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Civic Education – The Case of (East-) Germany

Abstract

There has been a long tradition of thinking on Civic Education in Western Germany, mainly after World War II. Aims and means have been discussed thoroughly, experiences in teaching politics (the most common name for the school subject) have been reported on. After the (re-)union of the two Germanies in 1990, Western concepts were brought to and adopted by Eastern Germany. Transformation of civic education (politische Bildung) faces the problem that the democratic system is open to conflicts and competition and does not lead and direct the citizen in an authoritative manner. Democracy asks for different abilities on the side of its citizens than an authoritarian system does. Research data show the difficulties of learning for democracy.

Contents

Keywords

Competences for democracy, controverseries, Beutelsbach consensus, competence of dealing with conflicts, orientations towards democracy, teaching controversies, climate of openness

The Competent Citizen

The competent citizen in the political system of democracy

- understands the system: its functioning and its meaning
- shares the beliefs and values of democracy: e.g. freedom, solidarity, tolerance, equal rights
- actively takes part in the process of public discussion and political decision.
  (cf. Detjen 2000)

This well-informed, humanistically minded and participating individual incorporates a high degree of personal autonomy and responsibility. Of course, this ideal notion does not describe reality, but it shows the direction to and goal of citizenship education (politische Bildung). In order to break the idea down to more precise aims and means of teaching and learning and to the evaluation of these processes, the following five competences for the learning of democracy can be made out (Behrmann/Grammes/Reinhardt 2004, 337f., 387-391):

Five competences

1. Take others' perspectives / roles: The views and expectations of others, also of the generalized other, are seen and integrated.
2. Handle conflicts: Conflicting interests, values and identities are approached with tolerance and "resolved" responsibly.
3. Use social sciences: Institutions, structural frameworks and individual actions in society (e.g. in politics, economy, law and other partial systems) are analyzed by employing social sciences.
4. Judge on moral and political reasons: Judgements on political issues need two sorts of criteria, those referring to the functioning of the political system and those referring to individual and / or collective terms of morals / ethics.
5. Participate in democracy: Everyday face-to-face life, work life, civil society and the over-all democratic state give the opportunity for and are dependent on the participation of citizens.

Handle Conflicts

The competence of handling conflicts of interests, values and political orientations in a productive and legitimate matter is specifically part of the democratic political system – it does not fit an authoritarian or totalitarian regime. These non-democratic systems tend to hide or suppress conflicts. Often this is done in the name of national unity, out of respect for the leader of the country, or in order to hold up collective we-feelings (Gemeinschaft).

This ability to accept and deal with conflicts is (historically) a new competence of citizens; it is (systematically) the psychic equivalent to democracy and it is (biographically) most difficult to learn. The "logic" of democratic politics is competition for the best answers and fight for power – all carried out in institutions and in a civil manner (Streitkultur). The "logic" of private life is seeking harmony and well-being. Therefore handling conflicts on a macro-level of society/state is not learned in everyday life; however it needs to be taught in a specific school subject (Reinhardt, 2006). In Germany there are quite a few different names for this subject, such as – depending on the state and the type of school - politics, social studies or social sciences, politics–economy–society, political world studies, community studies. Normally the subject includes topics that refer to different social sciences (political science, economics, sociology, law, social psychology). (cf. Massing, 2005)

The German Tradition

Democracy was brought to Western Germany after World War II (after a short period of democracy since 1918 – the Republic of Weimar was overthrown in 1933 by Nazi-Germany) and thereafter accepted by a big part of the population. Very slowly the different states of the Federal Republic of Germany set up a school subject meant to further citizenship education (politische Bildung). Developing curricula and assigning school hours to the subject took up to 25 years and had diverse results regarding the name of the subject and the number of school periods (usually there are only few periods of teaching in classes 5 – 12). The term "citizenship studies" was the name during the Republic of Weimar (and was used in its constitution). This name was also used in Eastern Germany in the German Democratic Republic, which is possibly a reason why it was not used in the West.

During the 60s and 70s of the 20th century the philosophy of the school subject was a matter of serious and embittered fights. At least two state elections centred on the question if education had the task of passing on traditions to the younger generation or

if education should enable students to change this world by political means (Anpassung oder Widerstand). This either-or-confrontation divided between conservative and progressive opinions brought up the question of whether teachers could indoctrinate students according to the teacher's personal point of view. There was a shared belief that this kind of education could not be called education for democracy. (cf. Gagel 1994, 178-220)

The Beutelsbach Consensus

In 1976 the state agency in charge of citizenship education in the state of Baden-Württemberg called on a group of well-known thinkers in the field of "politische Bildung" to discuss aims and strategies of the school subject. They met in the small town of Beutelsbach, where they agreed on a consensus on principles of teaching political issues. This "Beutelsbacher Konsens" emerged out of lectures and discussions. The consensus was not voted on, but it was summarized by Wehling (1977). The three basic principles of Politische Bildung are:

a. It is **forbidden to overwhelm** learners (Überwältigungsverbot).
   Teachers are not allowed to overwhelm students – by whatever means - in the direction of wanted opinions and thereby prevent students from gaining their own judgements. This marks the difference (Grenze) between Politische Bildung and indoctrination. Indoctrination does not conform with the teacher's role in democracy and the – widely accepted – aim of students' personal autonomy (Mündigkeit).
   Issues that are controversial in politics and society must be treated as **controversies** in teaching-learning-arrangements.
b. This requirement is closely linked to the first demand: if differing points of view are hidden below the table, if options are suppressed, if alternatives are not openly discussed, then the path to indoctrination is chosen. The question is raised whether the teacher should correct (Korrekturfunktion), e.g. bring up opinions and alternatives that are unknown (fremd) to students (…), because of their social and political background.
   This second principle clearly shows why the teacher's personal point of view, his origin in a certain academic philosophy and his political opinion are of rather little interest. His own specific understanding of democracy for example [does it mean a way of life or does it constitute the form of the state?] is not problematic as long as opposing views come into the picture.
c. The student must be enabled to analyze a given political situation and his **own personal interests** in it and to find means and instruments to influence this political situation according to his vested interests. This aim includes pragmatic operations that also follow out of the first two principles." (quoted from Wehling 1977, 179f. translated be S.R.)
   The inhibition to overwhelm addresses the teacher, the precept of controversy refers to the learning arrangement and the right to pursue individual interests addresses the student – this trinity of principles has been widely respected not only in Western Germany but also in Eastern Germany after the peaceful revolution in 1989. Any civic education curriculum quotes the Beutelsbacher Konsens. (Modifications were suggested to the third point to include a more universalistic perspective. – Wehling 1987)

The Biographical Learning Task

It is not surprising that it is most difficult to develop the ability of handling conflicts, not only for private well-being (by mediation for example), but for the sake of the democratic system with its logic of conflicting opinions and interests. This difficulty is

not only typical of young people, but is probably typical of adults, too. Some empirical data might demonstrate the big task of understanding the meaning of democracy.

The first scholar to put the following question to students was Helmut Fend (1991, 174). He asked: "If all the parties formed the government what would be the worse disadvantage for democracy?" The so-called Sachsen-Anhalt-study gave two options to the young persons to choose from: "1) There would be constant quarrel within the government between the members of the different parties." or "2) There would be less criticism of the work of the government in parliament." This item refers to the understanding of the competition for answers and the fight for the legitimate power to carry on a certain political solution. This fight is carried out in parliament. The formation of an all-party-government would reduce the chances of conflicts in public and in parliament. Only 20 percent of the 1.400 students of grades 8, 9 and 11 responded that there would be less criticism of government and 80 per cent responded that there would be constant quarrels in the government.

► **If all the parties formed the government – disadvantage for democracy? Choose one.**

items	%
… less criticism of government	20 %
… quarrels within government	80 %

(Reinhardt/Tillmann 2002, 62)

Another item was taken by Meulemann (1996,100 – he followed Bauer-Kaase). The item is concerned with the meaning of political opposition. It asks if the person approves or disapproves of the following statement: "The task of the political opposition is not to criticize the government but to support its work." (The statement is completely false, somewhat false, mostly correct, completely correct) Quite evidently the statement fails the meaning of opposition, but almost 70 percent of the young students between the ages of 13 and 18 (some were older) identified it to be correct (mostly or completely).

► **The opposition should support the government but not criticize it**

items	%
The statement is false (somewhat, completely)	31 %
The statement is correct (mostly, completely)	69 %

(Reinhardt/Tillmann 2002, 61 – see also Krappidel/Böhm-Kasper 2006, 45)

I suggest that the interpretation of this data indicates the students' lack of comprehension with regard to handling conflicts and not their lack of knowledge in the sense of knowing and reproducing words. Everybody in Germany "knows" that a central element of democracy is "opposition"; almost everybody agrees. But if an item gives a description of the process of opposition, many people are actually against opposition because opposition means to oppose the opinions of others and to fight for the right answer. However (this is my interpretation) this logic is not popular among normal human beings who are unlikely to make clear distinctions between their private lives and the processes and actions that go on in democracy.

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The Research Task

It is not surprising that teaching controversies is difficult and probably disliked by many teachers, especially those who teach the subject without having studied social sciences and its didactics thoroughly. There are many indications that students seldom get the chance to deal controversially with controversial subjects (cf. Henkenborg 2007), but there are also hints from empirical research that there are in fact teachers who try to give their students the possibility to express opinions that are controversial to the teacher's or the other students' opinions.

The Sachsen-Anhalt-study asked 1.400 students who belonged to 75 different school classes of grades 8, 9 and 11 in different types of school (secondary, comprehensive, gymnasium, vocational) how they experienced teaching in the subject of social studies. Initially it appears that most teaching and learning seems to be dominated by the teacher.

► **How students experience their lessons in social studies (per cent of answers – rounded):**

items	never	seldom	sometimes	often
Students sit in class and listen, the teacher talks	3	18	31	48
The teacher talks and asks questions, single students answer them	1	9	35	55

(Kötters-König 2002, 118)

This data gives the impression that there is little controversy in the classroom. Still, there is data that conveys the impression that students feel free to express their own opinions no matter if they differ from what the teacher thinks or what they expect him to think.

► **How students experience their teachers and fellow students in social studies (per cent – rounded):**

items	never	seldom	sometimes	often
Teachers respect students' opinions and encourage expression of them	3	14	44	39
Students can express their opinions if they differ from their teachers'	3	12	33	52
Students can express their opinions if they differ from their comrades' opinions	2	13	34	51

(Kötters-König 2002, 123)

Apparently many teachers are successful in creating a climate in the classroom that gives students the impression that they are free to express their own opinions. This is remarkable and encouraging! It does not automatically mean that controversies do take place in the classroom (the upper data speaks against this diagnosis), but it means that there is an important prerequisite for controversies.

Research on Civic Education in Eastern Germany should concentrate on the *topic* of controversy, analysing the professional beliefs of teachers, the experience of students, and ongoing teaching lessons. The first step might be analyses of documents (curricula) in the five states of East-Germany to find out how clearly the *Beutelsbacher Konsens* is stated and also transformed into teaching methods and contents (cf. Reinhardt 2005).

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