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1. What's your concept of Citizen Participation?

Taking as our starting point the Folgueiras (2005) analysis of the **citizen participation** construct, we have identified four fundamental elements – each inter-related with the others – which transform the concept into a key **tool for social and educational transformation**.

- **participation as a citizenship right**, insofar as the process develops a collective and social action;
- **participation as a responsibility**, to the extent that it implies a commitment and a shared responsibility;
- **participation as a improvement tool**, since it creates opportunities for capacity development, and
- **participation as a necessity**, since it favors the feeling of belonging to a community.

These four elements are both generated and achieved from various levels at one and the same time, and have as their objective an overall understanding. That is to say, an effective citizenship participation is not only born from an individual, not from civil society as a totality, non from an institution, but rather from the combination of the three; maximizing the synergies between each one, and developing in this way all the elements that participation brings with it (Cabrera 2002, Flanagan & Faison 2001 and Yates & Youniss 1998).

Our interest in this approach brings us to consider citizenship participation is an educational context – which, despite the difficulties involved in establishing a participative educational framework in the school, is both necessary and possible – given that the school is the formative public space for the coming (Ianni, 2003). In this sense, and without forgetting that overall understanding which we have referred to, we would like to ask:

2. What part can the school play in helping the young people to learn and exercise citizen participation?

It is, then, when we come to consider the methodological proposal known as **service learning** which gives the key four element framework to structure our thinking about citizen participation.

Faced with the challenge of promoting the idea of citizen participation from within the school using the methodology of service learning we have developed the program ***From the School to the Community*** (Cabrera, Campillo, Luna & Del Campo, 2007).

This program has the objective of developing *the feeling of belonging to a community, and the exercise of citizenship roles* among secondary school students. In this way we cover two essential dimensions in the condition of being a citizen: promoting a living awareness of community and acquire a group of skills, competences and attitudes which are associated with participation in a community, facilitating in this way a commitment to improve and promote a sense of social responsibility (Luna, 2010).

3. Let's go to validate the program! A Participation Evaluative Research

Once the program has been designed, we propose to validate it with the next general objective of the study:

Evaluation of the program of education for active citizenship *From the School to the Community*

Evaluation is carried out by means of an **evaluation study** which enables us to articulate, contrast and validate the information coming from both a **variety of information gathering strategies** (observation, interviews,.....) but also from the **various participants in the program's development** (student, teacher, other teachers in the school, family...) all of whom add value to the process and supply varied and contextualized information.

The evaluation was carried out in a group of 3º ESO in a secondary school in Santa Coloma de Gramenet (Barcelona). This group was characterized by its lack of interest in traditional forms of study, and for a high level of conflict and absenteeism.

The study is carried out **in three stages**: initial evaluation, the process itself and the analysis of the results with the next objectives:

| Stage of research | Objectives |
|---------------------------|--|
| Initial evaluation | <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Adapt the program with the needs and interest of the school.- Analyze the initial viability of the project and examine the possibilities of carrying it out in practice and confirm that the basic requirements needed to carry the program through to its conclusion are fulfilled.- Analyze the initial state of the student sample in terms of the key dimensions of the program. |
| Evaluation of the process | <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Assess the feasibility of program implementation, analyzing the level of adequacy between the practical aspects, the theoretical framework and the design plan.- Assess the achievements that were getting. |
| Evaluation of the results | <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Understand the changes which the application of the program produces in the students, both in the school and in the community.- Indentify "good practices" in order to facilitate the optimum development of the program for future application. |

Picture 1. *Stages of research and their respective objectives.*

We got a lot of interesting results during the process. Summarizing, we emphasize three **key dimensions**. These dimensions cover the objectives of the program and synthesize the achievements attained by the students:

- a) Strengthening of the natural support networks
- b) Preparation for active and responsible citizenship
- c) Development and strengthening of individual and group identities.

a) Strengthening of the natural support networks

In this respect we can decisively conclude that the program produced a notable improvement in relations between the students themselves, and in particular in terms of their ability to recognize the **value of collective action**. Group work enabled them to enter a learning process which implied a far better knowledge of their own community. At the same time, and as Ichilov (2003) suggests, such processes involve the development of capacities for expression, discussion, deliberation, the negotiation of differences, and the resolution of conflicts, and in this way generate an inclusive space which improves group functioning and mutual understanding.

At the same time we have been able to see how work in small and large groups is able to generate **collaborative dynamics** between group members, where the emphasis moves to the importance of learning to live and work jointly with others rather than in competitiveness (Camps, 1998). This collaboration enabled the students to foment **mutual help** living it as beneficial. Thus, as Novella (2005) argues working in a collaboratively implies projecting and constructing at one and the same time.

The program was has developed, by means of group work, two key aspects which may be considered essential for the creation of an inclusive space: **the capacity for collaboration and mutual help between students, favoring in this way a better classroom environment**.

b) Preparation for active and responsible citizenship

The program permitted the student to experience democratic processes in the micro context of the classroom, generating an active and responsible citizenship, which respects both the norms of communal life and developing faculties of critical judgment and social skills.

This becomes evident once the **specific citizenship skills** are unbundled: the students acquired social skills like speaking in public and learning to organize better, and, in relation to contents, they learnt to gather and present statistical data, to construct historical narratives, to identify the elements which constitute the culture of a given neighborhood, to use internet to conduct information searches, etc; they **participated as citizens** to the extent that they discovered new activities to engage in their neighborhoods during their spare time: they learnt to analyze the needs of their communities, how to approach the local authorities etc. valuing the importance of participation in a democratic society; how to develop a set of **own values** as part of a process of active, responsible critical and intercultural citizenship such as cooperation, intercultural dialogue, responsibility and respect for peers.

These values are displayed in **behavior**, such as the interest in work, the level of group involvement, personal effort, positive conflict management and the skills needed to achieve consensus; in following the **rules** and the routines of the class, which reflect a philosophy of just and equalitarian treatment, and a strong **feeling of belonging to a community**.

In this way, this second dimension (preparation for an active and responsible citizenship) is directly related with the previous one (strengthening of natural networks of support). As Novella (2005) asserts, the promotion of the natural support networks between students encourages the establishment of values, the development of skills and the acquisition of knowledge. Thus the development of common norms and values facilitates an improved level of group cohesion and involvement in the community, and encourages group identification making communal life more cohesive both at the level of the classroom and the community (Bartolomé and Marín, 2005).

c) Individual and group identity

The student lives the experience of the programme and the community action process with a feeling of success, one which adds to the self esteem of both the individual and the group and, in some cases even to the point of opening up plans for further academic progress previously none existent, As regards **individual identity**, it is worth mentioning that the program encourages a positive feeling of self esteem among students insofar as it develops the latent potential of the student as translated into social skills (expressing their ideas) and academic skills (written and artistic expression). It also promotes companionship as a value and as a cooperative attitude, as explained in connection with the previous dimension. In this way both the development of the potential of the student as a value and an attitude which this promotes generates on the one hand more security in themselves and an improved level of confidence; and on the other, the students offer each other mutual support to the extent that this is necessary to carry out the tasks they are good at (potential), and in this way achieving positive recognition.

Thus we can say that the program promotes empowering processes among students in terms of their self awareness and confidence with a positive impact over their level of social capital. This aspect also helps them to identify and resolve the needs of others, strengthen in the process communities and the individual identities of their members.

Following this line of reasoning Johnston, Laraña and Gusfield (1994) draw attention to the role of collective emotions in the development of individual identity as an important nuclear component in the construction of **group identity**. This identity is formed through a process of individual definition of the shared situations where members of a group become aware of the fact they belong to that group. This was clear in our study to the extent that the student perceived the classroom as a unit of communal life where they became able to express themselves with growing freedom and confidence.

As a result we conclude that this dimension confirmed that the program encouraged the development of both individual and group identity between students by generating an affective bond between them.

4. Conclusions

Alongside these three key dimensions which testify to the development of a sense of active citizenship among the students in the context of the program validation process, we conclude the research emphasizing the next:

- ***The school has opened to the community.*** The students have done actions through communities' projects. These projects have born from real needs of their community that they have detected. So, the methodology service-learning that the program promotes, has developed a relation between the school and its community.
- ***The validation of the program.*** About its *intern validation* we have resettled some aspects as temporality and more flexible activities.

In relation to the extern validation, the own outputs of the research pointing that the students:

- Have experienced democratizing processes.
- Values and citizenship practices.
- Dimension of citizenship as a process.
- The school as a privileged space of citizenship learning.

These outputs have demonstrated the development of the citizen participation in the students as a right, a responsibility, an instrument for improvement and a need, considering it as an effective tool for educational and social transformation.

5. Limits and Perspectives

This research has some limits and some perspective of future. About limits, one factor is the **absence of cultural diversity**, given that the group studied was essentially a monoculture one. However, even if there was no evident cultural diversity in the group, the defining characteristics of the class were representative of a broader diversity: the learning rhythms, levels of problematic behavior, school absenteeism rates, and interests and needs of the group were all extremely diverse when compared with other groups of students in the same center.

The coordination of the teaching timetable with the community one was also a limit. This problem was largely overcome since it became an advantage rather than an obstacle given that it became a measure of the commitment of the student to the task which was to be carried out.

Bearing in mind the conclusions and limits previously expounded, we feel **three lines of future investigation** can be identified in order to extract the maximum social advantage from this study:

- Proposal of a program for the subject “Citizenship Education”.
- Continuous training for teaching staff in the area of citizenship education.
- Research directed towards change in other educational contexts.

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