

# EDUCATION: A COMPARISON BETWEEN PORTUGAL, ENGLAND AND SLOVENIA

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## ABSTRACT

This study emerges from a research project entitled *Participatory Citizenship Education in Transitional Societies* that aims at a wider understanding about Citizenship Education (CE) across Europe, and particularly whether educational policies, curricula and practices emphasise a political culture that values citizens' active and critical participation in civic and political issues in different contexts. To accomplish this, an understanding of the visions and roles of NGOs is essential to discern the kind of CE to which they are committed to. The inquiry of European NGOs through an e-mail survey involved 41 European countries; however, in this paper the authors will present the results for Portugal, England and Slovenia. Among other findings, the research highlights the important role of NGOs as CE providers, and the need for policy makers to acknowledge their involvement in the topic. Especially in countries with authoritarian pasts, NGOs consider that models of conformism and submission are still dominant in the relationship between citizens and the government, and emphasize the role of CE in promoting a strong civic society.

**Keywords:** critical consciousness, participation, Citizenship Education, NGOs, democracy.

## INTRODUCTION

Citizenship education has been assuming a central role in educational policies across Europe in recent years and it has been the object of international research regarding its guidelines and curricular design, its impact on the lives of schools and on the knowledge, values and skills of students (Ross 2008; Wilde 2005; Menezes 2003; Araújo 2008). Even if the predominant rhetoric about CE emphasises active and responsible citizenship, it is important to recognize that it is diversely conceived by different democratic traditions (Eisenstadt 2000; Heater 2005) from a minimalist version that reduces citizens to the passive role of being "spectators who vote" (Walzer, 1995:165), to communitarian views that advocate participation should involve many formats in diverse contexts (Benhabib 2004; Osler & Starkey 2005).

But even if schools have a consensual role in promoting citizenship, it should be underlined that, more than in other areas of the curricula, students' learning does not solely occur in schools, as CE involves experiences that take place in many other social contexts and institutions. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can play a significant role in providing CE through non-formal and informal education that complement schools' provision. Besides, they promote connections between young people, society and schools (Park, Senegacnik & Wango, 2007). The potential of NGOs lays therefore in their capacity "to act as bridges, facilitators, brokers and translators, linking together the institutions, interventions, capacities and levels of actions that are required to lever broader structural changes" (Edwards & Fowler, 2002:8-9).

## BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Citizenship education (CE) is clearly a major goal of educational systems across Europe, and it has been in the centre of academic and political discourses since the mid eighties as a central task of both schools and the civil society. However, more information is necessary to effectively understand *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?

## THE STUDY

### 3.1 METHODOLOGY

The inquiry of European NGO's through an e-mail survey took place between August 2010 and February 2011. Contacts from European non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were drawn from existing databases of 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, as shown in Table 1.

Table 3: Table : E-mail survey response rates for 41 countries

Invited	No answers	Refused	Accepted	Responded
424	222	27	175	127
	52,36%	6,37%	41,27%	29,95%

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 which is quite positive if we consider the tendency for the decline in email surveys response rates (Sheehan, 2001).

As already mentioned, this paper presents the results for a subset of this sample, 23 NGOs from Portugal, England, and Slovenia – countries which have different cultural, historical and political traditions –, as shown in Table 2.

Table 4: E-mail survey response rates for the NGOs from England, Portugal, and Slovenia

Countries	Invited	No answers	Refused	Accepted	Responded
England (EN)	17	6	1	10	8
Portugal (PT)	20	7	3	12	12
Slovenia (SI)	6	2	0	4	3
Total	43	15	4	26	23

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:

- Could you please give a brief description of your work in this organization?
- Can you describe the organization's role and projects regarding Citizenship Education?
- From your personal perspective, what is the dominant vision of Citizenship Education in educational policies and practices in your country?
- Taking your experience into account, what would you say are the major barriers to implementing Citizenship Education in your country? And the most positive experiences?
- On the whole, how do you evaluate the work done until now, either by your organization or by specific schools?
- In many European countries there have been periods of dictatorship, but even in countries with a long democratic tradition, the quality of democracy has suffered fluctuations. How relevant do you think it is to include a critical historical consciousness into Citizenship Education?

Data from this e-mail survey was analysed using content analysis through computer-assisted qualitative data analysis (Kelle 2004), using NVivo 9.0 software package. A structure of so-called *tree nodes* was designed that followed the main questions asked in the e-mail survey. The main questions captured the research questions that were first defined. So, the initial available categories (*tree nodes*) were: roles of respondents; role and activities of NGOs in CE; dominant vision in CE; evaluation of CE, highlighting the barriers to implementation and positive experiences in national and international CE; and integrating a critical historical consciousness in CE. From the interesting elements found and coded in respondents' answers new categories emerged, the so-called *free nodes*, such as target groups, key-concepts, themes, topics and skills addressed by the NGOs; perspectives of the NGOs regarding CE and school's role on it; and suggestions for change. Due to space concerns we chose to present only the results for the categories more relevant to the current study: roles of the respondents; role and activities of NGOs in CE; dominant vision in CE; barriers and positive experiences in the implementation of CE; and integrating a critical historical consciousness in CE.

### 3.2 ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

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 organised by grouping together similar views, while retaining the specificity of the opinions. The NGO was used as unity of analysis.

As it was mentioned in the methodology section, in the first question of the e-mail survey we asked to the NGOs' respondents to briefly describe their work in the NGO.

Taking into account their responses, it can be concluded that 52% of the respondents have predominantly coordination, management and leadership roles in projects, programmes, activities, teams, and research activities in their organisations. Therefore, they constitute an important source of information. It is important to mention that some respondents have more than one function simultaneously, which could reveal the lack of resources that is expressed by many NGOs.

Through the question about NGOs' roles and activities, it was possible to perceive which are the target groups for the activities mentioned. The participating NGOs target simultaneously diverse individuals or groups according to age and gender. However, they mainly focus on the school community (50%), including teachers/educators, students, experts, and stakeholders, and youth (28%), including youth institutions, workers or leaders.

Analysing the roles and activities highlighted by NGOs in their responses, it was possible to point out some topics and themes they considered important in CE. The participating NGOs from England, Portugal, and Slovenia cover a very wide range of themes and topics related to Citizenship Education in their services and actions. Illustrating this we could note that the most referenced concepts were 'human rights' (30,43%), 'citizenship' (26,09%), 'democracy' (21,09%), 'gender equality' (17,39%), 'participation' (17,39%), and 'volunteering' (17,39%).

When NGOs were inquired about how they promote Citizenship Education, it was mainly mentioned the development and implementation of non-formal and informal projects, programmes, and activities which aim at promoting awareness, information and support citizenship among different target groups, addressing the themes mentioned above.

Participating NGOs assume themselves as CE providers through the organisation of different activities, mainly focused on the development of educational projects and programmes, according to non-formal and informal methodologies, addressing distinct target groups, despite the emphasis on school, community and youth. It could also be concluded that 47,83% of the participating NGOs highlighted their responsibility in training different actors, at national and international level, as well as (43,48%) for creating opportunities to exchange knowledge and practices supporting the implementation of CE in their countries and abroad (such as workshops, conferences, seminars, round tables, meetings, debates, journeys, discussion, visits, and lectures). Furthermore, 30,43% of the respondents point out the provision and publishing of educational, pedagogical, and methodological materials – such as manuals, textbooks, guidelines, books, educational and documentary films, and web multimedia tools (websites, blogs, podcasts, interactive DVDs, and forums) –, and information places. They (21,74%) also mention youth group activities, such as peer qualifications, youth clubs, the simulation of parliaments, role playing games, annual field work, and academic competitions.

The respondents were invited to make explicit their different roles in the implementation of CE. Taking into account their responses, it seems clear that the participating NGOs (65,22%) claim their role as CE providers through non-formal and informal methodologies, complementing school provision at all levels of education. CE is at the core of their actions. Although is not one of the main areas of action of some of the participating NGOs, it has become a core issue in several of their activities. Furthermore, 78,26% of the participating NGOs consider that they contribute to strengthen the culture of active citizenship and participation in different contexts, through enabling individuals to become informed and capable citizens. To accomplish this, 73,91% of the

participating NGOs believe they are responsible for building partnerships with other private and public actors and institutions, in order to further social transformation and welfare.

Participating NGOs, also shared their perceptions regarding the dominant vision of Citizenship Education in educational policies and practices in England, Portugal, and Slovenia. Taking into account the diversity of the results, it can be affirmed that these European countries have different dominant visions and approaches to CE. The position of 30,43% of NGOs is that the effective opportunities to participate in decision-making are few, therefore, it is difficult to influence improvements in educational policies and practices. Furthermore, 30,43% of respondents from England and Portugal pointed out the fact that the 'active' and 'critical' elements of CE are not fully recognised in educational policies, and they (21,74%) also criticize that CE is too focused on spreading knowledge about national and European democratic systems and their formal functioning. Some NGOs from England and Slovenia (21,74%) consider that CE gives pupils the knowledge, skills and understanding to play an effective role in society. However, some NGOs from Portugal and Slovenia (17,39%) ask for more systematic or better-structured work where different actors in the field of CE can come together. Some English NGOs (17,39%) highlighted the interest to reduce the dependency on state and increase individual responsibility.

NGOs were also invited to express their positions on the major barriers and positive experiences they found along the implementation process of CE. NGOs identified many different barriers to the implementation of CE. Firstly, participating NGOs (43,48%) criticise the fact that CE has been neglected in the school curricula. Some participating NGOs (39,13%) also referred that CE is focused mainly on the transmission of knowledge about citizenship in formal education, neglecting the creation of effective opportunities to exercise it. They (34,78%) also pointed out not only the lack of human and financial resources in different organizations, whether NGOs or schools, to efficiently deliver CE, but also the lack of preparation of teachers and educators to effectively deliver it (17,39%). It is also important to mention that some participating NGOs (21,74%) from Portugal and Slovenia considered the culture of resignation, conformity, and acceptance of authority, which is a legacy of long periods of authoritarian regimes, a barrier to overcome.

Looking at the positive experiences in Citizenship Education highlighted by the respondents, at national or international level, it can be concluded that various different positive experiences in CE around Europe were identified. NGOs (30,43%) particularly consider the increased interest, involvement and participation of all members of educational communities (e.g. heads of schools, teachers, students, and parents) in CE. Some participating NGOs from England and Portugal (26,09%) highlight not only the experiences that allow learners to participate actively in their education process, but also the growing governmental concern for CE, expressed through the creation and implementation of some national initiatives and documents (21,74%), such as the "National Strategy for Development Education (ENED)" (2010-2015) in Portugal or the "National Citizens Programme" in England. Some NGOs (17,39%) pointed out NGOs' projects developed within school contexts as good examples of the implementation of CE providing opportunities to produce and share knowledge and good practices. NGOs (13,04%) also value services and actions promoting social and political development, which emerged from partnerships between governmental and non-governmental organizations, and citizens. It is also important to notice that 2 English NGOs emphasise

the importance of a hands-on approach to CE, whether in the school or in the surrounding communities, through volunteering initiatives.

In many European countries there have been periods of dictatorship, but even in countries with a long democratic tradition, the quality of democracy has suffered fluctuations. Our last question to the NGOs asked them to express their opinions about how relevant they think it could be the inclusion of critical historical consciousness into CE. Based on their most referenced responses it can be stated that most of the participating NGOs (56,52%) consider the integration of a critical historical consciousness perspective in CE as a relevant goal. Furthermore, they (34,78%) also consider important that people understand past and various stages of the historical processes in order to comprehend present reality and to be able to perspective future realities. Besides, the critical historical consciousness is seen by 56,52% of the respondents as a basic condition to the effective exercise of citizenship and as essential to strengthen the democratic process.

#### **4 CONCLUSIONS**

The research highlights the important role of the NGOs as CE providers and the need for the policy makers to acknowledge their involvement in the topic. However, “The advisory councils are few and end up to not allowing the views and contributions of citizens and NGOs which are, indeed, very crucial in terms of policy decisions”, as it was mentioned by a Portuguese NGO.

NGOs consider that CE in schools is too focused on formal democracy, which means that students learn about public institutions, elections, political parties, etc., as it was pointed out by a English NGO: “Citizenship in this sense brings with it certain rights and responsibilities that are defined in law, such as the right to vote, the responsibility to pay taxes and so on”.

Especially in countries with an authoritarian past, NGOs consider that models of conformism and submission are still dominant in the relationship between citizens and the government. Therefore, on the perspective of a Slovenian NGO “(...) the term “democracy” is understood differently as in democratic countries with tradition. It was misused under previous regime”.

The participating NGO criticise the fact that CE has been implemented in a reductionistic way and it is not seen as a priority. Therefore, we can conclude that their perceive that CE is neglected in the school curricula, “often not implemented as cross-curricular, not seen as skills-bound experiential learning – more or less taught as theoretical subject. Teachers have not enough knowledge to approach it as skills-based learning instead of knowledge-based”, as was stated by a Slovenian NGO.

Finally, NGOs also stress that the creation of effective opportunities to exercise citizenship in daily life has been neglected. As it was expresses by an English NGO “The ‘active citizenship’ element of the Citizenship programme of study is often regarded as difficult (or impossible) to deliver well or properly as it is often difficult to take children and students out of school in order to be actively involved in for example, their local community”.

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