

Civic, Legal and Social Education in French Secondary School: Questions About a New Subject



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In summer 1999, a new compulsory subject was introduced in French upper secondary school: civic, legal and social education (éducation civique, juridique et sociale or ECJS). Sixteen hours a year are devoted to this teaching. The organisation differs a lot from one lycée (1) to the other: here, four hours a month, there two hours each fortnight, or even one hour a week (2); teaching ECJS is spread either over a part of the school year, or over the whole year, but with alternation of periods "with" and "without"; most of the time in ECJS the class is divided in two groups and there is one different session for each group, but other modes can be seen. These are apparently superficial details, but they are significant of a flexibility which is new in French secondary school. It stresses the status of ECJS as a subject "different from others", less normative or less dignified. The curriculum in ECJS, through contents and through pedagogy, upsets traditional secondary teaching. It is understood either as a welcomed whiff of liberty and puff of reality or as a concession to demagogy and a token of the decline of secondary education.

I am giving a brief account of the general context that can explain this innovation, but as a didactician, my main concern is to analyse the teaching itself. As far as we know what is done in the classrooms (3), we can say a) that what is in practice and what is learnt differ largely from one class to another, and b) that there are striking differences between what is intended of ECJS by the institution, by the teachers and by the students. The thesis that I will present in this paper is that this subject shows such an heterogeneity not only because it is new, but also because the three actors involved in the project, the institution, the teachers and the students, refer ECJS to legitimacies and to contents that do not coincide. This interpretation calls for discussion.

To support my reflection, I will draw results from a short empirical study that I conducted with several colleagues (4) in the National Institute for Pedagogical Research (INRP) during the year 2000: we observed 15 debates in ECJS, on different topics, and interviewed the teachers working

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in these same classes. Even if we put forward some interpretations, our analysis was mainly a descriptive one, in order to identify which understanding of ECJS was assumed by the teachers and how it was applied in the classrooms. It has not been published till now. I will also take advantage of some accounts of teachers or teachers' trainers about the questions and difficulties of teachers grappling with this new subject. The interpretations that I develop are my own. In this paper, I draw on French researches only; even if the questions of political or civic education are largely debated in Europe nowadays, and if many projects are developed in a national or international or European frame (see for example Ross 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002), French teachers and students don't regard this debate as relevant for themselves. They only do refer to a French horizon. Just the same, the official project of ECJS does not mention any general European preoccupation on civic or political education.

1 Context

1.1 School Context

From the end of the 19th century to 1999 there was no compulsory civic education in French lycées. This resulted in the fact that until the eighties, and even in the nineties, the lycées received mainly the bourgeoisie's children. In 1960 11.5% of a generation obtained a baccalauréat, the exam that attests a complete secondary education and allows university entrance; in 1980, they were 26.5% (including 7.5% for technical baccalauréat). This did not result (officially) from socio-economical discrimination, but from school tradition: most students able to achieve the necessary qualifying educational level were from the upper and upper-middle classes. These young bourgeois were supposed to develop enough civic consciousness through humanities (Greek and Latin authors), through History (considered as modern humanities), and through their family education. However, civics existed in primary school, and there was also civic education or instruction in collèges (lower secondary school) at least when the political context seemed to require it (see Audigier's paper in this issue of the Online Journal for Social Sciences and their Didactics). Over the last 15 years changes both in society and in school (5) have altered this situation.

In 1989 the Ministry of Education decided that, in 2000, 80% of the students in school should reach the level of baccalauréat, (technological, vocational / professional or "general"). This objective opened the general lycées to young people of lower socio-cultural origins, through changing by degrees the criteria relative to the "intellectual abilities" necessary to attend secondary education. The social heterogeneity differs from grade to grade (the most in the first grade, the least in the last one), because of the progressive orientation and specialisation of the grades: young people from lower social origins were about 36% in the scientific course, 46% in the literary one, 49% in the economic one, and were the majority in the technical courses. Nevertheless, the social change is strongly perceived and sometimes resented by teachers. Roughly, they meet two main problems. The process of democratisation results in a decreasing demand towards cognitive abilities and school knowledge (Bulle 2000, 371-372), and in a growing cultural heterogeneity. Both are difficult to deal with, the first because it puts in question the identity of secondary education, the last because it puts in question the French model of

assimilation and voluntary ignorance of personal and social cultures in school. The whole is generally spoken of as a "crisis of the lycées" and of their professional practise by teachers, who cry for help.

A further stimulus to a change in teaching has been provided by a critical reflection of young people on their education: a wide consultation of upper secondary students in 1998 indicated, among other criticisms, wishes and claims, the students' wish to study more "real" social problems and current events, to be given more responsibility, and to be freer to debate during the lessons (6).

1.2 Social and political context

At the same time, several enquiries reported a growing indifference to politics, an increasing critical view of politicians and political debates, and a weakening attachment to common values. Politicians and media displayed anxiety about individualism, communitarisme (7), violence, and incivility among the youths and in schools. These attitudes were interpreted as a crisis of social cohesion and a danger to democracy. Teaching civics on every school level seemed a solution (at least a part of a solution) to social and political crisis.

In this context, and in the context of Europeanisation and globalisation, the meaning of "citizenship", and especially the relevance of the French definition of it, is debated. From the Revolution to the Third Republic the political meaning was dominant. During this long period from 1789 to 1940, it was thought that the main social problems should be resolved through radical political change, i.e. the institution of a democracy, of a republic or of a socialist regime (la Sociale). The vote was the core of citizenship. The supremacy of common interest over groups' and/or individuals' interests was asserted as the basis of political choices and of citizens' duties. In this framework, the State was the only sphere for exercising citizenship. Citizenship and nationality were tied together. And the citizen was defined as a human being, free of any distinctive identity (religion, ethnicity, gender, class etc.): this was already the basis for the Declaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen, that refers political rights to natural equality. The collective identities different from the national one were taken as threats against the common or general interest and as private matters. Even if local identities and local stakes were important in politics, local and regional issues linked the citizen firstly and mainly to the Nation-State. Such was the official basis for national identity and solidarity and for public debates till the end of the 20th century (8). In the last two decades, this conception has been questioned and has evolved. The level of the state is no longer the only level for political decisions: the European Union, and regions challenge it successfully, even if the main political debates remain national. The question of non EU-migrants' vote in local elections is debated, and, in some cities, foreigners participate in a consultative assembly: this constructs a social category ("migrants") as a political one, which is quite new in France. A change in citizenship practices can also be discerned, especially among young people: most young people do not and will not situate themselves as militants in political parties or trade-unions, but in some marginal movements as motivé/es for example. At the same time, they take part in social and humanitarian actions, both on local and global levels: associations for solidarity, for the management of their district, for the environment. And they also demonstrate for their values, as shown last spring against the Front National, and during the last years for students' rights, for migrants'

rights, and for human rights. Other problems also raise questions about the capacity of French citizenship to face the evolution of political culture, of society and of Europe: the political philosophy on which French democracy and French parties work is blurred; social exclusion results in a two-speed citizenship; the claim for multiculturalism is in opposition to the French republican model, the gradual elimination of limits between private and public space, between human being and citizen, weakens the political aspects of citizenship etc.

2 The aims and references of the institutional project

In summer 1999, official texts defining ECJS for the lycées were published. They were renewed in August 2001 and supplemented by texts relative to vocational schools. The curriculum consists of concepts and general topics, and the pedagogical methods are intended to develop the autonomy of students through documentary researches and debates. Three points are very different from any other subject: the priority given to concepts, both in the organization of the contents and in the intended knowledge; the stress upon discussion and debate and upon students' autonomy; the mention that ECJS "has generally not to add knowledge to contents learnt in other subjects" (our translation). The main particularities of this curriculum are

- to give opportunities to reflect on the different aspects of citizenship, including, but not exclusively, the political ones; to practise a real respect of the Other, and the Other's speech and opinion;
- to inspire an approach of the meaning of Law and Rights, deeper than through a knowledge of legal rules and institutions (e.g.: not only "knowing the rules" but reflecting on how they were invented, how they are used and talked about...)
- to conform to secondary students' expectations: to legitimate opportunities to express oneself and to debate social problems and topical questions.
- to focus the work on critical approaches to topical questions, current events and problems;
- to set argumentation and debates in the core of the subject, with attention paid to the avoidance of prejudices and purely affective arguments; in this respect, to develop the ability to inform oneself seriously and to favour reasoned argumentation.

2.1 The reference to citizenship

The title "civic, social and legal education" may be understood as a testimony of the evolution of French citizenship or at least of the present controversies in this matter. The prescribed contents all deal with citizenship: 1st grade (15-16 years old) "from social life to citizenship", 2nd grade (16-17) "institutions and practices of citizenship", 3rd grade (17-18), "citizenship and the test of a changing world". At 18, the young come of age. A closer look at the contents set out themes significant of an enlarged meaning of "citizenship" as "citizenship and work" (1st grade), "citizenship and civility" (id), "citizenship and scientific and technical evolution" (3rd grade), "citizenship and globalisation" (id.). Only in the 2nd grade do the topics refer to the classical political definition. Through the

themes imposed, it is clear that any social and ethical problem is not only a human problem but a citizen's problem. And the question of foreigners is displayed from the beginning of the official text: "it cannot be forgotten that most students in lycées will come of age, and be confronted with voting or, for foreigners, with the lack of this right, and the questions raised by this difference" (our translation).

Even the way of teaching and studying ECJS reflects the evolution of citizenship in France. The ECJS is not intended to teach principles and knowledge to students who will later be citizens. The students, even 15/16 year old students, are intended to act as citizens in this matter: inform themselves, debate and form one's opinion etc. The citizen is no longer considered only as one who observes law and who votes. She or he intervenes in public life, takes part in discussions, argues etc. Such practices are prescribed for ECJS, not as a mime but as a foundation for political and civic life.

The official texts (Le B.O., 1999, 4 and 2001, 13) are very critical towards traditional methods of teaching. They denounce as counter-productive for citizenship the passivity of students who have only to learn knowledge presented by an authority (the teacher). What students learn from such teaching methods is that the best way is to delegate choice to Those Who Know: students are "formed as passive citizens" (our translation). The prescribed right way to develop their abilities is to devote them a large responsibility for acquiring and practising knowledge. Then the teacher is not a dispenser of knowledge, but a or the guarantee that the debate will be relevant, deep, sensible, fruitful. Even in the debates the students' responsibility should be solicited, not only to argue, but, also, to draw the main conclusions.

2.2 An explicit reference to politics

The official texts explicitly point out that knowledge has to do with political, social and/or economical issues. Officially relevant topics for debates include European elections, minorities' rights, political corruption, urban violence, unemployment, in addition to more traditional themes such as racism and discrimination. The topics address some of the major French social and political controversies: e.g. "citizenship and integration", "republic and regional idiosyncrasies", "renewed requirement for justice and equality" etc. Questions about migrants and nationality, parity, laïcité (9), legal status of the politicians, and others, are explicitly suggested. In the official booklets published in order to help the teachers, one can read that it is possible to debate such burning questions as "the use of torture during the colonial wars", as "governmental responsibility for risks", or "security / insecurity / the feeling of insecurity". Such topics are rather new in French compulsory teaching - new because they are openly political, and so may contrast strongly with a tradition of neutrality in School, new because they divide society, and are sometimes inflammatory.

The first official texts (Le B.O., 1999, 4-5) insist on the obligation to study and to debate in a non polemical way, but this may be a formal opposition between "polemical" and "reasoned", or a way to smooth over some disquieting feelings before the risks of working in an openly non-neutral field, more than a realistic requirement, due to the topics suggested. The second texts (Le B.O., 2000, 14) invite non-ideological debate; this seems more relevant (due to the school commitment to neutrality) even if, in a wider understanding of ideology as "a coherent vision of the world and of

society", it could be surprising.

2.3 A link between school and world

The official texts prescribe the use of current events and problems, provided that an objective relative to citizenship is at the core of that use. It is not simply to motivate students, to incite them to work by themselves. It is that what will be learnt through ECJS can be relevant to social, civic and legal life outside school.

At the end of the 19th century, primary school had to develop a common identity through language, and through the passing on of a same common culture; this imposed a rupture with what was spoken, believed, told etc. outside school, which was often taken as the expression of regional idiosyncrasy and of archaism. In secondary school the subjects had little to do with practical or with professional life: let us remember the importance of Latin and Greek, or, for History, that teaching Antiquity was for a long time more important than teaching contemporary history (10). Here and there, this tradition is still active in the general lycées, for example through a quasi exclusive reference to literary argumentative texts in French, or through a reluctance in History to teach topics which troubles society.

Several recent enquiries into school sociology and into history and geography didactics have pointed out that, for students, feeling a relevance of school knowledge to the so-called "outside world" is not usual nowadays (was-it ever?). A large proportion of young students, asked to say what they have learnt and where, omitting school, or say that what matters really has been learnt outside - from their family, from their fellows, through everyday life (see the study by Charlot, Bautier, Rochex, 1992). Speaking and arguing about Europe, most 15-18 year olds do not refer themselves to what they have learnt during the previous year, but to news and personal experience (Tutiaux-Guillon, 2000, 45-93). To work on social problems or "real" political questions gives students an opportunity to link "life" to "school". The idea may be to give more legitimacy to school, because of its utility not only to get a qualification, but, also, to learn how to behave in the world. ECJS is supposed to act as a catalyst in order to understand that personal experience and news do not provide a sufficient and satisfactory understanding of the world, that such knowledge needs to be scrutinised, to be confronted with other sources of knowledge, to be evaluated, and that any political, social, ethical action requires such reflection.

3 The teachers' referees for ECJS: School and knowledge

There is no official prescription as to which teachers should be in charge of ECJS. Currently it seems that only those teaching French, philosophy, social-economic sciences or history-geography teach it. These last claim a traditional right to teach civics, as in collèges, and an interference with some of the topics they teach (e.g, struggle for democracy in the 19th and 20th centuries, or Europe). The social-economic sciences teachers claim that the topics are close to their subjects, and teachers of philosophy and French claim that they are used to debate and to working on argumentation... All are right: the best solution would be team work, which is very rare in French lycées, partly because of the institutional

organisation, and partly because teaching is a lonely practice. In such a discussion- that masks sometimes professional stakes: posts, number of classes taken in charge etc.- ECJS is reputed to be close to what is already taught (contents or competencies) more than thought of as a radical innovation.

3.1 The main reference: School knowledge

The aim of ECJS is conceptual reflection. The contents are very specific: it consists firstly of notions (and neither of factual nor of procedural knowledge), and secondly of knowledge which is supposedly already learnt, either from former grades or from other subjects. This is not at all usual for French curricula: even if notions are prescribed, they are generally secondary, not to say subordinate to factual knowledge; and of course, what legitimises a subject is that its content is original compared to others.

Some teachers are absolutely opposed to ECJS. They argue that this teaching has no knowledge-content, or that the contents are too polemical to be school ones. Traditionally, as I have said before, the current problems, the burning questions and the present political issues are not allowed in the classroom: the only legitimate knowledge is "scientific" and therefore "true" (11), and does not allow discussion or debate. The teachers' opposition is mainly grounded on their (largely shared) social representation of school knowledge. It is supported by the importance given to debate in ECJS: usually, debates are mainly thought of (except sometimes in philosophy lessons) as a motivating introduction to a lesson, not as work which increases knowledge, or develops reflection. The main objection is that students are students, they have no consistent and reliable knowledge before having learnt, and so they cannot get any profit from the debate. This is not a refusal of the relevance of debates to social and political life; it is a refusal of the relevance of debates to instruction. Furthermore, there is a sort of professional distrust towards young people's ability to find reliable information, especially because teachers are rather suspicious towards media.

The group of researchers investigating the practices in 2000 (the 1st year for ECJS) had the opportunity to interview teachers about how they had organised progressive learning for their students. Most of the time, the progressions were methodological progressions in documentary research: collecting information, criticising information, classifying information etc. Progression based on abilities to debate was scarce, progression based on conceptualisation, exceptional. Most of the interviewed teachers seemed to consider that the only relevant arguments in a debate were knowledge, or at least valid information. So, to teach how to argue, they taught how to find relevant and reliable information. At least that year (2000), teachers taught what they felt able to teach. During the debates that we could observe, sometimes the teacher assumed the same role as in his or her other lessons: she or he said the "truth", because she or he had the intellectual and professional authority to do so. She or he validated or invalidated arguments (with respect to exactitude), stressed or enriched such and such with examples, specified or developed scientific information on notions (e.g. under-culture, equality/equity, legal meaning of "family" etc.), or even suggested referring the debate to a former lesson in history or social sciences. They often assumed clearly in the discussion that school knowledge is more reliable than media. This

attitude is closely linked to a common fear or demand: School must not give legitimacy to frail or partial or wrong information, because school is a place where students are intended to learn. That is probably why some teachers prefer to give documentary files themselves to students, rather than to have them attempt their own researches.

The debate is shaped mainly as a medium to learn to talk to others: methodology and basic speech competencies are often favoured. The teachers mentioned the abilities to ask understandable questions, to complete correct sentences, to distinguish between prejudice, opinion, argument and fact. In the interviews conducted, they did not refer those abilities to the competencies of a citizen, but only to student's competencies. The argumentation is presented more as a school requirement than as a social or political demand. The documentary research, too, is more taken to be methodological learning. We are far from the official discourse. But this sort of self-referee, from school to school, is quite usual and has been identified as a strong tendency by historians of education. It is not consecutive to a lack of training, or a systematically traditional attitude, or to some inability to see farther than the school walls ...

3.2 ECJS - an answer to school difficulties?

As said above, the teachers are very conscious of recent difficulties in the lycées, of the social tensions, of the growing incivilities, of some students' lack of interest for what is for teachers the core of their profession etc. They question the role of ECJS in this specific critical context. Some approve of a subject healing some of the problems inherent in the massive flow of "new" students: they emphasize the structure of discussion, of "free speech", the opportunity to deal with local school conflicts, to smooth the class etc. Others reject or distrust a subject that they think is intended to be a "first-aid kit", a "fire extinguisher", a way to "humanize suburbs", or to "civilize little savages" as Claude Allègre, the former French Minister of Education, said (all quotations are the teachers' own words, translated). In this respect, they fear a new morality, or even an indoctrination. I will not discuss of the relevance of such interpretations. But I would like to stress that neither the first nor the second takes seriously in account the official political aims of ECJS, the focus on citizenship and on social problems defined as not only French, but also European or even global. Most teachers we interviewed in 2000 mentioned only to school social tensions and problems when referring to ECJS. Sometimes, they do not even distinguish between ECJS and what is called "class-life", a time devoted to deal with immediate administrative or relationship difficulties.

So, some teachers justify the introduction of ECJS because they see in this new subject, with different requirements, a possibility to motivate students failing academically or to take into account other competencies (e.g. to talk to others, to be a leader in a debate etc.) generally neglected by assessments, and therefore, to give to "non-achieving" students, in one subject, at least, a chance to succeed.

3.3 Any place for citizenship?

The topics worked upon in the visited classroom were always very narrow, comparative to the official suggestions. This allowed sometimes a slide

towards debates about school behaviour. The choices were directed by the students' interests and by current events - often without an explicit intention to draw a link with citizenship or to reflect on the notion. The social questions were examined without being set in their political context. The concept of citizenship was sometimes explicitly evoked by the question debated in the classroom; but in most of the debates that we could observe (remember they were few in number, only 15), citizenship was put aside or was only a background. This was the case for debates about incivility, about social exclusion, about parental rights, about PACS, and even about work and unemployment. It may be of course that the relationship was worked upon in earlier or later lessons. But such a plan was not specified by any teacher. Surprisingly, citizenship seemed either excluded or implicit.

A possible explanation is the fear of confusion between morality and civics, private and public aims. Teachers have been educated in a society that condemns indoctrination as either serving the interest of the dominant class or as subjecting the individual to totalitarianism. They often refuse to express values, or to explicitly require students to adhere to values (even democratic ones), in the name of Freedom. They too, are part of a society that dismisses the public expression of values, that takes the values as being only a private matter. In this case, ECJS has no real purpose, except in giving some freedom or some knowledge to students. Can this approach be altered? In this perspective, the success of Le Pen, coming second in the presidential election, has been a salutary shock, raising more concern about democratic values and about the necessity to promote and defend them explicitly.

Teachers say that to speak and to listen bear values: self assertion, respect. But these values are less political and collective, than personal ones. The teachers intend less to train citizens than individuals, able to get information, to make up one's mind, to exchange. Some teachers also give attention to abilities to negotiate, to become aware of one's capability to act. Generally personal or social goals and political ones are not separate.

It may be too that the students apparently do not need any specific reflection about democratic values. The ECJS debates observed are debates where everyone "thinks well": the expressed values, seemingly shared, are: liberty, equality, fraternity (not in a motto !), equality required for women and for outcasts, tolerance, solidarity, compassion, love, social harmony. This corroborates investigations about the youngs' values that indicated their adherence to Human rights.

4 The students' discussions: the reference to common sense, experience and media

This part will be shorter, because it is only based on the analyse of the debates that we could observe in 2000. But I partly corroborate the observations with the conclusion of other researches (e.g. Tutiaux-Guillon 2000)

In contrast to the teachers preoccupations, there is an impressive lack of referees to school knowledge during the debates. Even if the students have worked a lot on collecting and organising a documentary file before the debate, only very few refer themselves to this file during the discussion. The arguments taken from lessons or from textbooks are scarce, be it because stamped "school" and so not relevant to social

problems, or be it because stamped "science" and, therefore, not questionable. When the teacher puts forward some argument drawn from her or his professional knowledge, she or he is listened to politely - but then, either the students go on just as if nothing has been passed on, or they change the matter discussed: either what is said is put aside, or it is taken as a full stop, and the students neither discuss it nor try to expand or enrich it. It is just the same when the teacher intends only to clarify the words used by the students, or to alert them to a possible slip from one notion to another. It also seems that what is learnt in French about argumentation and rhetoric is not imported in ECJS.

What prevails in students' arguments are common sense, experience and media. Let us take some examples. Students debating about parental rights do not make any distinction between legal rights, granted by Law, and natural authority or influence through education; they slip continuously from the former to the latter, the most familiar one. Another debate on the topic of *parité* (affirmative action for women in politics) becomes a debate on economical equality (job and pay), on shared (or non-shared) familial charges and responsibilities, and on everyday male chauvinism! During a debate on legal rights for homosexual couples, the teacher tried vainly to have the students reflect on the legal questions of filiation: they spoke only of love and personal convenience. In another debate about social exclusion, some minutes of exchange were devoted to divorced fathers - and their situation is seen by the youths as "social exclusion"... In most discussions the students' arguments were more often common sense psychology. This common sense is not questioned. In a research about teaching and learning in Europe, the analyse of two experimental debates in upper secondary school (2nd grade) concluded that there was a massive use of common sense and a very limited use of knowledge on the same topics passed on in a former lesson (e.g. Tutiaux-Guillon 2000, 45-93).

Analysing the arguments used in the ECJS debates, we found that they were partly stories issuing from personal experience or from neighbours' or relatives' experiences. But their status is very different from one group or context to the other: they are a justification for being concerned by the subject, or they are linked directly to some general assertion relevant to the topics- or here and there, they are dismissed, because "school is not a place to talk about oneself". The discussion is thus very close to any discussion between young people, or to any middle-class discussion, that sociologists analyse as drawing mainly arguments from experience and everyday life.

We found more often a large amount of information drawn from the media, without a critical approach. I link this to the lack of explicit critical position in the debates. What is said by anybody must be respected; if anyone disagrees, she or he puts forward one another "fact" or one another information, adding a contradictory piece to the discussion - but never criticising the origin, or the reasoning, or the exemplary nature of the other's argument. In fact, the implicit model seems to be common discussions, and not intellectual or political debates. The objective seems not to get more understanding or knowledge of Law, of civics and of society - but only to talk about some topics in which young are concerned or interested.

The references to citizenship are very scarce. The arguments are nearly never political ones, even when such information was collected or given in the documentary file: they are more often psychological and sometimes economic. It may be for different reasons. The students involved in the

debates in 2000 were rather young (15-16), and in this age group interest in politics is low, as attested by several enquiries. The students may also adhere to the image of a "neutral" school, where ideologies and politics are to be avoided. When they speak of what we can take for collective and political values, most of the time, students understand them as individual. "Liberty" is a good example: in the students' speeches it is personal freedom to come and go, to think and talk, to choose one's life - not a condition for political choice. Law is never taken as instituting freedom and capacity. Law is reputed to be incomprehensible, unknown, irrelevant, and inefficient. Law is either compelling and limiting one's freedom, or failing and scorned. (In such a framework, what use could it be to vote for a legislative assembly?) In research about Europe, we remarked that students lacked a political vocabulary, as if the notions were not necessary to analyse the problem or to express one's opinion. For some young people, politics is a very distant and opaque world, and Mr or Ms Everybody is powerless towards it; in this respect, it is vain to try to take an interest in it; the only relevant and concerning referee is one's own life and environment. There are exceptions of course. Here a young person tries to define the political meaning of a notion; there a migrants' daughter invites the taking of some critical point of view of what is presented as "difficulties for women" in French society, by comparing it to Third World societies; or a part of discussion is focused on the homeless' legal rights etc. But the dominant feeling is that the students (because they are students or because they are young?) do not refer their reflection to politics.

One possible interpretation is that such debates have no stake for the young. They are motivating because they give opportunities to express oneself, to discuss or better to exchange opinions, but they have no prospects in politics, civics or even school-life. They are not problem-solving situations: the youths have no personal or collective decision to make towards law or towards most of the social problems debated (ex. jail, the jobless, risks, technical evolution etc.). The only apparent possible gain is to get and to give more information about the topics. This refers to an understanding of democracy as a regime where information is free for everyone, and where communication is one fundamental value. But at the same time, the political sphere still remains far from young people's preoccupations - at least in school.

5 Conclusion

If the objective of the introduction of ECJS was somehow to organize a meeting, or a confrontation, between political, social and legal world, school world and young world, it rather failed. I have shown that the argumentation refers to different worlds: politics (official texts' authors), school (teachers), everyday experience and common sense (students). Moreover, the social practices used as references for the debate differ from the one to the other. I understand by this expression, as defined by Martinand (2001, 19-20), the consistent whole composed by the objects, the tools, the problems, the tasks, the contexts and the social roles characterising a practice, used by school as a referee for school activities and learning. For the institution, the main reference is political debates thought of as taking place in everyday life when the citizens are confronted with acute social problems - and not limited to politicians' debates in media and during electoral periods. The students' references are evidently their usual discussions, at least when they discuss serious matters. Those discussions are not political ones, as a rule. The teachers'

references are more blurred: they usually have no such practices in school, and school is their main reference; they construct their position on a refusal both of politicians' debates and of so-called "café du commerce" discussion (common sense discussion). So, they do not have, or did not have in 2000, any social practices to use as legitimate models. At the same time, the uncertainties on what is citizenship, between the classical French definition, the enlarged social one, the equivalence between citizenship and humanity (etc.), and the questions on which identities can be expressed and openly referred to in public and political society, give occasion to non-shared approaches. The youths seem to adhere to the larger and least political definition - and most history-geography teachers, for example, are to adhere to the opposite. These gaps between institution, teachers and students explain that ECJS opens out on to different interpretations and practices.

ECJS is new and thought of as a lever to change teaching and learning, school and more widely political society, when present students will become the adult majority. These aims are necessarily far-off ones, and this paper is written very (too?) shortly after the introduction of this subject. ECJS destabilises the usual way to teach and to learn. It is not surprising that school actors are standing back. They are used to constraints that organise school as a sort of sanctuary from politics and from social tensions, even if the general final aim is to train citizens and adults. They are used to building a consensus grounded on knowledge: for most, the legitimacy of upper secondary school is to pass on "science", not to socialise the young. The heterogeneity in what is dealt with in the classrooms can be seen as the result of this destabilisation: on one hand, there is no shared certainty on which specific topics are right or not for ECJS discussion, because there is no referee to any scientific background; on the other hand, it is difficult to create a true political space (ECJS class and classroom) in a wider non-political one (school). Each teacher and each class attempt a local compromise. At the same time, local compromises are placed, too, in the organisation of time, of classes, in the topics and concepts worked upon, and even in the conceptions of what must be learnt and how. I interpret those compromises in contents and in forms not so much as individual and contextual choices, than as random responses of the system to a disruptive input. It could lead either to a renewed system, after a period of instability; or to a reinforced system, after evacuation of ECJS.

Notes

- (1) School is compulsory till 16 years old; the upper secondary school (called lycée) begins at 15 and lasts 3 years (general and technical secondary schools), or 2+2 years (vocational schools). In this paper I refer mainly to general lycée.
- (2) To compare, history and geography together are devoted at least 2.5, at most 4 hours a week.
- (3) The classroom is a sort of " private " place, open only to inspectors and to teaching apprentices; most teachers are not willing to let researchers come inside and observe.
- (4) Louise Blanchard, Michel Journot, Gérard Pouette, Michel Solonel
- (5) In this paper, as usually in French, " school " refers to the whole system, from primary school to the end of the upper secondary schools.
- (6) Please note, that in French schools, debating is not a common teaching practice, at least in upper secondary school.

(7) In French, "communautarisme" has a rather pejorative meaning, the one of a system where fractions of social and political society, self-closed, act without taking into account the general common interest; it refers to a weakness of social cohesion; the Robert & Collins dictionary translates it by "system taking in account the minorities", which is quite a different meaning. That is why I prefer use of the French word in italics.

(8) Even in autumn

2002, in a public debate on the creation of juges de proximité (local judges, who would be responsible for arbitrating in local dispute, for a 4 years term), media referred to these judges' local identity and possible common interest with local ones as a threat against impartiality and public interest.

(9) This cannot be translated exactly by "secularity"...

(10) One must qualify this assertion: for example teaching Geography was intended to give some knowledge of the world to favour economic abilities.

(11) I do not adhere to this argument, having set out in my researches in school history, that the scientific, or, better, scholar knowledge is reshaped, restructured, and so to say translated for the class, and that a large part of what is passed on is common sense. But secondary teachers build strongly their identity on the conviction that they teach a topic directly issued from science. Furthermore, epistemology is more careful with the words "truth" and "true"; but saying that school teaches the truth is a powerful legitimacy for teachers.

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KeyWords: Civic education, political education, France, national report, education civique, juridique et sociale, ECJS, secondary school, upper secondary school, lycée, baccalauréat, Europeanisation, globalisation, French citizenship, knowledge, school knowledge, competency, politics, integration, exclusion, neutrality of school, history didactics, geography didactics, teachers, basic speech competency, school conflict, incivility, indoctrination, value education, political debate, common sense discussion, professional knowledge, critical approach, social interpretation, social practice, personal culture, social culture, school culture



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