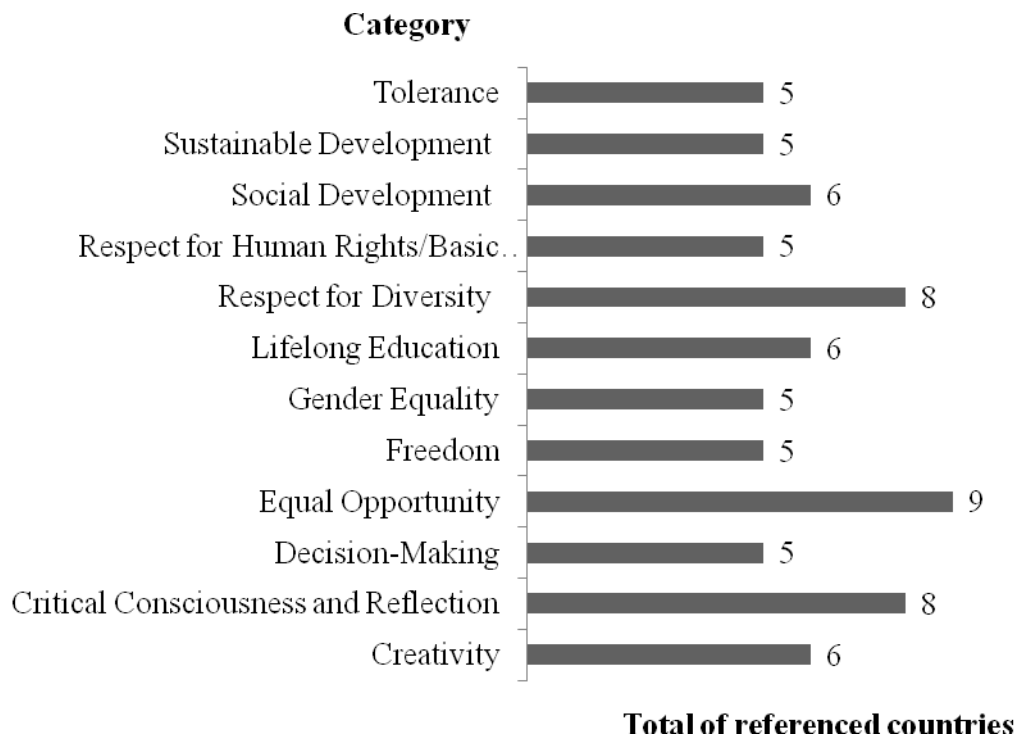
Figure 2. Intermediated level of referenced categories in 20 countries

Besides these commonalties, less frequently CE appears associated with a large variety of other concepts such as "solidarity" (e.g. France and Spain), "rights" (e.g. Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic and Italy), national (e.g. Austria, Estonia, Slovenia) and European identity (e.g. Slovenia), "moral values" (e.g. Bulgaria, Italy and Slovakia), "empowerment" (e.g. Belgium and Ireland) or "entrepreneurship" (e.g. Bulgaria, England and Slovakia) (Figure 3).

Category

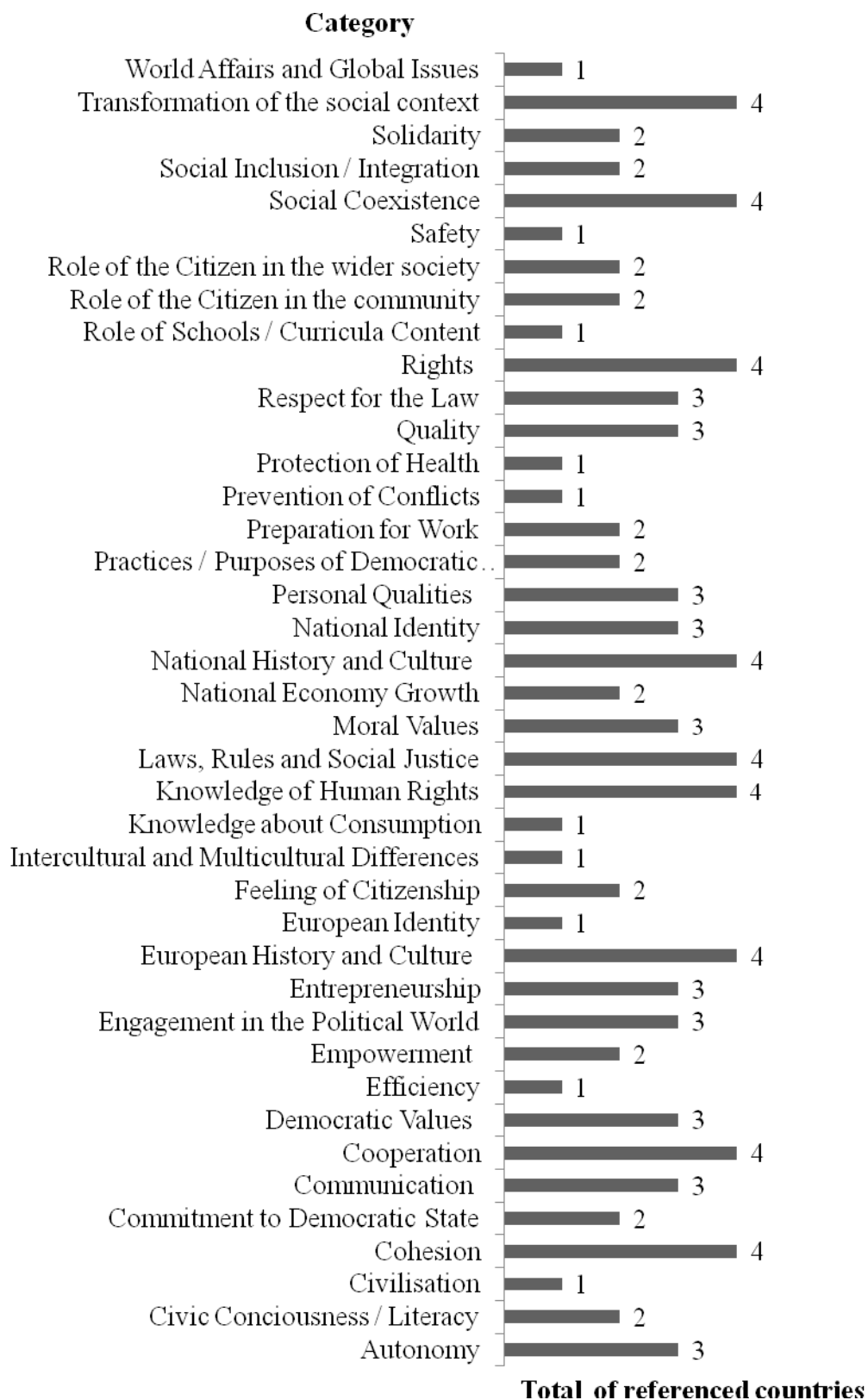| Category	Total of referenced countries
World Affairs and Global Issues	1
Transformation of the social context	4
Solidarity	2
Social Inclusion / Integration	2
Social Coexistence	4
Safety	1
Role of the Citizen in the wider society	2
Role of the Citizen in the community	2
Role of Schools / Curricula Content	1
Rights	4
Respect for the Law	3
Quality	3
Protection of Health	1
Prevention of Conflicts	1
Preparation for Work	2
Practices / Purposes of Democratic...	2
Personal Qualities	3
National Identity	3
National History and Culture	4
National Economy Growth	2
Moral Values	3
Laws, Rules and Social Justice	4
Knowledge of Human Rights	4
Knowledge about Consumption	1
Intercultural and Multicultural Differences	1
Feeling of Citizenship	2
European Identity	1
European History and Culture	4
Entrepreneurship	3
Engagement in the Political World	3
Empowerment	2
Efficiency	1
Democratic Values	3
Cooperation	4
Communication	3
Commitment to Democratic State	2
Cohesion	4
Civilisation	1
Civic Conciousness / Literacy	2
Autonomy	3

Total of referenced countries

Figure 3. Lower level of referenced categories in 20 countries

On the whole, these results suggest that CE is presented as a priority even if this is not always translated in an intense curricular timetable or space; moreover, given the large variation of topics and contents associated with CE, it appears as a (large) umbrella term to accommodate both more traditional (e.g., national identity, moral values) and emerging (e.g. entrepreneurship) educational and social concerns. Again, we could question whether this might be described as a strategy of compensatory legitimation (Weiler, 1990) that risks producing little real change in the daily lives of schools.

Survey of NGOs

To a significant number of participating NGOs, CE is at the core of their services and actions: NGOs play an important role as CE providers at all levels of education, using formal, non-formal and informal methodologies, complementing school provision and fostering citizens' active participation in a democratic society. However, even if the respondents emphasise their advocacy efforts with political and educational stakeholders and decision-makers for the formal instilment of CE and its effective implementation within the educational system, "the advisory councils are few and end up not allowing the views and contributions of citizens and NGOs which would be crucial for policy decision-making" (NGO, Portugal). Moreover, they criticise a top-down approach where

> (...) the concepts and proposals departed from a hierarchically superior entity, almost in a demagogic and doctrinal way. At the end, it is expected that in the end of the whole process of learning, people change their daily actions, habits and lifestyles (...) which most often does not happen, because only are forecast and "imposed" one-off actions and without continuity with the support of the students and not constructed with the students in order to ensure their ownership of the process (NGO, Portugal).

The participating NGOs view the dominant vision of CE as founded in the assumption that school has the role to provide pupils with the knowledge, skills and values that are considered relevant to be good citizens. Thus,

> (...) its starting point lies in perceiving the actual society as a society with a moral deficit. Therefore, young people need to be schooled into good citizens. (...) It is associated with a particular set of claims about what makes a citizen and about the necessary conditions of that status (NGO, Belgium).

The institutionalised CE is also criticised for being too focused on formal democracy – public institutions and its functioning, elections, political parties, etc. – and for overemphasising respect for rules, values and responsibilities, both at national and European level, hence "it is seen as an instrument of social cohesion" (NGO, Romania), suggesting that an active and critical approach to CE is not often realised, meaning that CE "lacks the critical, questioning, [and] social justice aspect at the centre of active citizenship" (NGO, England).

Mostly NGOs agree that much of the CE provision in schools is focused on the transmission of knowledge about citizenship instead of on the creation of conditions and opportunities to exercise citizenship on daily life; but CE implies

> (...) the involvement of young people in public life and affairs and this encompasses a wide range of activity requiring diverse skills, [because] young people learn what it means to be a citizen through discussions and debates in the classroom and participation in the life of the school or college and in the wider community. They are

given opportunities both to develop their learning and to put it into practice in 'real life' situations (NGO, England).

Additionally, this means

(...) that pupils should develop and strengthen concept skills, method skills, modelling skills and decision-making skills. (…) Instead of mainly teaching knowledge about political institutions and the political system [CE should] focus on the empowerment of pupils for taking part in the democratic system (NGO, Austria).

Moreover, it is important to foster

(...) the creation of local networks that meet regularly and bring together youth, youth associations, leaders, elected politicians … with the aim to reflect and act together so that youngsters are recognized as full participants in planning, but make sure they also take this role (NGO, France).

In addition, the respondent NGOs emphasise that teachers lack the knowledge and the skills to deliver CE using innovative methodologies, even recognizing that there are schools, teachers and educators who have a positive involvement. On their vision, leading political and educational structures often do not create the necessary conditions to foster the use of collaborative, practical and flexible methodologies, there is a "time pressure on teachers and schools, [as well as] a growing focus on 'core competencies like language and math" (NGO, the Netherlands). It is assumed that citizenship education should promote "participative practice by encouraging young people to progressively take more responsibility in selecting, planning and leading activities that are based on their interests" (NGO, England).

NGOs highlight the need for more innovative methodological and pedagogical materials to deliver CE, namely through the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). The application of ICTs as a means for

(...) young people to acquire and strengthen participative decision-making competences as well as media competence. (...) [It also] demonstrates how modern media, above all the internet and WEB 2.0, can support political and civic education for young people and foster democratic discourse among them. (…). This approach of strengthening e-participation among young people is highly innovative (NGO, Austria).

Considering possible improvements to the CE provision, the "last thing is combining different communities and people from different sectors - public, private and economic -, so that they can together bring more positive changes" (NGO, Poland). On the whole, NGOs "have received very good feedback for (...) [their] efforts and partnerships established (...). An additional benefit is that we connect both political and civic leaders and help form a wider network of public entities" (NGO, Bulgaria).

Particularly in countries with authoritarian pasts, NGOs consider that models of conformism and submission are still dominant in the relationship between citizens and the Government, taking into account that "those countries with undemocratic history face the problem of low social capital at both local and national level. A change is processed very slowly" (NGO, Czech Republic). However, CE is seen as an essential condition for citizenship and democratic development and understanding in all countries: CE should be

(...) concerned with the conditions of young people's lives, and with the processes through which they learn the value(s) of democratic citizenship. (...) presupposes an

attitude wherein everyone, including teachers and young people in schools and colleges, is routinely engaged in a continuous and thoroughgoing public dialogue (NGO, Belgium).

Some NGOs also point out that, given the growing cultural diversity in contemporary societies, fostering a critical historical consciousness "is especially important in order to link recent developments regarding the phenomena of racism and anti-Semitism to this period, but to also show that there are new developments like Islamophobia and more culturalised strands of racism" (NGO, Austria), as well as the enlarged "number of non-citizens (persons of undetermined citizenship)" (NGO, Estonia) – promoting tolerance towards minorities should be an important goal of CE.

In sum, both in countries with a recent democratic history and in those with a long democratic tradition there is a recognition that

(...) democracy is in need of constant renewal otherwise it can die or be set back, that's why critical minds are so important and an understanding that change is possible though it may not be easy and it may not happen immediately (NGO, England).

Conclusion

On the whole, our findings are consistent with other comparative studies on citizenship education that point out the disputed nature of the concept and the diversity of curricular strategies and definitions (Kennedy, 1997; Hahn, 1998; Ichilov, 1998; Torney-Purta, Schwille, & Amadeo, 1999; Schulz, Ainley, Fraillon, Kerr, & Losito, 2010). In fact, our policy analysis in 20 European countries shows the complexity surrounding CE, and how it is defined using a panoply (and broadness) of related domains that can result in a lack of specificity, hampering its recognition as a relevant educational goal and fostering a gap between policies and practices of CE – that could be characterized as a "everything means nothing" phenomena.

In fact, educational policies portrait CE as involving knowledge (e.g. knowledge about nation, state and political institutions) with emphasis on the respect for the law and the security of the state (e.g. Estonia, Czech Republic and Bulgaria), that can suggest a vision of pupils as passive citizens. From this point of view it seems that educational policies, despite emphasizing the importance of developing critical thinking, participation and active involvement of pupils, mainly promote citizenship conceptions based on conventional actions such as voting and volunteering (Norris, 2002).

In this research, we confronted educational policies related to CE with the vision of NGOs that also operate in this field. As we stated above, the involvement of NGOs in CE is complex and diverse, as they both act as providers of CE experiences, as mediators between the school and the community, and as actors in the school arena by producing curricular materials and training teachers to address specific CE topics. It is important to remember that NGOs play a significant role in contemporary democratic societies and are key actors with an agenda of their own: in fact, "since NGOs are sectoral in their interests there is a clear limit to their ability to claim general representativity" (Warleigh, 2001, p. 622). Besides, their own mechanisms of internal governance can be more or less democratic and, obviously, this limits their potential as a CE space for active and critical citizens, and can even result in disempowerment (e.g., Stewart & Weinstein, 1997). This cautionary note is only to remind us that NGOs are not neutral participants in the CE field, and therefore their evaluation of CE policies is committed to their own political positions.

European NGOs that participated in this research argue that policy makers are barely interested in promoting young people's participation as well-informed, critical and active citizens in civic and political issues in different contexts. As Marinetto (2003, p. 118) argue "[f]or governments, the idea of active citizenship is primarily significant because of the part it plays in political rhetoric and in strategic calculations". In fact, most NGOs involved in this research agree that CE policies, curricula and practices are focused on the theoretical transmission of formal democracy and on the discourse of respect for responsibilities, rights and duties – however,

> (...) knowledge of values, rights and obligations does not directly translate into personal attitudes, not to mention that even if a person has such attitudes this does not necessarily guarantee that he or she will behave accordingly. (...) [Therefore], reducing the concept of citizenship to as set of rights and responsibilities would be unfounded and futile reductionism (Dimitrov & Boyadjieva, 2009, pp. 154-155).

In this line of thought we could argue: "if the goal [of citizenship] is to promote students' civic and democratic participation, [then it] should begin to consider the opportunities students actually have to experience democracy in the schools" (Campos, Costa & Menezes, 1993, p. 15) and beyond. The emphasis of CE on the transmission of values, rules and knowledge about society, has led Sultana (1992) to question whether CE is playing a function of mere social control, viewing citizens as simply "spectators who vote" (Walzer, 1995, p. 165).

Notwithstanding the political rhetoric about the importance to enhance youth participation and involvement in the public sphere, the participant NGOs say it is difficult to influence improvements in educational policies and practices due to the dominant role of governments in decision-making processes. These arguments are in line with Marinetto (2003, pp. 106-107) that affirms that

> (...) citizens in Western democracies, although regarded as sovereign, have only a passive role in the political and decision-making process. There are opportunities to enter the state as political representatives or to join distinct interest groups. Nevertheless, for the majority of citizens, their most telling contribution to government is the intermittent opportunity to choose democratic representatives.

According to Biesta (2008, p. 4), CE is not confined to the school context, as "young people learn continuously from the situations, practices, relationships and experiences that make up their lives". Many years ago, John Dewey expressed this brilliantly: "interest in learning from all the contacts of life is the essential moral interest" (1916, p. 527). And Biesta (2008, p. 4) continues: "It is in those situations that they learn the value of democratic and non-democratic ways of action and interaction and it is through such experiences that they also learn about their own position as citizen". Therefore, as many NGOs respondents state CE requires a well-structured and continued strategy, in order to achieve durable and effective awareness, participation and involvement of all citizens.

Partnerships between governments, civil society, political parties, youth organizations and even private companies were explicitly identified as a potential channel for CE through which more public or private resources could be gained and the educational provision could be enriched. Furthermore, the role of CE in promoting a strong civil society is emphasised. However, as Boje (2008, p. 3) argues,

> (...) the possibility of civil society becoming a locus for democratic learning, political reflexivity and governance depends, on the one side, on its own specific institutional

mechanisms, and, on the other, on the broader institutional configuration which such civil society is a part of.

The fact that "only few governments (…) started real power sharing through new participatory policies, increasing citizens' rights and institutionalized forms of participation" (Hedtke, in press) reveals that democracies across Europe still have to work on the mechanisms to enhance citizens' critical and active participation. And although CE has become a fashionable educational policy across Europe, it appears that more has to be done, in- and out-of-schools, to guarantee that it effectively promotes active and critical citizens.

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